

folio

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folio

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Table of Contents

POETRY

Joe Grillo	
"On-Air"	7
" Wings "	8
"Hide"	9
JESS BACHINSKI	
"presence"	10
LUKE HUNTER	
"Ode to Bukowski"	11
MANDREW CARRION	
"Street Art Rebellion"	12
MEG RATTANNI	
"After Kahlo's 'The Little Deer'"	14
" End of the World "	15
LUKE HERZOG	
"Water Desert"	16
KATHERINE SULLIVAN	
"Waiting for Peter"	17
TAYLOR RICHARDS	
" Do You See Me Sitting Here "	18

ART

BILL GELENEAU	
"The Pen is Mightier"	20

CIARA CUMISKEY	
" Box III "	21

MIGUEL BENITEZ	
" Ropan Archetype 1 "	22

GABRIELLE MARTINEZ	
"Beauty Queen 1950"	24

KYLE BRODERICK	
"Reflected NYC"	25
"Looking Up and Down"	26

AVÉ RIVERA	
"Emotimug: Caffeinated"	27

SAMANTHA ANGERMANN	
"Reflection in the Keys"	28

PAUL BENJUNAS	
"Praying Mantis"	29

KATIE MANENTE	
"Born Again"	30

DAN DECAMILLO	
" The American Way? "	31

TIFFANY BARNETT	
"Smitten"	32

FICTION

KA'RIN GRACE	
"True Romance"	33

PATRICK MOODY	
" The Royal Taste Tester "	41

CAITLIN MASSARO	
<i>“Criminals of the Iron Horse Calvacade”</i>	45
CARLIN HUCKEL	
“Postcards from Cairo”	52
CIARA ADAMS	
<i>“Doug and the Cleanie Bug”</i>	56
ZANNY STOWELL	
“Dedicated with Apologies to H.P. Lovecraft”	64
DRAMA	
GEORGIA RUSSELL	
“The Voice Within”	66
JUDGES’ COMMENTARY	
INTERVIEW WITH ANTOINETTE BRIM	
CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES	
THANK YOU	
	103

On-Air

JOE GRILLO

On the five o’clock news today, the anchor slammed his fists on the desk before he shoved a .357 Magnum into his mouth, turned his back to the camera, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot, a *pop*, made me jump back in my seat. A part of his skull crashed through the television screen and landed on my dinner plate, atop the peas beside the chicken cutlet.

Microphone feedback filled the room, and my eardrums swelled like sandbags. Small drops of blood dripped from the shattered glass, formed a red pool in front of the entertainment center. I ate around the bone fragment, avoiding it with my fork.

When the screeching stopped, a voice spoke from inside the bleeding box. It said, “We’re sorry for the interruption. We have no place left to go from here.”

Wings

JOE GRILLO

I tore the wings off a dragonfly today
and laid its blue-green body atop an anthill
to be eaten, when an angel appeared in the sky
and told me it was cruel. His wingspan
blocked out the sun. With one hand,

I shielded my eyes from the white glow
that radiated from the halo crowning
a head of golden curls. The angel smiled,
revealed the ivory teeth of a choir boy.
As he hovered above me, his toes brushed
against my cheek. They tickled

and lingered like a common insect,
as if he were trying to taste my guilt
with his toenails. An annoyance I wanted
to swat. That's when I grabbed him by the ankles
and wrestled him to the ground.

I ripped the wings off an angel today
and placed his body, its limp limbs outstretched,
on a sidewalk for pedestrians to step over.
Soon after nightfall, the light that bled out
from his broken halo drew flies.

Hide

JOE GRILLO

A brother and sister playing hide-and-seek
in the woods are never seen again, as if they were
snatched by bare hanging branches, or beckoned
to a distant place by the sunbeam's thin finger. That night,
only their shoes come running all the way home
and rest on the doorstep. The mother cradles both pairs
and faints. The town calls for the children by name,
illuminates the lawns, every flashlight a blinking star.
Parents and newspapers tally off days, then months.
In those cartons with faces, the cheeks decay
and the milk goes sour. Years pass—*one ... two ...*
and people lose count. Everyone
starts over. They tell the future generations to come back
before dark, not to stray too far from the yard.
Decades later, two small skeletons
reassemble and emerge from a trapdoor in the earth,
hunting for their skin the same way someone looks
for an old coat at the start of a new winter.
Come out, each skull whispers, *wherever you are*.

presence

JESSICA BACHINKSI

my presence will ricochet
from deep within the damp soil,
or drift towards the azure illusion above me –
inundated with the
glow, glow, glow,
from the kaleidoscopic star,
letting the colossal inferno overhead
shroud my pallid bark in warmth –
mama,
nurturing my crumbling roots
drinking from the cool dew of the morning
growing, stretching
to sustain the gift of nourishment
from earth and sky.

Ode to Bukowski

LUKE HUNTER

When I read Bukowski, I feel like shit;
he was succinct, and barely bravado,
even when masculine machismo made him marketable.
But boldness, with Bukowski, was a drunken bird,
crying in the morning light
but keeping composure, hiding
tears that tumble down the lit branches
with a silvery glow, like satin,
as weather stripped the tree of its bronzed, dark-bark.

When I read Bukowski, I think of being
a mad postman, or maybe just tired;
drinking dozens of beers as days
fade away,
waiting for the publisher's check to arrive.
I think about a dead mailbox,
or maybe mischievous girls,
who only want me for the booze
and royalty checks.

When I read Bukowski, the sun still sets,
and I still starve at school.
Responsibilities rattle the romantic
rambler I thought I was.
The world won't wait for
sad eyed boys, or lovelorn lassies.
It spins like Bukowski,
drunk, disillusioned,
but never alone;
even when checks didn't come,
the women had left
and the beer was gone.

Street Art Rebellion

MANDREW CARRION

They mobilized
Against the establishment that had so
fervently oppressed them,
They revolted
with Krylon cans in hand, the squad is
A force to be reckoned with
And like a scene from a spaghetti western
through the ghetto, their Adidas covered
in the marks of their past mischief, they walked
Along the yellow dividing line of the asphalt.
Then The Hiss Heard 'Round the World.
Hoods flipped like a light switch
The crackle of the peas mixing pigments
That left purple-orange hues in their wake
Incoherent words that told the perfect story
and renditions of humans and shapes that spoke
to the innermost primal urges
It sprawled across cars,
Snaked around lampposts,
Glided across doorways;
Any surface with some traction was a casualty
But actually, it was more of a conversion
From the narrowminded to the open-hearted
With the capability of anger, love, joy, rebellion
With the notion that "No, Creativity's not dead,
No pennies on its eyes yet"
It was merely a little drunk and
Fell into a stupor
So now this guerilla gang of fly-by-night artists
Will not react to their work by daylight
But will breed more brethren Once the sun sets
A breath of new life into this world of
Conformity
They've been called "hoodlums, troublemakers

that are just a product of teenage angst"
But the passion for creativity isn't a disease
it's merely a cure
so take two and call in the morning.

After Kahlo's "The Little Deer"

MEG RATTANNI

Beyond the placid turquoise ocean
You were a little deer, my little deer
With a thick black brow and small gold
Dangling from mule-like ears.
You were wounded but running,
Punctured with nine feathered arrows.
You tried to evade the sportsmen, while weaving
Over tree roots on the mossy forest floor
The bough was broken at your cloven hooves.
Out of breath but calm, you continued
To run from the thieves who wanted
To claim your nine-point rack. I wish
I could've plucked each abhorrent arrow
From your gentle tawny hide
And lay you down on your immaculate midriff,
Cauterizing the ennead, or suturing
Each crimson opening with thread
Made out of vines from the limbs among you.
But you bolted, my little dear,
And I barely saw your stony muzzle glide past.
I scoured for owls tucked away in knotholes,
Baby sparrows nestled in their nests,
Waited with them
For the return of the mother.
I wished death upon the treacherous archer
Who urged his cohorts to keep quiet, as to not spook you
While he strung another arrow on his bow.
If his shot was dead-on he'd later gloat
That he stuck his arrow in your most tender spot.
But you saved yourself.
You are nobody's white-tailed trophy to sit
Above a fireplace menagerie of fallen siblings.

End of the World

MEG RATTANNI

I saw Her at the annual End of the World party
Eating Mexican dip and chips over the deafening
Blare of "Celebrate" by Cool and The Gang
Supernova explosions burned over the woodshed
My catlady neighbor read Bible verses
From the cloudy screen of her first-generation Kindle
The shock waves spat clouds of hydrogen and carbon
That made us choke on our plastic cups of Kool-Aid

Those who awaited Rapture camped out
In Veteran's Memorial Park's circus-themed gazebo
And fought for outlets to plug their nightlights into
They told the children to catch tadpoles in the lake
While they scraped off enough flaking lead paint
To slip under their tongues during goodnight kisses

I planned to meet up with Muffy outside Dollar General
To discuss who would get to keep our gerbil
If we ended up unscathed in our beds by morning
I scanned aisles of no-name shampoo and expired fruit snacks
My Big Gulp flooded the laminate floor in waves of murky green
After I saw the new masculine name branded onto her chest

We agreed that we should go at it one last time
In case the sun imploded and rained stardust
We made our pilgrimage to the Wailing Wall in the shadow
Of a stank rusting Wintergreen Bros dumpster
And prayed for forgiveness until our upper lips glistened

Water Desert

LUKE HERZOG

We all dive into the ocean
Because the warmth of the sun,
And the coals on the beach
Are motivators;
Their heat and flame
Burn with crude and yet
Generous intentions.
This ocean is deeper,
Wider than the sand
Ever will be.

We're swimming to be cool,
Refreshing our sunburned bodies.
But the more we float,
The more we freeze.
We understand these waters
Are intimidating.
How far can we swim?
We choose not to test
Such a frightening question.

Thus, we allow the waves to
Carry us back to shore.
Adventures at sea
Become terrifying,
As its icy temperature
Only reminds us
How eternally lost we are,
Breathing the hot air
And drinking the frigid liquid
We recall as loneliness.

Waiting for Peter

KATHERINE SULLIVAN

A basket of mismatched socks
wait patiently to be darned
beside my rocking chair,
as I listen to The Lost Boys'
exhausted sighs. Imagining
how they suckle their thumbs.
each is securely tucked in,
dreaming of a mother's embrace.

The candle casts a soft amber glow and
the steel needle catches the illumination.
The stitches disappear into the cloth.
Mending rambunctious holes from the day.

My eyes lift up as the flame flickers.
He floats into the room, boastfully
presses his fists into his slender waist.
Elbows sharp and pronounced,
about to crow with excitement.

His eyes lock onto mine as they widen
I press my lips to my index finger,
silencing him. He exhales and unravels like
a hopeless sock that can no longer be mended.
He crosses the room heavy with each step
sinks beside my basket of socks.

His head rests upon my thighs.
My breath detaches unnaturally,
Like a shadow that needs to be
forcefully sewn back onto its heel.
I exhale and weave my fingers
plucking twigs and leaves from his hair,
I giggle and sigh, "Oh Peter. . ."
As he drifted off to sleep.

Do You See Me Sitting Here

TAYLOR RICHARDS

Across the table doing nothing in
particular but for some reason
I can't stop thinking of that one time I found
you roaming around the little pocket of space
that fills up the back of my mind and
I just wanted to let you know that I see you and
can't just STOP seeing you because your face
and your words are walking through my windows and doors and
walls your words are biting
the back of my neck and if you don't
come over here and scratch them
off maybe just maybe I'll
continue what I was doing before as if there was nothing
I really cared about but I just can't
STOP caring about that little
twitch under your eye that you get when you're
searching for what to say like saying the right thing
really matters ever cause you know that shit
doesn't matter like that one time
I jumped out of a second story window to see if I'd
break my feet again and
again and again and over and
over the top of the mountain where I saw your
eyes shining in the clouds as I was about to jump
from the peak just to see if I could break
every bone in my body in an instant cause all I
ever did was think a little too hard

too many times but I just can't STOP
thinking to myself over and over so
when my endless jumbles beneath my skull start to
iron themselves out maybe just maybe
I'll give you a call from over the table
but first I'm going to step off this
cloud and break more bones
than ever before
and maybe just maybe you'll look up
from your book and see me from
across the
table.



The Pen is Mightier
BILL GELENEAU
Stoneware



Box III
CIARA CUMISKEY
Oil on Canvas



Ropan Archetype 1
MIGUEL BENITEZ



*Assembled wheel-thrown ceramic pieces decorated
with terra sigillata and crawl glazes*



Beauty Queen 1950
GABRIELLE MARTINEZ
Digital Photography



Reflected NYC
KYLE BRODERICK
Digital Photography



Looking Up and Down

KYLE BRODERICK

Digital Photography



Emotimug: Caffeinated

AVÉ RIVERA

Ceramic



Reflection in the Keys

SAMANTHA ANGERMANN

Charcoal



Praying Mantis

PAUL BENJUNAS

Digital Photography



Born Again
KATIE MANENTE
*3-D rose sculpture made with
broken seashells and copper wire*



The American Way?
DAN DECAMILLO
Digital Photography



Smitten
TIFFANY BARNETT
Graphite Pencil

True Romance

KARIN GRACE

“Why don’t men exist in real life like the men in the movies?” Victoria asked her mother as the credits for *Cleopatra* ran down their flat screen TV. The 70-inch television was bought specifically for their old Hollywood movie nights. Victoria’s mother Jackie was obsessed with Elizabeth Taylor while Victoria was simply in love with the dramatic love affairs. So urgent and real... such a true romance, she would think to herself as she played with a piece of her brown hair that sprang up and down like curly fries.

“They do and you’d know that if you got out of this house and away from your computer. There’s a real world out there, my pretty,” Jackie said without taking her eyes from the TV, even though the credits were rolling.

Jackie was still dressed in her work uniform: an off-white, nondescript top with matching pants. Jackie was a hospital cafeteria worker and whenever people asked her about her career she’d tell them with a smile, “I work at Yale,” with such pizzazz and pride that no one dared to ask in which department. If they were bold and asked, she would hit them with an evil squint of her hazel eyes that made them wish they hadn’t. Although her uniform was plain and splashed with stains that hinted at her long day, her face was fully made up. Victoria felt the long false lashes, bright red lipstick, and heavy blush made her look like a clown. Mother and daughter sat comfortably near one another in the living room of the apartment they shared, yet Jackie refused to remove her makeup. Victoria was used to this side of her mother, though. This was the way it had always been.

“At the rate you’re going we’ll be living here together with one another for a long time. I don’t know about you, but I didn’t picture having you as my life partner,” Jackie said, finally looking away from the TV. “I think I need more wine. How about you, Princess?”

“Well then why don’t you get married again, Mom?” Victoria asked, not realizing that she actually had said those words out loud. She normally opted to ignore her mother’s comments. Victoria didn’t like hurting people, but she knew ways to cut people just enough to make them bleed, but not so much that they’d bleed to death.

“How’s Rowan?” Jackie asked as Victoria got up from the couch and began to tidy up their snacks. “Keep my glass there. I’m going to get a refill. It’s so early.”

“It’s Ronan,” Victoria corrected her mother. Ronan was the latest guy that Victoria was talking to on FindMyDate.com. A few of her co-workers had talked her into joining it. Victoria had yet to meet anyone. Ronan was her most consistent interest. They had been talking for months and he looked like James Dean. Their conversations were always so passionate. So urgent and real. He was perfect and Victoria didn’t want

to ruin things by meeting him just yet.

Ronan368: I really want to see you, Victoria. We need to get together.

Dreamgirl0_1: We will...

Ronan368: I love talking to you. You are the most interesting woman ever, but I want to see you. Conversations are better in person...

Dreamgirl0_1: I guess. But right now isn't a good time. And thanks JJ you're the most interesting man I know too.

Ronan368: When will be a good time? I'll be near your town next week meeting with my partner and I would love to spend my off time with you.

Dreamgirl0_1: My mom has been a little sick and I've been helping her. Once she's better we can get together... I promise.

Victoria felt horrible that she lied to Ronan last week, but she didn't know what else to say. Now wasn't the time for them to meet.

"We're fine." She headed to the kitchen with their empty dinner plates and hoped that when she went back in the living room her mother would bring up another topic. She was wrong.

"Whatever his name is—you really like him, don't you?" Jackie looked her daughter up and down, making Victoria pull at her oversized sweatshirt, trying to conceal her body's recent extra twenty pounds. She knew she had her new position as the head baker at *Ann's Cookie Corner* to thank for her body's lovely expansion.

"Yes, Mom. I told you I do. I know it's just been a few months, but I really think he could be the one."

"Awww, Victoria, I'm so happy for you, but you've got to meet him. No man is going to want to wait around. There's a world full of available and willing women. Roland is a great catch from what you tell me. Show him you are too. You are my daughter after all."

"That's what I'm doing, Mom. And his name is Ronan. Why do you always get it wrong?" Victoria raised an eyebrow at her mother, who was normally a stickler for details, especially names.

Jackie got up from her seat on the couch and went over to Victoria. She ran a hand through her daughter's frizzy hair, "Are you even using the new shampoo?"

"Yes, but..."

"The commercial said after one day you would see results, and, my beautiful daughter, your hair is still a frizzy mess."

"Commercials lie, Mom." Victoria cleared her throat and backed away from her mother. "Your wrinkle cream is the perfect example."

Jackie gave her daughter a tight smile before she smoothed out her cheeks. "Honey, go in my room and spray some of the hair spray in the yellow bottle. It's magic in a bottle. It's on my vanity table near my other hair products. It really works. Espe-

cially for people with your hair condition. My Mary Kay lady swears by it."

"Mom, I don't feel like it. It's late and we aren't going anywhere." She hated when her mother tried to play make-over. She did it whenever she was bored, but tonight wasn't the night. She just wanted to go upstairs and cuddle up with her book.

"Victoria, you're never going to meet anyone being so boring and predictable. You need to spend more time on yourself, and I bet you the boys will come running. I know you've put on some weight, but—"

"Mom..."

"I'm your mother. I'm just being honest with you. You've got to change, Victoria."

"I know, Mom."

"You're a fun girl. You really are. You've just got to be a little more exciting. Men don't just fall into your lap. You've got to pull them there, and you've got to keep them there. I know it sounds like a childish game, but that's all dating is. A game. And there are many ways to win. For instance, how do you think I got your stepfather Claude to propose? The chase." Jackie looked at Victoria to make sure she was still listening and cleared her throat. "Men love to feel like they are chasing you. They want what they can't have or at least think they can't have."

"If Claude likes a chase... then why were you chasing him after the divorce? Was that role play?"

Jackie opened her mouth, but then closed it. She licked her thin lips and cleared her throat before she continued, "Everything isn't what it seems, Victoria, darling. That man loved me. I loved him. We just met at the wrong time. Fate can be like that. Look at Liz and Dick. They had the same exact passion that Claude and I have... had. Claude will realize one day that I knew what was best for him. He probably knows now, but is too embarrassed to admit it. Now go and fix your hair. And try some make up. Come back and Mommy will tell you how you did. Do a good job. You're not getting any younger and your mother doesn't want to have to raise you forever." Jackie waved her hand at her daughter and Victoria sighed, but headed to her mother's room.

Victoria walked into her mother's bedroom and rolled her eyes at the huge heart-shaped bed, which was almost filled with pillows. Every room in their house, except her own, looked like Valentine's Day. She walked over to the white vanity table and tried to count to 60 as she stared at herself in the mirror. Today she got to 40 and felt better. A record. She knew her mother knew best and wanted what was so best for her. Jackie had been married five times and if anyone knew about men, it was her.

Victoria sprayed her hair using almost half the bottle. When she was done she brushed it down and played with the eyeliner until she felt like her mother would approve. She looked in the mirror once more and tried to make a sexy expression with her eyes and had to laugh at how silly she looked.

"Whatever," she said, leaving the vanity table messy, not wanting to be near the large mirror any longer.

When Victoria went towards the steps, she heard her mother laughing with a guy. She prayed it wasn't her mother's last husband, Claude. He was no doubt her mother's favorite husband, but he was also the most trouble. Jackie had just reached the point of not "visiting" him at work every night and Victoria was sure that they both still had restraining orders on one another. She was surprised when she went in the living room and saw it wasn't Claude sitting on the couch with her mother. In fact, it wasn't any of her mother's ex-husbands or boy toys. It was Ronan. She switched her eyes when she noticed they were focusing on the pouch that replaced the six-pack he proudly displayed in his pictures. She looked up and saw that his face was not as smooth as all his pictures promised. In fact, he had a large red pimple right in the middle of his forehead. He didn't look exactly like the model-quality pictures of himself that she studied every night, but it was him.

"Oh, look who came downstairs. Vicky, you're going to be mad at me, but I couldn't resist." Jackie laid her head on Ronan's shoulder, and Victoria felt like the lining of her stomach had fallen. The turkey burger she had earlier with light mayo, extra pickles, and chili felt like it was going to fall to the floor right along with it. She was dizzy and the air in the room seemed ... well, like it left.

Ronan stood up and Victoria dodged his eye contact. He extended his hand and gave her a charming face. "Victoria, I am so happy we get to meet. You're even more beautiful in person."

Before Victoria could say anything, her mother stood up beside Ronan. "Isn't she? She looks just like me. Except her hair and mouth. She gets both of those from her father, may he rest in peace."

"Ronan, how'd you ... Mom, how'd you invite him here? I'm so confused." Victoria rubbed her sweaty hands on her jeans and hoped he'd drop his. He did. She didn't want to shake his hand. She wanted to run. She wanted to hug him. She wanted to shower. She wanted to kiss him. He didn't look how she imagined he would, but to her, he looked even better, and here she was with turkey chili burger breath. She wanted to curse her mother, but not until she drank a bottle of mouthwash.

"I saw your laptop open one day and one thing led to another." Jackie shrugged as if she had done something as simple as order them dinner without asking Victoria. "He was so nice and we decided to surprise you. I hope you're happy, baby girl."

Victoria looked away from her mother, afraid that she'd strangle her. She tried to ignore that her mother was working on another glass of wine. Please don't let this get crazy, she thought, knowing that too much wine and her mother were almost as bad a combination as her mother and Claude.

"Victoria ... Ronan ... you two make sure that you thank me in the wedding speech," Jackie giggled.

Oh, so now she knows his name. Victoria rolled her eyes and cut her mother off before she got too reckless. "Ronan, I had no idea."

"I hope this isn't awkward," Ronan said, looking back at Victoria. "I know you told me your mother was sick, but when she invited me over I thought ..."

"It's not your fault, Ronan. I just wish I was warned. I look a mess ... and ..."

Victoria looked down at her feet and her pink bunny slippers smiled up at her. She looked up and noticed the way that her mother was now leaning on Ronan. Ronan was being polite and helping her stand, all the while looking uncomfortable. Victoria knew the drunken act was a form of her mother's flirting.

"You look fine, really. How about we go watch a movie or do something?" Ronan asked her.

"If you were warned, you would've just come up with an excuse, Victoria. Let's be honest. Ronan, this girl is a procrastinator and has been since she was a child. And she's painfully shy. I don't know why; she's so beautiful." Jackie regained her stance, but was still standing rather close to Ronan and looking up at him, batting her lashes.

"Ronan, can you excuse my mother and me really quick?" Victoria asked, but didn't wait for an answer. She rolled her eyes when she noticed one of her mother's lashes had fallen near Ronan's brown shoes. She went into the kitchen and tried to calm her breathing down before she triggered an asthma attack.

Her mother walked into the kitchen and headed straight to the refrigerator. "Want a beer, Vic? They're nice and cold."

"Mom, why did you invite him here?" Victoria walked close to her mother and whispered, peering at the door, "You could have told me. In fact, you could just stay off my computer. I can't believe you did that."

"What's the big deal, Vic? He really does own his own business. I Googled him. He's not as handsome as his pictures, but we can work on that. Men are nothing but projects. That's what my mother told me. And if this fails, which it probably will, we can just find you someone else."

"Ma, you had no right," Victoria said a little louder.

"And what's with you saying I'm sick?" Jackie pulled out a big red bowl that was full of mixed grapes. "You think these are any good? I wonder if Romel likes grapes?"

"Ma, I know you meant no harm and I appreciate all the advice you give me, but you were wrong. And now he's Romel again? You just called him his right name out there. What's going on, Ma?"

Jackie sniffed the bowl before she made a face. "Victoria, you act like I committed a crime. I just added a little fire under your ass. You'll be twenty-five soon and I'd like to see you happy. You know I love you and I know what's best for you. I'm your mother. If I embarrassed you then my apologies, but how else are you going to find happiness?"

Victoria thought about Ronan. He smiled at her. Ronan smiled at her and called her beautiful. How unexpected. And urgent and real. She looked at her mother, who was cracking open another beer and talking about how she was married when she

was 19 years old.

“Mom, Ronan and I are going to go out for a little. We’ll see you later,” Victoria said, causing Jackie to stop in mid-sentence.

Jackie put the bowl back in the refrigerator and started, “Where are you guys going? We can go get frozen yogurt and if he turns out to be a jerk you, and I can just go to—”

“No, Mom. We’re going to go. I’ll be home in a few hours,” Victoria said, leaving her mother, her beer, and her sour grapes in the kitchen.

Victoria went back in the living room where Ronan stood looking as uncomfortable as expected. “Can you give me like fifteen minutes and we can head out?”

He smiled. “Sure. Is everything okay with your mother?”

“Yeah, she’ll be fine. You can wait in here—or your car?” Victoria offered, but hoping he’d pick the latter. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her mother—well, in fact, it was just that. Her mother was a little too tipsy and there was no telling what she’d say or do while Victoria got dressed.

“I’ll get in my car and return a few emails, if that’s okay. I’m right out front,” he said, picking up Victoria’s hands and kissing them both, causing a funny feeling to grow in her stomach and go all the way to her slipped feet.

Victoria just nodded and watched him go outside. She looked towards the kitchen and was tempted to check on her mother. She wanted to get her mother’s advice on what she should wear or how she should do her hair. So many questions. She had never gone anywhere big without her mother’s consent on her attire. First time for everything, she thought as she headed up to her room.

It didn’t take Victoria long to pick out a plain pair of black jeans, a black top, and her favorite Uggs. She knew her mother wouldn’t approve of such a “plain” choice, but she threw it on anyways. After she was ready, she yelled a goodbye to her mother, who was still in the kitchen. She left before she said something that would make her stay.

Victoria’s eyes got a little big when she saw Ronan sitting in the Benz parked in front of the station wagon she shared with her mother. The station wagon had been around for about as many years as Victoria had been alive and it had taken her mother and herself on many adventures. Sundays were reserved for road trips, and they took turns picking the destination. Ronan got out of his car and opened the passenger side to open the door for Victoria. “You look awesome, Victoria,” he complimented.

Victoria smiled. “Thanks.” She climbed in the car and immediately tried to get comfortable. It wasn’t that hard. She wondered if she should open his door for him from the inside, but he got in before she decided.

“So where to, Princess?” he asked as he turned down the music that was playing.

“Umm, there’s this place my mom and I always go to for yogurt,” she said, wishing he hadn’t called her Princess. It was her mother’s favorite pet name for her.

She also wished she kept the part out about this place being her mother’s favorite, too. Victoria loved her mother, but wanted to have this date between her and Ronan alone. Maybe they should just go somewhere different and create their own memories.

“Sure. What’s it called? That sounds great.”

She gave him the name and he punched it in the GPS in his car. They spent the six minutes it took to get to their destination in a comfortable silence. Once they arrived, Ronan got her door again and they walked into *Dippers* hand in hand. This was a first for Victoria and she almost hoped someone she knew would see her.

After they were seated and had ordered, Victoria decided it was time to talk. She looked around the empty yogurt shop and then looked at Ronan, who was staring at her with a smile. “So, what are you thinking of?”

“Honestly, I’m thinking that I really like you, Victoria. I’m so happy to be sitting here with you.”

“Me too.” She smiled and wondered how little Victoria and Ronan babies would look.

“Maybe I should have checked with you after your mom invited me over. I really didn’t think it would be that awkward,” he said, snapping her out of her daydream.

“My mother was just doing what she thought was a good thing,” Victoria sat up a little, “She really means no harm. She’s just a little impulsive sometimes. But she just wants the best for me though.”

“I can tell she does, but you’re a grown woman, Victoria”

“I’m aware of that.” Victoria wondered where Ronan was going with this. She knew her mother had gotten a little annoying earlier, but it was the wine. That particular brand always made her that way.

“I’m going to say this and it may sound rude, but I’m only saying it because I really care about you and I hope we can build something together. Victoria, your mother is trying to control you. No offense.”

Their yogurt arrived and Victoria’s appetite for the chocolate caramel swirled frozen yogurt with pecans left with the waitress. Ronan dug into his frozen banana yogurt and complimented on how delicious it was.

“It’s going to melt,” he said with a smile so big that it made his pimple pulsate a little. He looked nothing like James Dean. Victoria pushed her yogurt away feeling a little nauseated.

“I’m full.”

“I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings. I think your mother is a nice woman. I mean, I barely know her, but I was just saying today was a little weird. Do you understand where I’m coming from, Vic?”

Victoria didn’t know how to answer that, because she didn’t. She knew her mother wasn’t perfect, but her mother was all she had. She wanted true romance as much as any girl her age, but she’d be damned if she dropped her mother in the pursuit of it. Jackie was—well, Jackie was Jackie, but she wasn’t as bad as everyone perceived

her to be. She had always gone above and beyond for anyone she ever loved. Victoria was suddenly in the mood to watch *Thelma & Louise* with her mother. It was getting late, so she knew they'd both doze off on the couch with the credits rocking them to sleep.

"It was nice meeting you, Ronan, but I think I'm going to head home. You don't have to worry about bringing me home," she said, getting up from the table and pulling out her cell phone to call her mother, whose feelings she hoped she hadn't hurt that much.

The Royal Taste Tester

PATRICK MOODY

To be a royal taste tester is to dance with death at every breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Not a dance, really, when you're sitting in a nice, comfy chair in the dining hall, but you catch my drift. When people find out what I do, the question is usually "How does one get such a job?" After all, when you chalk up the risk vs. benefit analysis, it's really not a bad gig. Plenty of people would kill for it. Getting paid to gob on cheese and parfaits and chocolate mousse? Please. The gallons of spiced wine and mead aren't bad, either. Not to mention the pork roasts and seared salmon and game hens. Get some battered potato dumplings with the right honey drizzle...

But I digress.

The answer is threefold. First, you must have an iron stomach. Not that you should have a huge gut, per se (it's not uncommon for a taster to be bursting out of his breeches), but it needs to be strong enough to handle a six course meal three times a day without fail. Most guests pass on a lot of the offerings. A taster gets no such luxury.

Can't say that rule applied to Malin the Maladjusted. Never heard of a man with a more delicate stomach. Ate like a bird, and when he did, could never handle anything spicier than milk. It wasn't uncommon for Malin to excuse himself before the third course was out, knocking over dukes and duchesses on his mad dash to the privy. Poor sap.

Second: you must not fear death. After all, the royal taste tester is the last line of defense. It's our duty to take the hit for our Lord Protector, in case someone's been a little liberal with the poison. People always worry about a king getting killed on the battlefield. Ha! Sure, a king could die that way. But not every king is a glory hound nut job who charges the front lines swinging a sword like a pompous oaf. Some kings are more cowardly than others. Some prefer to stay behind their castle walls in comfort. Those kings aren't much fun for the history books, but believe you me, they're the smartest. They're the ones who live long enough to read a history book.

Wyman the Weak-Kneed wasn't much for bravery. Had to be tied to his chair when he tested his king's dishes. The very sight of the food would send him into a panic, so the household guard had to blindfold him just so he could get through the meal without fainting. Needless to say, dinner in that castle was never a casual affair. I heard they had a padded room in one of the towers to keep him when he caught a case of the fits.

Third: You must love food. Now this one may seem a bit obvious, but when I say 'love food,' I mean know the ins and outs of every meal. That's ingredients, taste, presentation, pairings, the whole lot. It's knowing every herb and spice, every broth and batter. Heaven help the taster who can't tell parsley from sage. Looking for poison's

not all we do. The king relies on us for everything when it comes to food. “No, m’lord, this wine won’t go with that duck. It’s too sweet. You need a darker, oakier vintage, m’lord. Yes, m’lord, the cheese is fine. No, no, no, the blue lines mean that it’s old. You won’t catch plague, m’lord.” That sort of thing. A taster must live and breathe cuisine. If something on that plate looks fishy—something other than fish, of course—it’s our job to notice.

This wasn’t a problem for Hylan the Hoggish. The way he ate, it’s a wonder there was ever any left to go around. Greedy as the day is long, and with an appetite to match, he ran the cooks ragged in that castle. His king actually lost weight during his reign. He’d get the crusts, if he was lucky. Even got stabbed once, trying to reach past Hylan for a second helping of rump roast. Oh, Hylan loved his food. Poisoned soup finally did him in. I heard tell the king was surprised he didn’t finish the entire bowl before he fell into it face-first.

The taster also serves as a dinner companion to his lordship. After all, they need someone to laugh and scoff at the jester with, and queens are quickly bored with jesters. I’ve served a handful in my time. Most I’ve tasted for have been levelheaded. I’ve only served under a few warmongering ones. These, I came to find, didn’t care so much for pomp and circumstance. It was all meat off the bone and ale, which they commanded I throw back with them in copious amounts. In all my years, I can safely say that these were the most difficult men to serve. The food was fine to test. Nothing fancy, usually plenty of muttonchops and venison haunches and bacon strips. The drink, though... Let’s just say many a feast lasted well into the next morning. The hangovers... those lasted a few days longer.

Now there’s a little known fourth rule that I don’t usually include in my answer to the above question, mostly because it’s a little too ‘doom and gloom’ for friendly conversation. A taste tester must also be loyal. Loyalty to one’s king is paramount. After all, if a tester isn’t loyal, who’s to say he won’t point out the fact that the king’s salad dressing’s been spiked with a healthy dollop of hemlock? (Hemlock’s poison, by the way, so don’t go chewing on your shrubbery out back. Just ask Socrates. He’s in the history books, I think.) I’ve heard plenty of stories about testers who’ve been bribed to ‘look the other way’ as their lord choked on a tampered turkey leg. Happens more often than you think.

Take Leland the Lovey-Dovey, a renowned taster from the next kingdom over. Offed his king to make off with his daughter. Princesses are good for a tryst, I suppose, but when it comes to wife material, they’re hardly willing to give up the castles and carriages and gowns. Well, Leland learned that the hard way. The affair didn’t last long, and when it ended, the castle guards locked him away for good. I saw that princess once. Not worth the dungeon, if you ask me.

Taste testing’s serious business. There’s a lot riding on those first few forkfuls. Every meal is show time, but not every one is a big, fancy feast. Not as glamorous as that, I’m afraid. No, I’ve stood watch over bleary-eyed breakfasts, hasty lunches,

quick snacks, and, yes, the occasional formal festivity. Don’t kid yourself, though. It’s not the size of the meal that matters. Even the smallest morsel can be deadly. Say the king fancies himself a handful of grapes at three in the morning. Guess what? As the tester, you’d better be ready to head on up there in your pajamas and pluck one from the bushel. Last thing you’d want is the king croaking on your watch. I’ve seen plenty of tasters face the hangman’s noose just because they couldn’t be bothered getting up in the middle of the night.

No matter the hour, the kitchen is a mob: a hot, bustling room chock filled with hectic servers, overworked scullions, and panic-stricken chefs (who, I might add, are all stark-raving mad). I can’t tell you how many times I’ve walked through a kitchen and been scalded with a boiling bowl of stew, or poked in the face with a serving skewer of fowl, or slipped and fell on a pile of steaming fish guts chucked in a corner.

While the dining hall itself may be a place of eloquence, grace, and beauty, the kitchen below is a whirlwind of grime and smoke and toil. The scraps aren’t bad though, and if you play your cards right, there’s always scraps. Just a matter of sweet-talking the right handmaiden. Judging from the size of my gut, I think I’ve sweet-talked one too many. Surprised my teeth aren’t riddled with cavities.

There’s a certain pride that goes along with being a taster. For starters, you always get a seat at the big table, right next to the king. When the servers bring out the dishes, it’s always you who gets the first crack at them. They saunter out nervously from the kitchens, arms heavy with pewter pots and pans, all steaming fresh from the ovens. Then the cupbearers file in, deftly clutching the casks of ale, the decanters brimming with every shade of spiced wine (a personal favorite).

Once it’s all laid out on the table, all eyes fall on you. A hush falls over the room as you grab your gold-plated fork from the sheath on your belt. The lords and ladies all look on with bated breath as you stab the prongs into that first piece. The room is silent as you lift it up to your nose. You sniff. Eyebrows raise. A damsel gasps. An empty stomach growls. A pin could drop.

If it passes the shnoz test, you lower the fork to your mouth. The eyes of the dinner guests widen as you smile, nod to the king, and shovel it in.

The first chew is always the worst. Your heart stops. You can never taste anything that first chomp. There’s too much nerves. Now the entire hall is fixed on you. The king looks on gravely, watching your every move, reading your face like a book. You chew again. Your tongue is an explosion of sensation, every taste bud hard at work. Like a machine, you go through the list of ingredients. If you’re good enough, you can name every one on the spot. By the seventh or eighth chew, if nothing tastes out of the ordinary, you swallow. Then you sit back and wait. Most poison is instant. If it’s there, it shouldn’t take very long. A good assassin knows that time is of the essence. If after a few minutes your stomach doesn’t feel like it’s about to explode and your skin doesn’t turn yellow, you nod, ushering the server to carve up the rest for the guests.

Now, repeat that about twelve times without keeling over like a dying toad,

and you, my friend, have successfully taste tested your first royal banquet.

Then the good part: You lean back in your chair, and a feeling of relief washes over you, a calm like you've never felt in your life. Death is evaded, for another day at least. And all you had to do was sit, chew, sip, chug, nibble, and slurp.

There's not much glory in it, I'll give you that. It's not as flashy as trotting out onto a battlefield with a steed and a mace, facing a hail of arrows and a horde of barbarians, but there's really not too much difference when you get down to it. Lives are still on the line, even if there's cakes and crumpets and a troubadour plucking a lute in the corner. Worst-case scenario is you croak from a bad biscuit.

But I'll tell you what: the halls I've had the pleasure of dining in? I could think of worse ways to go. Only one suffering is the tailor. My breeches need adjusting more often than not.

Criminals of the Iron Horse Calvacade

CAITLIN MASSARO

My Effie didn't mind the dry Arizona heat. She would stay in the garden for hours, picking vegetables and keeping after the chickens. She made her Ma proud, and looked like her more and more every day. Her blonde curls bounced under her hat as she carried eggs and vegetables in to Ma. They would look into each other's green eyes with a love I only seen between a Ma and daughter. On cool breezy evenings we would all sit in our rockers on the porch and watch the stars, Ma and My Effie chattering away like school girls. They were inseparable. I never thought My Effie would ever leave Broadview Ranch. I thought she would live here forever and rear my grandbabies with a nice respectable man like Silas, who lives on the next ranch a few miles down. Silas took a real liking to My Effie. He would call for her at the front door clean and polite, real respectable. I guess she didn't feel the same way because he would call for her and she would say she didn't want to see him. I think it is because of the fellow Mack in town she met one day while I was picking up a few sacks of cornmeal. She started talking to Mack and introduced me kindly. I didn't like the fellow, but I acted respectably. He had a rugged look, dark hair that he wore long and eyes green like an unripe tomato. He smiled the kinda smile that made the hairs on my arms stand up. He started coming around the ranch, bringing My Effie all kinds of stuff. Sweets from some place east, and plants she planted in the garden from places I ain't never heard of. I wondered how he got these things.

My Effie was seventeen when she left me here. It wasn't long after her Ma died from the cancer, and Effie missed her terribly. She met this Mack fellow and left her old Pa here to run this ranch by my lonesome. I wanted the best for My Effie. She went to school, and learned how to read and write, she was so good at it, real smart. She tried to teach her Ma how but she was too sick to learn. My Effie would read all these books with pretty stories in them and I could tell Ma loved those stories, because she would make Effie read them over and over again. She tried to teach me too, but I wasn't no good at it. I know enough to get by. After Ma died Effie hadn't touched none of those books she used to read to Ma. She put them up in the parlor. I would catch her sometimes standing before the shelf running her fingers down the book spines, one by one, in a particular order. They remained on the shelf until Mack came around and asked her to read them to him. Mack would come to the back door and rap on the screen 'til My Effie came into sight. She would fling the screen door open and jump into his arms. They would sit for a spell on the back porch, My Effie in her rocker, Mack perched dev-

ilishly comfortable in mine. He wouldn't ever come in I think on account of me being there, he knew I didn't like him none.

Mack used to leave for long lengths of time and My Effie would miss him something awful. I could tell from the longing in her eyes that she was keen on Mack, and I didn't like that. He said he had to go because he had to help with the railroad. I asked him if he was a platelayer, like My Effie's granddaddy was. His eyes flickered in the same way the right corner of his mouth did. Yeah, something like that, he smirked. The line that cut deep from the corner of his mouth into his cheek held within it a lie. I knew it then, I knew how he was getting all this fancy stuff from back east.

Mack was a train robber, the kinda train robbers they talked about in the papers. They were good at it too, in a way I would've never thought of. A crew of men would sneak on the railroad cars at night and hide, the yard's night watchers headed for home around midnight. They would start to scout out what was good in the cars when the last watcher was homebound. They looked for stuff they could turn around real fast, delicacies. Come morning after the conductor checked the cars to be sure the merchandise was strapped down and gave the go-ahead to leave, the bandits emerged from oversized boxes they pried open and squeezed themselves into. The crew would start ripping up the floor planks. Their next goal was to make an opening just big enough to drop down the loot onto the tracks. A few men scattered along the train's route would gather the goods. The bandits on the train would hop off after the last of their heist was dropped and work their way back to the station. The crew would split the keepings. The trains would get to the next station without the cargo intended for the stop and good people lost money on stuff they were buying, cause of no-good bandits like Mack.

I tried my hardest to try to keep My Effie from liking him more. I would take the letters he would write when he was gone and hide them. I thought if she didn't know about his letters to her, she would think he forgot about her and move on. But she found the letters I hid once and she got real mad. I had to tell her then. I had to tell her what I thought I knew about Mack. When I did she got so mad at me she threw her Ma's red glass vase at the wall. It shattered to a million pieces. I can still hear it when I walk past that wall. She said I was just mad that Ma was dead, that I was jealous because Mack loved her and Ma was gone and I didn't have no one to love. She was wrong. I loved her so much and after Ma died I knew it was gonna be hard to take care of her alone. I told My Effie she couldn't see Mack no more and that he wasn't to write her when he was away. She said it didn't matter because he was leaving here for good, going to look for gold, working his way to California. I felt so happy to hear that he was going to leave, but I couldn't let My Effie see.

At first the letters thinned out and then they stopped coming altogether. I thought it was over, until My Effie started going on long trips off the ranch. She would take Millie, her sand-colored Palomino, and gallop off without a word. I heard from Mr. Willard in town one morning while I was making a run for a side of bacon that someone saw her heading towards Gunsight, the sinful town west of our ranch. I can't

imagine what My Effie was thinking going to that town, known for an infamous saloon filled with liquor and soiled doves. I think she went to play the piano. Ma taught her piano and when Ma got sick we had to sell ours to pay the doctor. My Effie loved piano, she would play for hours. I kept the paper music. My Effie would hum the notes to Ma while she slept. I take the pages out some nights and try to mimic the sounds she would make. The pages have puckered in the spots her tears would fall, as her hum carried the melody of her Ma's dreams.

If she wanted to go to play the piano she could've just said so. I would've went with her, to make sure nothing unorderedly happened. I think she had other reasons to go, a four-lettered no-good reason. I suppose Mack only made it to Gunsight, and he was staying there hoping to lure My Effie to him. One evening she came riding in from the west, I was standing on the porch, watching the chickens finish their feed. I heard the pound of hooves on the Arizona turf. I reached the barn just as she was closing in. I told her I would tack Millie down, because I left supper on the stove for her and that she should eat before it goes cold. She did not fight me, which I was grateful for, because she liked to fight me a lot then. She went moseying on into the house. I checked through the dusted windowpane to be sure she was inside. I searched her saddle bags like a madman, hoping to find anything that would lead me to an answer. An empty canteen, a wipe-down rag for Millie, and a box the size of a brick was all I found. I hung the saddle and bridle on the rack in the tack room and started for the door.

The idea of there being something important in the box drew me away from the knob. I opened the strap of the right saddle bag and removed the box from its dark leather place. It was detailed and heavy like the brick it resembled. I unhooked the leather enclosure. A folded piece of paper lay atop a handful of makeshift gold coins. The gleam from the coins against the flicker of the light from my oil lamp surged a knot into my stomach. My Effie can't be a part of Mack's thieving. I removed one of the coins from the box and turned it over in my palm. The word "train" was carved into it. I figured there was a message in the coins, maybe something that would tell me more about My Sweet Effie and that dirty bandit. I emptied the contents of the box onto the tack room table, and tried to piece the words together. 'Meet me,' 'train station,' 'midnight,' 'tomorrow.'

I knew it wasn't meant for that night cause My Effie was already back. I figured she got it that day when she was away from the ranch. It must've been for the next night, she was gonna sneak out to meet up with Mack. I was gonna have to sleep with one eye open and make sure that if she did leave, I could follow her. I put the box and its sinful contents back into the bag and started back to the house. The cool night air bit my face and blew my long graying beard into my neck.

I stopped to take in all that I made here. I built Ma and I a home and a barn for our animals. This was all My Effie knew. She tended the chickens. Millie was her Palomino. The garden was hers to play in. The land around us was hers to roam, to own when I die. I could see My Effie through the window above the basin, staring off into

space as she washed the contents of her plate into the gray water. I continued to the house by way of the moon. If I could give her that too I would, if it would make her stay.

I reached the screen door and I waited to see if she would notice me there. When she didn't, I walked in. I settled my hat on the hook next to the door. Thank you for tacking Millie down, Pa, she said. She dried her hands on a rag. I nodded. I waited for her to slip up and say something about her day. She hummed a song she used to play on the piano, bid me goodnight, and headed for her bedroom. Effie, I called to her. She turned to face me. Her strongest features addressing me, her cheeks, chin, and eyes. The green of her eyes was the green of a perfect string bean, deep in color yet sharp on the bite. Yes, Pa? She held the edge of the door frame marked with pencil lines from when she was a tot. Goodnight. Goodnight, Pa. She closed her door. I watched the thin line of light escaping from under the door vanish. I rested my bones into my chair by the fire and gazed at the ceiling until both the ceiling and my inner eyelids met in unison.

The next morning I woke with a terrible pain in my eye. I had slept in my chair all night, my face parallel to the ceiling. Eggs and meat were cooking on the stove. The horses were whinnying in their stables. My Effie peeked around the corner. The crackle of meat in the pan struck my nose. Morning, Pa. I'm making your breakfast now, but the horses are whinnying something awful, maybe you should get out there. The gleam in her eyes sent me back to mornings with her Ma. I steadied myself and headed for the barn. The chickens were pecking around their coop ready for feed and Millie was especially noisy that morning. Something was ailing her. Her eyes were wild with fear as I closed in on the barn. I called to her. Easy now, Millie, ain't no one out here but me. Steady, girl! She bounced on her hind legs and thrashed her front legs forward. Easy, Millie, I said. She bucked forward again in the stall. I backed down looking to see what could've spooked her. She kept bucking to the left of her stall. What did she see that I couldn't? I walked around the barn, maybe I would find something on the other side of her stall wall, but there was nothing there.

The sun beating down and the mix of dry heat created a haze over the grounds beyond the barn. What appeared to be a cactus took shape through squinted eyes as a man with long dark hair. Hey! You best get yourself outta here now! I shouted. The man, who I was sure was Mack, was hesitant to move. He must of figured if he didn't I would leave him be. I stood there in the haze, waiting for movement. After a few minutes I went back to Millie, who was ailing still. Easy, girl, ain't no one gonna come mess with you. I patted her nose and ran my hand down her mane. After feeding and letting the horses out to pasture I walked back around the barn to see if the man was still there. He wasn't. Even in this haze and heat I know what I'm looking at, I've been on this land for over 30 years. I'll be damned if he thinks he's gonna pull wool over my eyes.

My Effie was awfully tense while she cleaned the supper plates. The table was all that was between us, but she felt miles away. Her body was in Ma's kitchen, but her heart was not. She dried the dishes with haste. I sat at the table watching her fret.

I remembered nights in the kitchen. I would watch her Ma dry the supper plates and smother the stove fire before we would head to bed. I'm going to turn in, Pa, goodnight. She wiped her damp hands on the front of her apron before returning it to the hook next to the stove. I sat at the table for a while longer before I tended the fire and headed to my bedroom. I wasn't going to sleep. I had to figure out how to fix Mack, for good.

The screen door creaked open and snapped shut, jolting me from my bed. I crept to the window and saw My Effie treading to the barn, her frame kissed by the moonlight. I figured she would be along in a few minutes. I ventured to the kitchen to wait for her to tack Millie up and go. I removed my hat from the hook next to the door. Glancing out the kitchen window, I saw My Effie mounting Millie. I would take Willie, Ma's quarter horse, and stop them at the train station. I stepped onto the porch holding the screen door so it wouldn't slam, then dashed to the barn to tack up Willie. On the floor in the tack room was the note from the box of gold coins. I unfolded the paper.

"My dearest Effie, bring the box with you, we will need it to start our lives together. Be forever mine. -Mack"

I was gonna end this once and for all. Ain't no daughter of mine is gonna run off with some two-bit bandit that no one knows nothing about. I stuffed the note into my chest pocket. I tacked up Willie so fast my head spun. I ventured out of the pasture towards the train station. I was going to get My Effie back.

The station was seven miles from the ranch, just outside of our town. I figured at a canter I wouldn't catch up with Effie, but I would be close enough behind her yet still far enough away so she wouldn't know I was following her. I could see Willie's breath escaping him with each stride. His hooves pounding the ground rattled my old bones something wicked. I needed to get to My Effie before it was too late, before she let Mack convince her to do something awful or worse, leave here for good. I drew closer to the station and spotted Millie ground tied near a cactus. Effie must have left her here and walked the rest of the way to the station. I trotted up beside her, grabbed her reins, and continued on to the station. I was hoping she'd see me. I wanted her to know she wasn't gonna fool me none.

I tied my steeds to the rail outside the station house. I started around back, Colt Walker in hand in case someone tried to take me out. Creeping around a railway station at night was a surefire way to get a man killed, if he wasn't careful. Effie never liked when I had my gun on me, it made her jumpy, but she knew I would never use it unless I needed to. The moon was bright and let me see if anyone was around. I didn't see no one, but I stuck to the shadows just in case. I crept along the side of the train. My footsteps padding softly along the dirt sounded loud in my ears. The first car door was open. I peered inside. It was clear. I continued on to the next car. I was mid-stride when I heard voices. I stuck my back to the train car, the steel cold against me. I don't know about this, Mack, what happens if we get caught? I heard My Effie say. We won't get caught, Effie. We have to do it, there's no other way. Mack's voice was stern and low. My back went up. No one's gonna talk to My Effie like that. I knew I had to do something,

but shooting this man wasn't gonna make it any better, and it wasn't gonna make My Effie happy one bit. All we have to do is remove the floor planks of the car. Then come morning when the train takes off we drop the loot down onto the tracks and the boys will fetch it behind the train. When we drop the last of it we jump off and head back to the station, Mack said with an ease and smoothness in his voice, as if he wasn't doing nothing wrong. As if he had done this before. My ears prickled. My face felt hot. I felt a cool circle burning into the back of my neck.

Don't move, a deep voice said behind me. I gripped my Colt tighter to my side. I remained still. My Walker-less arm was bent around into my back and I was shoved into the overcast moonlight. Mack, you better come outta there, we got a visitor, the deep voice stated just louder than a whisper. Mack and My Effie came into sight. I stood under the moon chained by human hands. Pa? She was barely speaking. Effie, you best get Millie and get on heading home now. I struggled in the grip of the deep-voiced bandit to no relief. I can't, Pa, I'm sorry. Her words rang in my ears and sparked something that felt familiar to me.

Nettie's scent was on the breeze. She hopped off the car, calling my attention to her. *Nettie, what're you doing?* She drifted. I lowered the box I was holding to the floor. *Do you hear them, Zachariah?* I felt red hot and ice cold in the same moment. *Hear who, Nettie? Who do you hear?* I rushed to the car door carefully keeping my body hidden. I stuck my ear to the wind. *The coyotes, Zachariah, do you hear them?* She stood under the moon. The breeze blew back the strands of blonde hair that had fallen from her knot. Their howls echoed from the plains and rolled over on the breeze. *Yeah, Nettie, I hear them. Come finish helping me, would you?* I walked deeper into the car. *Zachariah?* She came closer, the bottom of the car meeting her waist. *Zachariah, there must be a better way to make money.* Her chin fell and she toed the dirt. I mellowed over to the opening of the car door. The moon cast a dim light on the plains, the squared door captured in a frame the terrain's crevices, the dips and climbs shadowed both in complete and slight darkness. A picture just waiting to be painted, the vast valley and all its freedom, swathed to a canvas and bonded in place by a wooden frame, likely to be stowed aboard a vessel such as the one beneath my feet, to be sold back east. To be hung in a parlor, to a family who knows nothing of this place or its people. The light breeze whisked back the length of my hair under my hat. Kneeling, I took her chin in my rough palm. *For now, Nettie, this is all we can do, but it won't go on for long.* I pulled her up into the car by the waist. She looked into my eyes with fear. *Zachariah, we can't bring a baby into this. We have to figure some other way.* Her breath was familiarly heavy in my ears. She placed her hand on mine and guided it to her not-quite-yet belly. *I hope it's a girl,* she whispered. *Just as pretty and perfect as you, Nettie,* I stammered.

The breeze over the plains whistled in my ears. The howls of coyotes prevailed through the gust and whisked back the length of hair under my hat. I broke free of my bind and put my Colt to use. Deep Voice fell limp to the dirt and Mack ran. I took after him and Effie took after me shouting and making a fuss. It wasn't until I noticed her

running next to me that I realized what was going on.

Papa! What're you doing here? Nettie shouted. He stood stone-faced in the train yard. He stood a full head higher than me on leveled ground. His shoulders, broad and strong, surely molded from his successes as the best railway platelayer in Arizona, held tense under his shirt and vest. Nettie took from him both his likeness and curiosity, and her Mama's strength and beauty. Her immense knowledge of the railway from her Papa's stories provided me with an idea, which was now unraveling at the seams. I dropped the box in my hands, its contents shattered. The sound clung to the stale breeze. *Step down from the car, Nettie, you're coming home with me.* His dark eyes weren't visible in the moonlight, but I could feel them burning holes in me. *I can't, Papa, I'm sorry.* She stood shaking, her hands on her soon-to-be belly. There was a moment of silence that seemed to turn us all onto the same page. He broke the silence. *Well, Nettie, you leave me no choice.* He moved not a muscle, did not flinch. A shot rang out. I stood numb, convinced I was done for in that moment. Still in shock from the blast, I felt Nettie's breath on my neck. *Run, run, Zachariah,* she said, pushing me from her, from this place. I felt my chest. I was dry and holeless. Her Papa took after me, and Nettie took after him. We would have been a sight, if anyone was around to see us. It wasn't until she was next to me running that I knew we were going to make it through this together.

A burning in my lungs and an ache in my backside had slowed me. My Effie wasn't trying to stop me from getting Mack. She was trying to stop Mack from leaving her here. I stopped. She eased up and looked at me. Her pale face glowed in the moonlight and her green eyes shimmered a look of confusion. That moment sent me back to the first night I really met her Ma. I saw a different side of her then. My beautiful Nettie running alongside me as we feverishly dashed farther from her Papa in the train yard, while shots rounded out into the heavenly indigo sky, gleaming specks millions of miles up guided our wild escape, and my future by my side. In that moment My Effie took the place of her Ma, running after and slowly catching up to Mack, who took the place of me.

Postcards from Cairo

CARLIN HUCKEL

The first time my father hit me, I was seven years old. He'd heard about what happened at school with me and another boy. I didn't mean anything by it, I swear, we were just playing truth or dare. All the other kids thought it was funny when I kissed him, and I was happy to impress them. It was nothing. Kid stuff.

I thought my parents would laugh like all the other kids, but I was wrong. At dinner that night my mom gasped and my father slapped me, then again for asking why. The hero I'd seen my father as disappeared with that slap, and for the first time, but surely not the last, I was scared of him. I wasn't allowed to eat dessert that night, and while I was crying in my room my dad came in and he said to me in his deep, accented voice, "Khai, you must not do this. I will not have a son that does such filthy things. You will fail if you do these things. You will go to Hell and burn forever. It is unnatural to be this way, and because you are a boy, you only kiss girls. Do you understand me?"

I didn't want to burn forever, so I nodded. He kissed my forehead and told me goodnight, but after he closed the door, I knew it. I knew it for sure, that I wasn't going to Heaven after I die.

As I grew up I remembered following news articles about Egypt and I saw this one about two guys getting beaten and arrested for promoting "indecent and immoral behavior" by holding hands with each other in public. When we visited Cairo when I was twelve, I saw a group of two or three people rallying for gay rights and they got food thrown at them. My father cheered and I pushed my feelings deeper down in me.

"Do you have a date to Iain's graduation party?" my mother asks me as I finish brushing my teeth.

"No, Mom. You know I don't date," I reply, my mouth full of the taste of mint.

"I know you are a lady's man," she says, smiling at me. "You know American girls love foreigners."

I roll my eyes. "I'm barely foreign, Mom, I've known these people since I was six years old. All the girls think I'm a terrorist anyway. They don't care that we're not even *from* 'the middle east,'" I put up finger quotes and start walking to my room, "despite telling them a million times that I'm from Egypt."

She lingers at my doorframe. "I know you will kiss a beautiful girl tonight. My son is the most handsome of them all," she says, smiling.

"I'll be down soon, Mom," I reply.

She leaves and I put my face in my hands. I hate lying to her, but I know whatever I tell her, my dad will hear. And he would kill me if he knew that in truth, it's just me and Iain hanging out in his basement watching horror movies. I guess Dad wouldn't care so much if I hadn't kissed Iain on the playground in second grade. The reality is that I don't have any other close friends, and I can't bear to let my parents know that.

I slip on my sneakers and text Iain to let him know I'm leaving. I rummage through the drawer on my nightstand trying to find my car keys. I feel like my room doesn't fit with the rest of the house; messy and smelling slightly of the weed I smoke when I'm stressed or nervous. Which is a lot. Anyway, the postcards from Cairo on my walls remind me of Egypt and only inspire me to act straight even more. Plus, they're the only things my dad would let me hang on the walls. Our house is pretty big because my dad is a lawyer and my mom is a nurse. On the outside it looks like your typical, perfect American home, but on the inside there's a family of Egyptian immigrants with a son who spends his time convincing himself he likes girls so his father can finally love him.

Downstairs, my mom and dad sit on the couch watching television.

"I'll be back later, Mom," I say, looking only at her.

"Be back by midnight," Dad says. "If you smoke or drink, I will know, boy."

I turn my glance to him, feeling anger in the pit of my stomach. "No you won't."

He gets up from the couch, and I can tell the muscle in his jaw is twitching.

"Go on and hit me then, I'm sure my classmates would love to hear that story," I say as I turn away from him.

"You are a disgrace to me," he says quietly, shaking his head. "You fail classes, you did not even apply to college!" His words sting, and I feel my face get hot and my heart start racing.

"I don't want to go to college. I've told you that."

"You have not even brought home a girl. What am I supposed to think of you?"

I feel myself about to yell. In that moment the sheer rage suppresses ten years of fear and suddenly I feel like I can't bear it anymore.

"I don't even *like* girls, Dad! Not even a little! And guess what? They don't like me either! I'm not even going to a party with girls! It's just me and Iain, and who knows, maybe I'll even fucking kiss him again!"

Before he is able to put his hands on me, I run out the door and slam it behind me and quickly get into my car.

I speed out of the driveway, and after making it out of my neighborhood I pull into the dark parking lot behind a McDonald's. I run my hands through my hair and squeeze my head between my forearms. I bite my lip and shut my eyes, trying to hold myself back from screaming or crying. I'm not going to be able to go home later. Why did I even say that? I didn't want it to be true, but I said it and now he knows, which

makes it real.

My breathing starts to get faster as I realize the magnitude of what I've done. I've spent so many years telling myself that I love girls and I always knew it wasn't true, but I still feel ashamed. "Shit," I whisper to myself as I feel tears rolling down my cheeks, despite my efforts.

I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I take it out to see a text message from Iain asking where I am. I wipe my arm across my face and take a deep breath. "Sorry. Traffic," I type. There's barely any other cars on the road. I look in my rearview mirror and hope my eyes get less red by the time I get there.

As I take the familiar drive to Iain's house, I find myself feeling nervous. I feel like I have to tell him, my only friend, the words I'd just yelled at my father. Too soon, the gravel of his driveway crunches beneath the wheels of my Jeep. There aren't any other cars there, so I let myself in and nervously walk down to the basement.

Iain's on the couch watching a re-run of *Star Trek*, and I can't help but smile. What a fucking nerd. He's a tall, skinny, white kid with short brown hair. I think we became such good friends because he understood what it was like having immigrant parents, though his were from Ireland. He was the kind of person who got good grades and read a lot of books. We always did weird shit together, like play *Lord of the Rings* Monopoly or read instructional books on how to play *Dungeons and Dragons*, 'cause we could never get anyone else to play with us.

"It's me," I say.

"There you are," he says as he turns around. I chuckle lightly.

"What are we watching? Not this shit, I hope."

I sit down next to him and I feel the warmth of his body.

"I picked a few movies from my DVD collection, but we've seen them already. I figured you wouldn't mind re-watching some stuff," he says. I shake my head.

"I can't believe we graduated," I say. "And you're gonna go to college!" As I say the last bit I feel my heart sink a little.

"I know. It's gonna be weird without you. We've been friends since like, second grade or something ridiculous."

I gulp and force an awkward laugh. "Yeah...you remember how we met?" I ask, a part of me hoping he doesn't.

He laughs for real, picking up a stack of movies from the shelf on the wall. "Of course, you fucking kissed me, how could I forget?"

"It was a dare!" I say, and I can't help but smile.

"Yeah, alright," he replies and sits back down. I can tell he's being sarcastic, but I wonder if I've done a good enough job of hiding it from him all this time. There's a silence.

"Hey, listen, um..." I hear myself say. I run my fingers through my hair. Iain cocks his head.

"There wasn't any traffic. I, uh... I got in a fight with my dad," I say as I avoid

eye contact.

"What now?" he asks, not unfamiliar with our rocky relationship.

I sigh. "I'm only telling you this because I feel like I owe it to you, alright?" My hands start shaking. "I told him I was... I told him that I was gay," I say quietly, staring at my lap.

Iain's shoulders fall. "Oh..." he says. "Um... are you?"

The look on his face kills me. I nod, looking him in the eyes.

"Yeah, and I think I like you, too." My heart feels like it's going to crawl out of my throat. I watch as his pale face turns pink, and I feel like I've fucked up.

"Do you... do you still want to watch a movie?" he asks me.

My eyes burn, and I can't look at him. I shake my head no. I stare at the dirty carpeting, trying to hold back the lump in my throat. My view of the carpet begins to blur and for the first time I wish I was at home in my room. He puts his hand on my shoulder and that does it; I let the tears and ugly sobs come out and I feel Iain pull me into an awkward hug. I can't even bring myself to tell him to get off me, because this will be the closest I get to him embracing me. I feel his warmth on me, and I cherish it.

"Khai, this doesn't change our friendship. I hope you know that," he says quietly, pulling away from me.

I wipe my eyes with the palms of my hands. He keeps looking at me, but I can't return his gaze. I just keep staring at my lap and playing with the sleeves of my sweatshirt.

"It *has* changed our friendship. Even if we never mention this again, it will always be there. Honestly, I wouldn't have told you if I hadn't blown up at my dad. I just... I hate him so much, so I figured... I figured it was only fair for me to tell *you*, you know?" I say.

Iain runs his hands through his short hair. "Khai, I..." he sighs. "I... wish you felt comfortable telling me."

"I didn't even feel comfortable telling it to myself," I snap at him. Iain looks at me, and there's sadness in his eyes. I nod, and I bite my bottom lip and try to hold myself back from crying again.

"You're my best fucking friend, okay? I mean, Jesus Christ, Khai. So you've got a crush on me or whatever, big deal. You're my best friend. Alright?" he says.

A wave of emotion washes over me and I burst into tears again. I pull Iain into a hug and I feel the fabric of his shirt gather under my hands.

"Thank you," I manage to say. If I ever get home, I'm tearing down those stupid fucking postcards.

Doug and the Cleanie-Bug

CIARA ADAMS

Her one financial extravagance was rosewater. She used it for several of her perfuming needs. It smelled the kind of sweet Shakespeare would have meant. Candles and sprays smelled like flowers that grow from the earth the way a fourth grade concert band sounds like the London Symphony Orchestra. Oh, but that was unkind.

A trilling sound came from the next room. Ellen placed the neatly labeled bottle of rosewater back in the cabinet and gently closed it, moving into the kitchen. She shut off the stove and removed the flowered kettle, humming as she poured it into her flowered teapot and dropped a pinch of tea leaves inside. *Mmmm*, nothing like afternoon tea and the smell of rosewater to make her feel nice and calm.

Ellen settled into a kitchen chair and tipped some tea into her matching flowered tea cup. A dollop of milk, one and a half sugars, and stir. The purple curtain that was supposed to cover the small window above the kitchen sink was pushed to the side. Ellen slowly lifted her tea cup to her mouth, but the taste was spoiled slightly by the unexpected appearance of Outside.

She stood and walked to the window, looking at the even square of her backyard. Her empty porch covered half of it, and the other half sported some overgrown grass and bushes. She knew what Whitman would say about grass: *I guess it must be the flag of my disposition...the handkerchief of the Lord...Or I guess the grass is itself a child... But all she saw was chaos and disorder, dirt and bugs and allergies, danger. She brought the tea cup once more to her mouth.*

Bang, bang, bang – “Hey, lady!” came from the front of the house. Ellen nearly dropped her little flowered cup, but managed to place it, shaking, on its saucer, spilling a light brown spot on the white lace tablecloth. Hovering between her abused front door and the stain she could *feel* setting into the lace, she finally wrenched herself away from the kitchen. She stood by the front door and smoothed her hands over her dress, taking deep breaths to calm herself. Unexpected should not equal dangerous.

Ellen stood on tiptoes to peer through the peep hole. *What on earth?*

The hinges squeaked as she pulled the door open a few inches.

“Hey, lady,” came the even tone from the four foot mud-pie. The child was staring up at her with eyes as brown as the dirt smudged along his cheeks. “I’m here for your grocery list.”

Ellen opened her door a few more inches and tried to focus on the child and not the too-bright world behind him. “Oh, no. No no, little boy, that’s Felicia’s job.” She was sure to keep her voice kind, despite the dread growing in her chest. Unexpected does not mean dangerous.

“Felicia eloped with her boyfriend yesterday and Aunt Kim said I’m s’posed to

help you out until she’s allowed back in the house,” he said, his arms still hanging by his sides, his face upturned.

“Oh.” Ellen tried not to judge her now-former grocery-getter. “Well, I suppose that would work.” She eyed his small dirty hands. “You’re going to bring the list to your Aunt Kim?”

“Yup, and the money.” That was most certainly not happening. “And I’m supposed to ask if there’s anything else you need help with.”

“Oh, dear.” She smoothed down the front of her dress. Could she wait another week or two for groceries? She considered the state of her refrigerator. *Oh, no, I’m almost out of cottage cheese!* “Alright then, dear. Why don’t you,” she tried valiantly to hide her wince, “come inside? *Here!*” she corrected as he made his way towards her dark floral print couch. “Here you go, dear.” The child sat on the chair she’d pulled from the kitchen, after covering the padded seat with a tea towel. “Now, I’ll just go get the—”

“You’re one o’ them, huh?” he asked, sitting on his hands. *Thank God I covered the padding!* On the heels of her relief came an achy resignation. “One of those people” was not a phrase she enjoyed, nor was she unused to it.

“One of whom, dear?” she called from the kitchen, pulling her kitten stationary off of the refrigerator and checking over the list of items she was short on. If the boy answered her, she didn’t hear it.

- 1 16 oz. Tub of Breakstone’s cottage cheese – small curd – 2% low fat (the red one, not the blue!)
- 1 gallon store brand white vinegar (should be on sale!)
- 1 box Bigelow “Cozy Chamomile” herb tea – caffeine free

“So, you are Felicia’s cousin?” she asked as she walked back into the living room, the lilac carpet firm beneath her pink slippers. The child nodded, hands still under his thighs, bare feet brushing the carpet. *Oh heavens, where are his shoes?*

“Yup. She’s my favorite cousin. My other cousin’s a jerk-face, but I only have to see him at parties, so that’s okay, I guess.” Ellen let him ramble while she rocked back and forth slightly in her slippers and fingered the hem of her cardigan. “I just moved in with Aunt Kim in second grade ‘cause my dad’s in Afghanistan, but he said in his last email that he’ll be home soon so I prob’ly won’t be here for third grade.”

“Oh.” She dragged her eyes away from his dirt-streaked toes. “W-what’s your name, dear?”

“Doug.” He stared at her for a moment, and then his eyes widened. “Oh! And what is your name, ma’am?”

Ellen felt her shoulders relax a fraction and smiled a little. “Such manners! My name is Ellen.”

Doug lifted his legs onto the chair, crossing them. “My aunt’s house is really boring, you know. She doesn’t have any video games and all the books are for grownups

and all the kids around here want to do is play *tag*, like it's the eighteen hundreds and no one has any good ideas about fun, new games."

"That sounds – unpleasant?" Ellen guessed, resigning herself to a conversation and perching on the edge of a couch cushion.

"It's *super* unpleasant! How come you don't do your own grocery shopping? You don't look crippled."

"Oh!" Ellen struggled to keep up with the subject change. She smoothed her dress over her knees. "Well, I'm not—I don't think 'crippled' is the appropriate term—" The corner of his mouth pulled down in a flinch. "Oops!"

"That's fine, dear. Anyway, I don't do my own shopping because I don't go outside." She waited for a reaction.

Doug stared. "You don't go outside."

"No."

"Like, never ever?" He looked very confused. Had his aunt not told him? Did the kids not whisper about the crazy old lady down the street who never left her house? It was a good thing that Doug didn't know, right?

"Well, sometimes there's a substitute mail carrier who doesn't know to deliver it straight to the door, so I have to run out to the mailbox. And one day last summer I drank half of my afternoon cup of tea with the back door open."

"I don't think that counts," Doug said doubtfully.

"No?" Ellen folded her hands together in her lap.

"No. But before I can decide, I think I need to know why you don't go outside." He shifted so that one leg was hanging off of the chair.

"It makes me..." *Can't predict chaos, can't control disorder*, "nervous." Ellen looked at his dirty toes. "It's not safe outside." Her eyes trailed up his rounded legs, chubby stomach, arms free from purple or red marks. Doug was not a child who understood what it meant not to be safe.

"That's smart."

Ellen looked up at his decisive voice. "What? Smart?"

"Yeah. Sometimes other people suck. And there's stuff like mosquitoes and in-flu-enza and terrorists and stuff, so, really, you're right."

Ellen swallowed and watched the child watch her with a crooked grin.

She stood up and let out a large breath, took two tens out of her wallet on the table by the front door, and glanced at the boy. He hopped off of the chair and looked up at her with those wide brown eyes. She took out an extra dollar.

"Okay, little man. Now make sure your aunt receives the money and the list, alright?" She leaned down to match his height. Ellen held onto the end of the bill so their fingers wouldn't touch when he took it. "And here's an extra dollar for you, for helping out!"

"Thanks, lady!" Doug returned her smile—he was missing a tooth on the left side—and padded over to the door. He turned the handle (*Must remember to clean*

that!) and looked back over his shoulder at her. "By the way, I'm a girl."

And then he, no, she was gone, and Ellen's smile disappeared.

The loud banging and calls of "Hey, lady" returned two days later. This time, Ellen was in her soap room, pouring a batch into little heart shapes and humming Beethoven. Her grip tightened on the bowl. If she paused to answer the door before completing it, the soap would seize before she could get it in the molds, and that would not do. She took a deep breath, the spell of tranquility broken.

"One moment, dear," she called in the direction of the door, dripping the last of the viscous mixture into a mold. She placed her rubber gloves and the bowl on the counter, and hung her apron up on the hook by the doorway. "Coming!"

She opened the door to find a dirty little Doug—*That can't really be her name, can it?*—once again staring up at her, a plastic grocery bag in each hand. Ellen held her hands out to her for a second, and then pulled them back into her body. "Oh, right, plastic, thank you. I guess Felicia didn't give her mom the reusable bags I gave her. That's fine. I'll just—"

"These are heavy!" Doug complained and walked right past her. She marched her filthy bare feet through the living room and into the kitchen, lifting onto her tiptoes to drop the groceries on the table. Ellen followed behind her, hands clenching into and out of fists.

The child turned around and looked up at her. "Don't worry, I made sure to take a bath yesterday." *How could that possibly be true?* "Now that I know you're one o' those."

Ellen jerked into motion, lifting the cottage cheese from the plastic grocery bag and putting it on its proper shelf in the refrigerator. She turned it until the label was facing out. "Um, one of whom, dear?"

Germaphobe. Agoraphobe. Freak.

"A cleanie-bug," Doug said simply.

Ellen closed the refrigerator door and felt frozen herself. "Oh."

"You probably sprayed loads of disinfectant and stuff after I left, huh? My Uncle George is like that, he hates germs and dirt and stuff."

She turned to face the girl, who had her head cocked to the side. "No, actually. Most modern cleaning supplies are full of harmful chemicals. I use more natural materials, like vinegar and castile soap."

"Ohhh, so that's why all the vinegar!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, dear." Ellen smiled. "Now, your little friends are probably—"

"They're not my friends anymore." Doug's face darkened as she pulled out a kitchen chair and made to sit. "They said I'm weird 'cause I don't use a girl name and don't like shoes and they said I have an accent, but really *they're* the ones with accents." As she talked Ellen gently held onto her arm to stop her from sitting, pulled a tea towel off of the handle of the oven, and placed it down on the chair. Her fingers tingled where

they'd brushed the skin of the girl's inner forearm. How long had it been since she'd last touched another person? "Now there's nobody I can hang out with." The girl sat slumped forward.

Ellen sat in the chair across from her, back straight. "That's...unpleasant—" "Super unpleasant," she mumbled.

"Super unpleasant, yes, dear. But you know, if they don't treat you right, they're not worth your time or friendship." She brought her hand down hard on the table, for emphasis, and then startled at the noise.

"Totally," Doug agreed.

Ellen bit her lip and decided to voice her question. "What—what is your, um, birth name, Doug?"

The child sucked her lower lip into her mouth and then released it with a squeaking sound. "Katherine."

Ellen smiled. "That's a lovely name."

She shrugged. "I like the name Doug." Her eyes wandered around the room for a minute before they came to rest somewhere over Ellen's shoulder. "Hey, what's that?" She pointed through the doorway into the soap room.

"Oh. That's, um, nothing." Ellen stood up from her chair and pushed it neatly under the table.

Doug looked up at her with wide eyes and a wider grin. "Can I see it?"

Ellen glanced over her shoulder. It was relatively small, converted from a laundry room. Why did it suddenly look so empty? The white and yellow analog clock hanging by the sink told her it was 5:30. "Hmm. Tell you what, why don't you come by tomorrow after school, and I'll show you just what's inside that room?"

The girl surged out of her chair, hands balled into excited fists. "You mean it?"

Ellen smiled at her and cleared her throat. "Totally."

Doug thought that making soap was "awesome."

Ellen hadn't slept much the night before. She'd rolled over a lot and tried adding sheets from the linen closet and then folding them up and placing them in the laundry hamper when they got too hot, but nothing helped. She'd woken up forty-two minutes later than she usually did on Thursdays. Thursdays were soap-making days. She needed time to prepare and make as many batches as possible.

It was 1:00 and she'd made three batches already, the scent of grapefruit and eucalyptus just beginning to fade. She anticipated being able to complete one more batch of soap before 4:00—was actually anticipating 4:00—and then "Hey, lady!" and "We had an early dismissal today 'cause of conferences. Can you show me the room now, please, ma'am?" and Doug thought that making soap was "awesome," so what could she do?

"It's like *Little House on the Prairie* stuff," the little girl explained as Ellen rubbed her temples with one hand and with the other gently removed Doug's fingers

from a bar of soap that was still curing. "They have those books at the library at school, and I always wanted to read them."

"That's very nice, dear. Now, it's not a very difficult process, but you still have to be careful. First we'll pick out our main oils." Ellen gestured to the bottom shelf of the rack, and Doug leaned down to get a better view. "There's coconut oil, palm oil, shea butter—no, dear, that's heavy, I'll take it out!"

She removed the large plastic container of coconut oil and lifted it up onto the counter. Doug crowded in at her left side, leaning in to read the hand-written label. *Too close*. Ellen stepped away from the girl and smoothed the left side of her dress down.

"Now, see how the oil is solid? We have to heat it up so that it melts into a liquid. Then we—"

"Is that why there's another stove in here?" Doug asked, turning the knob on the stove to 'high.'

Ellen rushed over and clicked it back into the off position. "Yes, dear. But first we have to measure out the proper amount of—"

Doug was scratching her foot. With her hand. She was touching the filthy, dirt-encrusted soles of her feet, the same ones whose trail across her lilac carpet Ellen had been forced to scrub at for an hour after the girl had left yesterday. With the hand she was going to be using to touch Ellen's soap ingredients. No.

"Okay, dearest, you need to go home right now and put some shoes on."

The constant rustling, simmering, humming, dragging sounds of the little girl ceased. She looked up at Ellen and her face was even darker than it had been yesterday when she'd talked about her friends.

"I don't want to."

"I don't care what you want, little lady. You go home and put a pair of shoes on right now." Ellen belatedly thought to put her hands on her hips. That's what mothers did, right?

"I'm not a lady, and you're not my mom!"

Doug was suddenly furious and Ellen *wasn't* her mom, so she took her hands off of her hips, but her face was growing uncomfortably hot and her eyes were drawn to the brown smudges on her soap room floor, which wasn't supposed to encounter worse than dust and oil and occasionally ground-up seeds or flower petals.

"You cannot be in my house without shoes on, Katherine. Your feet are filthy!" Oh heavens, she was almost yelling!

"Don't call me that!" Doug was definitely yelling.

"Accurate labeling is very important!" Ellen threw out, wondering what was happening, why her heart was pumping so hard, feeling nervous and scared and the tiniest, littlest bit relieved.

The girl was backing up, out of the soap room, her hands curled into fists, her eyes wide and wet, and her mouth pressed together tightly. Ellen felt that small particle

of relief fizzle into non-existence. Doug turned around and walked out of the soap room, out of the kitchen, and out of Ellen's house.

Ellen stood alone amongst beautiful bars of soap and matching floral print and white lace and chamomile tea and felt, for the first time in a long time, exactly that. Alone.

The next day, there was a knock at the door at 4:30. Ellen froze where she was standing by the kitchen window, its purple curtain pushed to the side. She walked to the front door and opened it without looking out of the peephole.

Doug stood on the front porch, her hands behind her back, her face clean and angled up towards the older woman, her hair still a little damp where it was pushed back from her face and held in place with a red hairband. She wore brown sneakers on her feet with some little cartoon character on them.

"Hi, lady," she said.

"Hello, dear," Ellen said.

Doug held out a folded-up piece of white paper, one edge lined with semi-circles where it had been ripped out of a notebook. Ellen took the paper and opened it.

Miss Ellen I am sorry for making you mad yesturday and for not wearing shoes in your pretty house. I know you like to be clean so I should wear shoes on my feet. I am still really bored with the kids on the street, I would like to make soap with you today if that is okay with you. I even took a bath after school to make sure I was extra clean and I promise not to yell at you if you call me Katherine. But I'd prefur it if you called me Doug please mam.

Ellen folded the paper back up and tucked it into the pocket of her dress. She smiled and opened the door a little bit wider. "Please come in, Doug."

A wide smile spread across the child's face and she clapped her hands in front of her. "Let's get soapin'!"

They made soap with shea butter and coconut oil, one of Ellen's most basic recipes, and she hesitated but decided to let Doug pick out which colorant and essential oils to use.

"Hmm." Doug looked at the shelves of little jars and plastic baggies with her hand against her chin. "It's gonna be just green. But it's gonna smell like blueberries."

"That doesn't—" Ellen bit her lip and the girl raised her eyebrows hopefully. "I guess that could be fun."

And it was. A green soap that smelled like blueberries. It made her want to giggle.

That first batch made ten bars. They put the molds (Celtic knots, because they were "cool") in a box and wrapped it in a blanket, placing it on the top shelf of the shorter rack. The other shelves were dotted with dozens of bars of soap, all different colors and shapes.

"Jeez! What do you do with all that soap, lady?"

"I sell most of it. Some of it goes to the homeless shelter or the church. Some

of it I give to Felicia or the mailman," she said, and removed her apron. Doug was still wearing her goggles ("Lye can be very dangerous. We want to protect those pretty eyes."), so she reached over and gently pulled them off her head. Her thick hair was still wet in places. Wet for her, because she was "one of those"—a cleanie-bug. "And you know, dear, my name is Ellen, not 'lady.'"

As soon as it was out of her mouth, she wished she could swallow it back down. Still half-crouched in front of the girl, her hands holding the goggles, their eyes level, Ellen waited for an eruption of youthful indignation. Doug gave her a crooked grin.

"And I told *you*, my name is Doug, not 'dear.'"

They made their way into the living room, Doug sitting gingerly on the dark floral print couch and Ellen joining her after putting the kettle on the stove.

Ellen faced the young girl. She remembered how it had almost felt good to say what was on her mind yesterday, remembered Doug saying "cripple" and then "oops," remembered *I promise not to yell at you if you call me Katherine*.

"Why don't you like the name Katherine?" she asked quickly and quietly.

Doug looked at her with those wide eyes and shrugged. "'S not a bad name. I like it okay. It's just not me. I have a friend named Katherine. She says she wants to be an accountant when she grows up."

Ellen managed to curb most of her laughter. "You're right. That doesn't sound like you at all. Do you have any friends named Doug?"

"Nope. I don't know anyone named Doug."

Ellen smiled at Doug and let herself relax backwards into the couch. She pushed her pink slippers off of her feet and pulled her knees up to her chin, her feet pale against the dark floral pattern of the couch. She smoothed her dress over her knees. Doug watched her with wide eyes.

"Go ahead, dear." Doug raised an eyebrow. "*Doug*. Go ahead, *Doug*."

The girl smiled widely and kicked off her sneakers without untying them, one landing upside down on a powder blue ottoman. She, too, lifted her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"Are you sure this is okay?" she asked, facing the woman across from her on the couch.

"Of course it is, Doug." A trilling noise came from the next room. "We're safe here."

Dedicated with Apologies to HP Lovecraft

ZANNY STOWELL

I fear I do not have long to write this. I sit here at the ripe age of nine years and five months, a caged animal, curled in the corner of my bedroom with no voice but a purple ink pen and a *My Little Pony* diary that only opens if you say the password into the microphone on the back. I got it for my birthday last year. From them.

Was it all a lie?

Their ghoulish cavorting has been reduced to a quiet thump. I no longer hear the twisted cries of Hell creeping through my door. I am skeptical of this lull. And yet, that second place ribbon for my bean plant experiment proves that I am a woman of science, driven by noble curiosity. Noble... noble or foolish. Only time will tell.

No. My cowardice trumps my intellectualism. I cannot face their true forms again, not since last time.

I cannot begin to tell you of the horrors I witnessed that night, when I crept from my room, my heart heavy and my pink puppy slippers shuffling against the floor. The sounds I heard were inhuman, sickening, and when I cracked open the door I found them, not asleep in their beds—no! But combined into a wriggling mass of quivering flesh, a single eldritch entity, screaming the Lord's name as it jerked and writhed in its pagan dance on the tainted sheets of their hallowed bed, no doubt attempting to summon some Hellish beast more hideous than itself.

Trying not to retch, I tore my gaze from the foul sight and ran back to my room, where I hid in my closet amidst communion shoes and stuffed elephants, shuddering until I saw shadows pacing outside of it. They begged me to come out and “talk,” as if they expected me to trust them after what I saw. I finally let on the guise of agreement, clutching my softball bat behind my back with one hand, the other clinging to a stuffed elephant—my hostage.

I was surprised to see they had managed to transform back into their human selves so quickly. Pajama buttons had been haphazardly done up and their hair was mussed—signs that I hadn't imagined it. They attempted to explain the phenomena with the most ridiculous, cockamamie excuse I have ever heard in my entire existence: they were trying to make another baby, so I could have a little brother or sister. Ha! I may be many things, but I am no fool! Everyone knows that babies come from the stork!

I laugh to myself as I frantically scribble this memoir. The lull has ended, and the screams—oh God, the screams have returned! I am listening to the simmering

depths of the underworld bubble up through moist orifices, gaping and dripping with acidic fluid. A ring of sharp teeth surrounds it, and it burps up flinging tentacles, flesh-colored with blackened veins, oozing a pus-like mucous from their tips. I can hear these tentacles steadily bang—bang—bang! against the wall as if the entire bed is moving, and I know that soon they will attempt to knock down my door.

I know not what lies ahead. Only that I am sure to die before making it to middle scho

The Voice Within

GEORGIA RUSSELL

Characters

Egolina: Female, 30-50 years old (pronounced ē-gō-lē-nə), The Voice in the Head

Antanya: Female, 18-25 years old (pronounced ān-tān-yə), The Prima Donna

Corpia: Female, 18-40 years old (pronounced cōr-pē-yə), The Self-Inflicted Punisher

Relin: Male, 18-60 years old (pronounced rē-līn), The Renouncer

Amal: Male, 18-50 years old (pronounced ə-mōl), The Clinger

Famel: Male, 18-35 years old (pronounced fām-kū/fā-mēl), The Evader

Setting

A bare room with six different chairs set up in an open semicircle. The entire stage may be used as play-space. It is suggested that the flashbacks happen front and center within the semicircle of chairs.

Note: All characters, excluding Egolina, are unaware of the other people on stage. They are each in their own “space” and only have knowledge of each other during the flashbacks. During the flashbacks the only people who play themselves are Egolina and the speaker whose flashback we are seeing. The rest of the characters become people from the speaker’s past.

Egolina: Talk.

All Persons: Why?

Egolina: Because you’ve been able to work things out when you talked about them. So just talk.

All Persons: It’s exhausting.

Egolina: Yeah, but I’m always going to be here; just sitting here, waiting for you to talk to me. So you might as well help yourself and start talking.

Lights up on Relin and Egolina.

Relin: I’m so confused.

Egolina: What do you mean?

Relin: I...I don’t feel like I know who I am anymore. I’m not the same person.

Egolina: Well, lots of people don’t stay the same. People change. Change can be good.

Relin: I know. But I haven’t changed in a good way.

Egolina: Okay. How have you changed, then?

Relin: I’m so pessimistic, now. I don’t go to church anymore. I have absolutely no faith. I don’t pray like I used to...

Egolina: Maybe you’re in a transition period? Maybe you’re just trying to figure out what you really believe in.

Relin: No, that’s not it. I don’t *want* to go to church. I don’t *want* to have faith and I don’t *want* to pray.

Egolina: Why?

Relin: Because they haven’t helped me in the past!

Egolina: What? What do you mean?

Relin: I mean that bad things still happened to me even though all of those things were a part of my life.

Egolina: Well that's a warped point of view.

Relin: Well, I am well aware of why I think that way and it's a **good** enough reason for me.

Egolina: Is it?

Relin: Yeah.

Egolina: But ...you're confused.

Relin: Yeah...

Egolina: If you have a good enough reason to justify the way you feel then why are you confused?

Relin: I'm confused ... because ... I don't know! My head is all foggy now. I ... I miss feeling like everything is going to be okay. I don't know.

Egolina: Why do you feel like everything isn't going to be okay anymore?

Relin: Because I don't have something to protect me. Something to make sure that my life has purpose.

Egolina: What the hell happened? Why don't you have that "something" anymore?

*Lights fade. Light floods the flashback space. The other people fashion a makeshift bed from a few chairs. Corpia lies on the "bed" and becomes Relin's dead sister. She is covered by a sheet. Amal, Antanya, and Famel put on labcoats and have become Doctor 1, Doctor 2, and Doctor 3, respectively. They are playing out the flashback **as if** they were in a hospital.*

Relin: I was 19 and my sister had just been transferred to the ICU with a collapsed lung. She had been sick for a while with Scleroderma and I knew that she was going to die soon. But I just remember sitting there, thinking, "She can't die. God wouldn't take her away. She's too young. God isn't cruel like that."

Relin begins to pray.

Relin: God, please. Please don't let her die. She's the only family I have left. Don't let her die! I don't know what I'll do without **her**. **Please**.

Doctor 3: Relin, I'm so sorry. We did everything that we could. Would you like to talk to the grief counselor?

Relin shakes his head "no."

Doctor 3: Okay. If you need anything just let me know. The body will be ready to view in the bereavement room in a few minutes.

During Doctor 3's lines, the "bed" is taken apart and the persons return to their chairs. Black-out. Lights up on Egolina, Relin, and Corpia.

Relin (*to God*) and Corpia (*to self*): I-I-I hate you.

Egolina (*to Relin*): Why did you say that?

Relin (*to Egolina*): Because that's when I started hating God.

Lights fade. Lights up on Egolina and Corpia.

Corpia: B-B-B-Because I've always said that to myself.

Egolina: W-Why?

Corpia: B-B-Because I hate my body. I'm u-u-ugly and fat and disgusting.

Egolina: N-N-No you're not! What makes you think that way?

Corpia: I don't kn-kn-know. I've always felt this way.

Egolina: You c-c-couldn't have *always* felt this way. There must have been something that t-t-t-triggered this. Can't you re-re-remember the first time you felt like this?

Corpia: (*reluctantly*) Y-Y-Y-Yes.

Egolina: W-Well? Talk about it.

Corpia: N-N-No.

Egolina: Why n-not?

Corpia: Because I do-do-don't feel comfortable talking about what I've been through. And y-y-y-you're always so harsh on me.

Egolina: I'll g-g-go easy on you. I want you to f-feel like you can talk to me about anything.

Corpia: F-F-Fine.

Lights fade. Light floods the flashback space. The other people turn their chairs upstage and sit with their backs to the audience. Amal and Corpia are left in the "flashback" space. They are miming office duties. Amal has become a former coworker of Corpia's named Daniel.

Corpia: T-There was this guy at my office.

Daniel: Hey there! How are you? You weren't at Starbucks at your usual time. Did you not want coffee this morning? Didn't see you at the gym yesterday, or the grocery store.

Corpia: Daniel, p-p-p-please leave me alone.

Daniel: Why? (*No answer*) We get along so well. Don't we?

Corpia: N-N-No, we don't.

Daniel: You mean during all those times in the backroom we weren't getting along just fine?

Corpia: N-N-N-N-No. I don't c-c-c-consider getting forced into a room to do s-s-s-something that I don't want to do as u-u-us "getting along".

Daniel: I thought you were holding back. Didn't want to spoil any surprises for me.

He touches her back. She winces.

Corpia: L-L-L-L-Leave me alone, o-o-o-o-or I'll scream!

Daniel: No you won't. You won't scream because you're scared of what people will think. You're afraid that they'll think you're weak and too cowardly to fight back and that scares you more than I do. You're scared that if they knew what we've done they

would call you a slut and wouldn't be your friends anymore.

Corpia turns and tries to walk away but Daniel grabs her arm.

Daniel: A pretty little thing like you shouldn't be so scared of people and what they think of you.

Lights dim. The people turn their chairs around and Amal (Daniel) returns to his seat. Lights up on Corpia.

Corpia: If men like h-h-him were attracted to me when I was confident and cared about my looks then maybe they w-w-wouldn't bother me if I was the opposite.

Lights up on Egolina.

Egolina: Th-That makes no sense at all.

Corpia: Y-Y-Yes it does.

Egolina: O-Ok. But do you see how y-y-you're hurting yourself more just because you want to try to be someone you're not? Don't you th-think there's something else you could do other than starving yourself to make you feel better and safe from those kinds of guys?

Corpia: There p-p-p-probably is but that would mean forgetting everything that has ever happened t-t-to me and...

Lights up on Amal.

Corpia and Amal: Pretending like I'm okay with it.

Egolina (*to Corpia and Amal*): No, you don't have to pretend. You've been through a rough situation. But it doesn't define you. It's a part of you but you don't have to live your life dwelling on those kinds of experiences. You can still be happy.

Corpia: I d-d-don't think I can do that.

Amal (*sarcastically*): Then how do you suggest I move on?

Egolina (*accusingly*): Well, first you have to *choose* to move on.

Lights out on Corpia.

Amal: You don't think that I've tried to stop thinking about him? I've been trying for months to forget him, to forget that we were ever together. But I can't. I don't want to forget him.

Egolina: Just because you're not with him anymore doesn't mean that you have to forget him. But you need to move on and work on making yourself happy. He's not worth your grief.

Amal: Everyone keeps saying that. "You have to move on. Just be happy." Emotions can't just be forgotten. God! If I could just prove to him that I really was the person he wanted, then everything would be okay.

Egolina: I'm sorry, what?

Amal: All I need to do is prove to him that I'm his soul mate: that I'm worthy of a relationship. It would work. I know it.

Egolina: That's crazy.

Amal: Damn it! I know that. What's wrong with me?

Egolina: Why do you feel the need to prove that you're worthy of a relationship?

Amal: Because no one's ever given me a real chance. They've all ended the relationship before they've gotten to really know me. It's always been...

Lights fade. The other persons stay in their seats in the dark. A sound loop of Amal's past partners speaking the next lines comes on and is played during the blackout. The lines are spoken with increasing rapidity and eventually overlap each other.

Partner 1: You're just not "the one."

Partner 2: I feel like you're distracting me from my true purpose.

Partner 3: I'm not attracted to you. Honestly, I could do better.

Partner 4: It's not you it's me.

Partner 5: This relationship is getting in the way of my alone time.

Partner 6: People come into our lives for a reason, season or a time. Ours is up.

Partner 7: I see you more like family.

Partner 8: I just don't see myself as being in a relationship right now.

Partner 9: The thought of being in an intimate relationship with you makes me cringe.

Partner 10: The best thing right now is for both of us to be single.

Lights up on Egolina.

Egolina: You just don't want to blame yourself for the ending of the relationship. You know that they've gotten to know you and that they don't like the real you. That's why they leave. So what the hell are you doing that keeps making them want to run away?

Light floods the flashback space. Relin, who is now Amal's most recent Ex, Mike, has approached Amal. Amal is now standing. We are in Amal's flashback.

Mike: We (*pointing to the two of them*) aren't worth the time and energy of a relationship. I feel like we're wasting our time. I mean, I could be out there finding the perfect guy right now, but I'm not. I'm stuck here.

Amal: Stuck? You're not chained to the wall. What do you mean we're not worth the "time and energy" of a relationship? What the hell does that mean?

Mike: Ok, then, I don't think that *you* are worth *my* time and energy.

Amal: What, am I not perfect enough for you? I didn't give you enough love and attention? Not enough weekend getaways or surprise presents? Not enough cute "I love you" texts? What the hell is wrong with me that makes you want to go out and find the "perfect guy"?

Mike: That's just it! You try and make it seem like nothing is wrong. You push yourself to be this perfect boyfriend and all you end up doing is holding me back and annoying me. You pretend like you're...

Mike and Antanya: Perfect

Mike: ...but you're not. Do you know I can't hang out with other guys or even my friends without thinking, "What will Amal think if he sees me talking to this guy?" Your jealousy is out of control. Do you remember that time Jeremy put his arm around my shoulder for a photo? You freaked out over that! Over a stupid photo pose!

Amal: I didn't like the way he was touching you.

Mike: He was STRAIGHT! I told you that. You even met his girlfriend.

Amal: Hey, I used to be "straight" and then I accepted who I really was.

Mike: You think every person I talk to is going to steal me away from you. You're so fucking paranoid! You've suffocated our relationship and you don't trust me at all. I'm done!

Blackout. Relin (Mike) and Amal return to their seats. Lights up on Egolina and Antanya.

Egolina: Like what did you say?

Antanya: I'm pretty much like perfect.

Egolina: Nobody is like perfect.

Antanya: Well, I'm like the exception.

Egolina: You're like super annoying.

Antanya: Shut up.

Egolina: You like seriously think that there's such a thing as like a perfect person?

Antanya: Obviously. I'm like right here telling you.

Egolina: If you're so like perfect, then like why are you talking to me?

Antanya: Shit.

Lights fade. Lights up on Famel and Egolina.

Famel: I'm talking to you because this problem is serious and I don't know how to deal with it.

Egolina: I don't think it's a problem. I think you just need to accept that you and your family don't get along.

Famel: But they're my family. We have to get along a little, don't we? How am I supposed to make it through holidays and weddings and funerals or anything else with them?

Egolina: You could ignore them.

Famel: That's what they do to me now.

Egolina: Great! Then you're ignoring each other and everything's just fine.

Famel: That's not what I want, though. I want us to be like a normal family: where we all care about each other and are interested in each other's lives.

Egolina: Have you met other people's families?

Famel: Of course I have. My friends' families are all supportive and caring and they all love spending time with each other. My family dreads spending more than 5 minutes with each other.

Egolina: Well, at least you have 5 minutes together. And honestly, have you ever been around your friends' families for longer than a couple of hours?

Famel: I don't think so.

Egolina: If you and your family have guests over, do you fight in front of the guests? Or do you passive aggressively hold it in until the guests are gone and then unleash your wrath?

Famel: I guess I hold it in. But I'm sure there are people out there who don't want to be passive aggressive and they just blurt everything out, without a thought to who's listening.

Egolina: Yeah, there are people like that. But are your friends like that?

Famel: Well, they seem awfully happy to me.

Egolina: Okay. But remember when you were at Derek's house for dinner? He'd been dating this woman that was younger than him and his mother didn't approve of the age difference. But everyone knew that he was happy as a clam with her. Do you remember what happened at dinner? His mother threw around little sarcastic comments about her the entire night: "What grade is she in, again?" "Well, we wouldn't want you getting accused of statutory rape!" "I mean, really, has she even hit puberty yet?" Do you think Derek just sat there after you left and said nothing to his mother? Knowing how he feels about his girlfriend, you really think that there wasn't some crazy family fight after you left the house?

Famel: No. I know you're right. But whatever fight Derek had with his mother was completely legitimate. My family fights about stupid things and when we aren't fighting we're ignoring each other. I just want my family to be the way I think it should be. Normal.

Egolina: Your family **is** normal. Do you want to know what a real family fights about? They fight about stupid things. Why? Because they care about each other and know exactly how to get under each other's skin. Right now some mother just got home and is yelling...

Lights up on everyone. The other persons stand in front of their chairs and say the next lines. They have become people from various families.

Corpia: WHO LEFT THEIR SHOES IN THE DOORWAY?!

Egolina: And some kid is hollerin' in the mornin'...

Relin: DAD! BILLY JUST TOUCHED MY CEREAL!

Egolina: ... and someone somewhere is fightin' about ...

The next lines are said beginning with a normal pace and then are said with increasing rapidity.

Antanya: It's your turn to wash the dishes!

Amal: **I**, personally, don't think that dress makes you look fat ...

Corpia: You painted the dining room periwinkle?!

Antanya: Why do we have to watch (insert movie title)?

Relin: (Insert band name) is better than (insert different band name), and you know it!

Corpia: It's not that hard to put a new roll of toiler paper in the dispenser!

Amal: You promised you would call at seven!

Corpia: Mom said that **I** would inherit her diamond ring!

Antanya: I don't want the painting over the bed.

Relin: We're not naming the baby Winston!

Amal: You're not actually going to wear that, are you?

Antanya: I've always been Dad's favorite!

Corpia: We can't use plastic plates for Easter dinner!

Relin: Your bed is so uncomfortable!

Amal: You said that I could have the car today!

Antanya: You are *not* wearing that outside of this house.

Amal: Shut up. Kim is so much hotter!

Corpia: Nuh uh! Peter is way cuter!

Relin: You can't go to the grocery store now because I have to get to dance class!

Amal: We don't want you and Jimmy to date anymore.

Antanya: You're marrying who?!

Corpia: The Dodgers suck!!

Lights out on everyone except Egolina and Famel.

Egolina: Families fight. But you know your family loves each other on some level.

Famel: That's just it though. It doesn't feel like my family loves each other or me. Remember my birthday?

Light floods the flashback space. Famel remains seated and pretends to read. Antanya walks toward Famel and is now playing his Mother. It is Famel's birthday in the flashback.

Mother: Hey. I'm leaving for work now. Your father already left for his doctor's appointment and then he's going straight to work so it'll just be you here. I'll be back around 7. Have a good day, okay? *(She leaves and then comes back)* Oh, happy birthday. *(She leaves and comes back)* Don't forget to do the dishes. *(She leaves)*

Spotlight on Famel.

Famel: Or remember Thanksgiving?

Spotlight fades as light floods the flashback space. The other persons and Famel stand in a semicircle in the "flashback" space and hold hands as if they are giving thanks before Thanksgiving dinner. Relin is the Dad, Antanya is the Mom, and Amal is the Brother.

Dad: We give thanks for this food ... and ... uh ... for Szechuan Palace, for being open today and making this food for us.

Mom: I give thanks for our dog, Lulu.

Brother: Can I go to Melanie's now?

Dad: Alright. But you better eat some of that chow mein before you rush off to Melanie's to eat pie... or whatever you do over there. We paid good money for this meal.

The brother mimes stuffing some food in his mouth.

Brother: Thanks. Bye.

He runs out of the flashback space and to his chair.

Dad: Alright, y'all. Eat up.

Famel: But I wanted ... to ... say something.

The family is consumed with the task of eating. They do not hear him.

Lights fade. The people go back to their seats. Lights up on Famel and Egolina.

Famel: Can't you just feel the southern hospitality oozing out of them?

Egolina: Oh, do go on. You keep talking about how they treat you. How do you treat them?

Famel gives Egolina a blank look. Lights out on Famel. Lights up on Antanya and Egolina.

Antanya: I like treat people exactly the way that I would like want to be treated.

Egolina: Really? Like having people gossip about you, and like break up your relationships, and give you like dirty looks when you've done nothing wrong is how you would like want to be treated?

Antanya: They deserved it. Like the girl from dance class couldn't dance for shit. And like that guy from work like actually likes to read for fun. Like who the hell enjoys being a snobby bookworm? And you know why I like spread that rumor about Jackson and his "little issue". Like no one can dump me and expect to find another girlfriend.

Egolina: Like why did Jackson dump you, again?

Antanya: He said it was like because I slept with his friend. But it's not like his friend became like my boyfriend. I was still like Jackson's girlfriend, but he didn't understand that.

Egolina: You do that like a lot.

Antanya: Do what?

Egolina: Sleep around with like random people. And you're always drunk.

Antanya: So? It's like fun.

Egolina: Ok. But why?

Antanya: Why what!?

Egolina: Why do you feel like the need to get wasted and screw every guy you meet?!

Antanya: BECAUSE THEY PAY ATTENTION TO ME! Because they like want a part of me and feeling wanted is like a really nice feeling. Plus, it's easier to sleep with them if I'm drunk.

Egolina: Do you not like feel wanted by people you know?

Antanya: Not much. My mom and I like fight all the time. I just assume that like she doesn't want me around because she's like constantly calling me a "fat-ass" and telling me that I wasn't like one of the "planned" kids. I know that there are like people at school that don't like me but I know it's just because they're like jealous of me.

Egolina: Jealous?

Antanya: Like why else would they not like me?

Egolina: Maybe it's because you're like a bitch!

Antanya: Well, like I am who I am and I'm not going to change.

Egolina: Like who the hell are you? You keep like trying to think that there's nothing wrong. Like stop being stupid.

Antanya: I'm not being stupid! Why can't you just like understand that I'm like a bitch?

Egolina: Because, like you weren't always like this. What the hell like made you turn into this crazy bitch? I like hate who you are now.

Antanya: It's not my fault! I couldn't like help it. It's fucking Jason's fault. He like made me do... it.

Egolina: Pretty sure you were the one that like begged him.

Antanya: Yeah, because he made me.

Egolina: Oh my God, stop like kidding yourself. You made the decision all by yourself.

Light floods the flashback space. Antanya and Egolina are on one side of the flashback space, Antanya is seen playing a game on her phone. Famel, who is now playing one of Antanya's old classmates, Jason, is on the other side of the flashback space, also on his phone. He is

texting Antanya. The following lines between Antanya and Jason are text messages.

Jason: hey

Egolina: That's weird. Jason like never texts you.

Antanya: hi

Jason: wuts up?

Antanya: nothin. doin math hw

Egolina: You are so not doing math hw.

Antanya: hbu?

Jason: just chillin. what r u doing 2mrow nite?

Egolina: Tomorrow night? You'll be studying for bio so you don't like flunk the exam.

Antanya: nothin. y?

Jason: wanna go 2 kate's party?

Egolina: Who the hell is Kate?

Antanya: i wasnt invited

Jason: its fine. she doesnt pay attention to ppl anyways. besides we could just spend the nite upstairs

Egolina: That's sketchy...

Antanya: wut do u mean? like wut would we do?

Jason: i dunno. i could eat u out.

No answer.

Egolina: Whoa ...

Jason: u could give me a bj. but only if u let me come on ur tits.

No answer.

Egolina: What?!

Jason: u like anal?

Egolina: WHAT THE FUCK?! PUT DOWN THE PHONE LIKE NOW!

Antanya: wut?

Jason: wut? u still a virgin?

Egolina: That's like none of your fucking business, you perv!

Antanya: no ive had bfs

Egolina: You've had one boyfriend. ONE! Why are you lying?!

Jason: kool. so... party?

Egolina: Don't say yes.

Antanya: um idk

Jason: Wut?

Antanya: i dont really kno u. we just had that 1 class 2gether

Egolina: Like take the hint, douche.

Jason: so? u dont have to kno a person 2 fuck them. u can just have fun

Egolina: Fun is like getting my nails done. Are you going to do my nails for me?

Antanya: idk...

Jason: fine. i knu u wouldnt be wurth my time

Egolina (*hurt*): Ouch.

Antanya: wut do u mean?

Jason: ur such a prude

Egolina: Well you're like an arrogant asshole and nobody will ever want to fuck you.

There is a pause. Antanya is thinking and talking out loud. The following lines are not spoken.

Antanya: Maybe I should go.

Egolina: Why would you want to like go to a party with that guy? He's a jerk!

Antanya: I like don't want to seem like a prude.

Egolina: You're not a prude! He just like wants to make you feel like crap so that you'll sleep with him!

Antanya: Like what if he tells everyone that I'm a prude?

Egolina: He won't! He'll move onto the next girl until he like finds one stupid enough to say yes to him.

Antanya: I don't know. I kinda like him.

Egolina (*sarcastically*): Oh yeah. Like what's there not to like? He has like amazing talking skills and the way he like waddles with his jeans around his knees is soooooo sexy.

Antanya: He's kinda like the only guy that's like said hi to me at school. He, out of everyone, noticed me.

Egolina: Bullshit! You know that's not true. People say hi to you all the time! You're just like a thing for him to fuck and that's all he wants.

There is a pause. Antanya is thinking. The following lines between Antanya and Jason are text messages.

Antanya: ok. ill go

Egolina: Why don't you listen to me?!

Jason: forget it. u missed ur chance

Antanya: but i changed my mind ...

Jason: so? u arent worth it anymore

Antanya: come on. i promise itll b good

Amal (*said with Antanya's previous text*): Oh, come on!

There is another pause.

Jason: fine. c u there. txt u the address l8r

Blackout.

Amal: No one wants to be around me.

Lights up on Amal and Egolina.

Amal: They don't like me. People sometimes pretend to like me in the beginning, but they always leave. What's wrong with me? Am I too goofy? Too short? Am I too smart? Not smart enough? Is anything that I do good enough for anyone?

Egolina: Does something have to be wrong with you? Maybe the people you've dated aren't a good match. Just find someone else.

Amal: Why the hell would I trust the next person?

Egolina: You just need to learn to trust people. For God's sake, just give them a chance!

Amal: I shouldn't have to change myself for a relationship.

Egolina: Then you're just going to keep pushing people away with your jealousy. Maybe you'll even die alone. But, hey, at least you'd still be you, right?

Lights out on Amal. Lights up on Relin.

Relin: You think praying would be a "healthy change" for me?

Egolina: Maybe.

Relin: I already said that I don't feel like praying.

Egolina: So you're just going to keep feeling angry and writing little hate letters to God in your journal?

Relin: I'm allowed to be angry. God's done nothing for me. God kills people and doesn't even care about loved ones. I have every right to hate God.

Egolina: What's the point in hating God? It's not like God is moping around saying "Aw, Relin doesn't like me."

Relin: If God isn't moping then God obviously doesn't care about me.

Egolina: Listen to yourself! (*In a whiney voice*) If God isn't doing what I think God should do, then OBVIOUSLY God doesn't care about me. Would you say the same thing to someone else?

Relin: I don't know.

Egolina: Look, just because your prayers weren't answered exactly how you wanted them to be answered doesn't mean that God doesn't care about you. You aren't some situation that God specifically chose to ignore. Stop thinking that.

Lights up on Corpia.

Relin: I can't do that.

Corpia (*said with Relin's line*): I-I-I can't do that.

Lights out on Relin.

Egolina: W-Why not?!

Corpia: I-I-I just can't!

Egolina: I-If you can't say it, th-then you won't be able to feel better and move on.

Corpia: C-C-Can't I just think it?

Egolina: N-No. Y-Y-You need to say it out loud. Y-You need to hear yourself say it and believe it.

Corpia: I-I-I can't believe that. N-N-No one believes that.

Egolina: Th-Then say it until you start believing it.

Corpia: I-I-I-I'm not going to lie to myself! I-I'm not going to sit here and force myself to believe something that's not true.

Egolina: P-Plenty of people lie to themselves. W-We lie to ourselves when we eat ice cream and call it a "serving of milk". W-W-We lie to ourselves when we say that a B+ is the same as an A-, when we say that "funner" is a word just so that we can win at Scrabble, w-w-when we run a yellow light because everyone knows that yellow means "S-S-Speed up!" P-People lie to themselves to feel better. Y-You need to feel better. It may sound like a lie right now, but eventually you'll start believing it and it'll become true.

Corpia: Th-Th-That's got to be the dumbest thing I've ever heard.
Lights up on Famel.

Famel: *(to Egolina)* It's true, though.

Corpia: *(to Egolina)* Y-Y-You're making stuff up so that I won't feel g-guilty about making myself feel better.

Egolina: Th-That's not true.

Lights out on Corpia.

Famel: Yes it is. She can never meet my family.

Egolina: You can't hide your family from your girlfriend forever. Eventually she'll have to meet them.

Famel: Do you know how embarrassing that would be? First, she would see how poorly we treat each other. And second, she will see how absurdly different my family is from me.

Egolina: Do you really think that she'll care how different you and your family are? She's dating you, not your family.

Famel: Yes, because the differences can be a deal breaker.

Light floods the flashback space. Famel is standing outside of flashback space with a spotlight on him. Corpia is the Girlfriend, Relin is the Dad, Antanya is the Mom, and Amal is the Brother.

Famel: This is how the meeting would go. I would say, "Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend, so-and-so." And Mom would say...

Mom: Well hello honey. Nice to meet you.

Famel: And Dad would say...

Dad: *(in baby voice)* Yes, it's so nice to finally meet Famel's widdle girlfriend.

Famel: Then my brother would say...

Brother *(aside)*: Well she got hit by the ugly stick.

Famel: Awkward silence. Then Mom would ask ...

Mom: So, how long have you two been dating?

Famel: I would blurt out, "Not very long." But my girlfriend would proudly say how long we had actually been dating...

Girlfriend: A little over a year.

Famel: Then Mom would get all kinds of crazy...

Mom: Well, ain't that the berries! I'm glad no one kept any secrets from us. Guess you didn't want your mother to meet the girl that's stealing you away from her.

Famel: Dad would then try and make everything better...

Dad: *(in baby voice)* But aren't we glad our widdle boo bear finally decided to do show and tell for us...?

Famel: Mom would say...

Mom: NO. And you can sleep on the couch tonight.

Famel: At this point my girlfriend would look at me and say...

Girlfriend: Um. This is a bit overwhelming and it seems like you and your family need some time to talk things over. I think I'll just go now.

Famel: She would turn to leave ...

Girlfriend walks out of the "flashback" space and behind the chairs to their seat. Light fades. The rest of the people return to their chairs.

Famel: And walk out. See? It's a terrible idea!

Egolina (*to everyone*): Ahh! I can't take this anymore! You're too exhausting!
Lights up on all people.

Antanya: It like wasn't my fault, though! I couldn't help it!

Corpia: I-I-I don't have to say it if I d-d-don't want to!

Relin: I want to forgive God. But I can't. He doesn't deserve it.

Famel: Why can't I just have a different family?!

Amal: I don't think I can trust someone if I know they're going to leave me!

All: GET OVER IT!

All: IT'S NOT THAT EASY!

The following lines are spoken as the lights slowly fade to a blackout.

Relin: If God wants me to forgive him then he needs to prove to me that he's sorry for killing my sister. He also has to promise that he won't hurt me anymore.

Amal: I've spent too much time being depressed about my breakups. Maybe I should just stop dating for a while.

Famel: Every person I date is going to have to meet my screwed up, batty family. I don't

even think praying could help this family.

Antanya: Like I don't know what's wrong with people. I mean, like am I that much of a bitch? So much that like people don't want to be around me?

Corpia: Th-Th-There's so m-m-much wrong with me. Who c-c-could ever love this?

All: *ad-lib talking to themselves.*

The End

Sarah Pemberton Strong

POETRY CONTEST

First Place: "Wings" by Joe Grillo

This poem's disturbing narrative continues to haunt me as I ponder the questions "Wings" raises but does not answer. Days after reading it, I'm still thinking about the refusal of conscience, the cyclical nature of violence, and the lengths we'll go to in order to avoid feeling. Yet what ultimately makes the poem a first-prize winner for me is not the story it tells, but the way in which it's told. I admire the surprise and specificity of the poem's imagery, from "trying to taste my guilt / with his toenails" to "the light that bled out / from his broken halo." And I love the way meaning is created through the repetition of image. Each time wings recur, their significance is developed further, so that when they appear only implicitly in the final lines, the effect is both understated and stunning. This poem's expert construction lends essential support to the weight of its unsettling subject matter, creating a truly memorable piece of writing.

Second Place: "End of the World" by Meg Rattanni

I was immediately drawn to this poem for its exuberant ambitions. "End of the World" plays with pop culture while engaging in lyric meditations on the apocalypse, all with a sly sense of humor that delights me. From the first line, when we learn that this gathering to witness the "End of the World" is actually an "annual" event, I trust this writer to show me a good time, and she does not disappoint. Her mashup of a Kool and the Gang favorite with Bible verses, of children who "catch tadpoles in the lake" with parents who "scraped off enough flaking lead paint / to slip under their tongues during goodnight kisses" creates enormous texture and tonal complexity, diving into sorrow only to make me laugh again in the next stanza, when speaker and lover discuss "who would get to keep our gerbil / if we ended up unscathed in our beds by morning." And I'm still wondering if those lips in the closing line are glistening from the exertions of prayer or from sex; for all its apocalyptic imagery, this poem is celebrating life.

Third Place: "Do You See Me Sitting Here" by Taylor Richards

I admire a poem that teaches me how it feels to be someone else. Inside the mind of this poem's speaker, I relearn the increasingly desperate and painful labors we sometimes undertake just to be noticed, if not loved. This poem makes excellent use of visual and syntactic elements to render an emotional landscape. The poem appears on the

page as the visual equivalent of struggling to speak, while its syntax — one long, run on sentence — sweeps me along in the urgency the speaker feels. By the poem's end, the five words that make up the last three lines are completely isolated on the page; we know from this that the speaker's resources have been exhausted, and to no avail. I also appreciate the poem's spare but effective use of figurative language — for example, "roaming around / that little pocket of space that fills up the back / of my mind" — which adds depth and resonance while staying true to its conversational tone.

Sarah Pemberton Strong is the author of the poetry collection *Tour of the Breath Gallery* (Texas Tech University Press, 2013), which won the Walt McDonald Prize, and two novels, *The Fainting Room* (Ig, 2013) and *Burning the Sea* (Alyson, 2002). Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has received awards from *Southwest Review* and the Sustainable Arts Foundation. Her poems have appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rattle*, *River Styx*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sun*, *Southwest Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Hamden, Connecticut, where she is a poetry editor for *New Haven Review*.

Xhenet Aliu

FICTION CONTEST

First Place: “Doug and the Cleanie-Bug” by Ciara Adams

There’s a clever, subtle humor in Adams’ “Doug and the Cleanie-Bug,” but it’s gentle and never directed at its characters, who are instead treated with the utmost humanity. The characters are wonderfully rendered: Ellen’s obsessive-compulsiveness is illustrated clearly but never cartoonishly, and we the reader can readily relate to a woman, in a less skilled writer’s hands, could easily devolve into the classic eccentric old lady. Likewise, Ellen’s new young neighbor—a tomboy who prefers to be called Doug rather than Katherine—retains the innocence of childhood with none of the naïveté that would prevent her from becoming fully realized. The unique relationship between Ellen and Doug develops organically, as perfectly evinced when Doug adapts Ellen’s vernacular in describing a falling out with her friends: “That’s . . . unpleasant—” Ellen says, to which Doug replies, “Super unpleasant.” Doug empathizes with Ellen simply because, unlike Ellen’s adult neighbors, she simply makes an effort to; in turn, we as readers empathize with both because Adams makes it impossible not to.

Second Place: “Criminals of the Iron Horse Calvacade” by Caitlin Massaro

In “Criminals of the Iron Horse Cavalcade,” the growing disconnect between a rancher and his daughter is presented not as yet another teenaged rebellion story but as a reflection in alienation, longing, and reconciliation. There are upright religious folk and train-robbers, loving relationships and fractured ones, but the author resists casting her characters as good guys or bad guys. In the technically sophisticated conclusion, there is a seamless merging not just of past and present but of father and daughter, their seemingly disparate needs ultimately intersecting at a critical juncture. Massaro cares more deeply about a truthful ending than a happy one, which makes the reading of her work ultimately more compelling.

Third Place: “The Royal Taste Tester” by Patrick Moody

The voice never wavers in Moody’s “The Royal Taste Tester.” From the first paragraph, I believed in the wry, humorous narrator who spins yarns just as skillfully as he tests potentially poisoned vittles for the king. Moody consistently shows just the right amount of restraint when making what could be ba-dum-dum punchlines: “I saw that princess once. Not worth the dungeon, if you ask me.” The preposterousness of the narrator’s

job and the long-ago, far-away setting could in theory serve to alienate a reader, but instead the tone is warm and welcoming enough that we willingly go along for the ride. Indeed, the narrator may even inspire us to reflect on the oft-overlooked everymen all around us.

Xhenet Aliu’s debut fiction collection, *Domesticated Wild Things*, won the 2012 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction and was published in September 2013. Her fiction and essays have appeared in journals such as *Glimmer Train*, *Hobart*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Necessary Fiction*, *American Short Fiction*, and elsewhere, and she has received multiple scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, a grant from The Elizabeth George Foundation, and a fellowship from the Djerassi Resident Artists Program. A native of Waterbury, Connecticut, she currently lives in Athens, Georgia, after recent stints in New York City, Montana, and Utah.

Pamela Marks

VISUAL ART CONTEST

First Place: "Ropan Archetype 1" by Miguel Benitez

Miguel Benitez's vessel, *Ropan Archetype 1*, with its broken edges and tactile, encrusted surfaces recalls an excavated object of the past. The artist ties in an architectural form that penetrates the vessel through its doorway. A sweeping form of clay emanating from the base visually integrates the added elements. The result is a traditional vessel shape with a surrealist twist. The materiality and concept of this piece recalls the dwellings of the sculptor Charles Simonds. The dynamic interplay of inside and outside, the textural contrasts and imaginative form create an intriguing sculpture.

Second Place: "Box III" by Ciara Cumiskey

In *Box III*, Ciara Cumiskey has effectively manipulated the dynamic diagonals of this gestural pose within the rigid geometry of the box. The arrangement creates an empathetic response from the viewer, who identifies with the physicality of the pose and an increasing feeling of claustrophobia. The square canvas echoes the boxed confinement and reinforces the contrast between geometric and organic form. In this compelling painting, the staged boxed interior may be a metaphor for the myriad of pressures inflicted on the individual.

Third Place: "The American Way?" by Dan DeCamillo

Through this simple but poignant photograph, Dan DeCamillo poses a relevant and timely question to the viewer. One cannot help but wonder if the artist just came upon these casings in the woods and quickly set up this arrangement for his photograph. However it came to be, it is a powerful image in red, white and blue that brings the current gun culture into question.

Pamela Marks received her BFA in painting and drawing, from the University of Illinois and an MFA in painting from the University of Arizona. Her artworks have been exhibited in France, Scotland, the Dominican Republic, Singapore, the Netherlands, Japan, and Greece. In addition, her work has been exhibited in numerous exhibitions across the United States. Her paintings can be found in a number of collections including The Tucson Museum of Art, IBM, Florence Griswold Museum, Benziger Winery, Pabst Brewing Corporation, and the Sangre de Cristo Art Center. Marks was awarded an honorarium and purchase prize for her multi-paneled artwork, "Healing," that is on permanent display at the University of Arizona Health Sciences Library in Tucson.

Recently Marks was awarded an Exploratory Residency at the Golden Foundation in New Berlin, New York. She received a Visual Artist Fellowship Grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism in 2008. She has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She was also a participant in the Visiting Artist and Scholar Program at the American Academy in Rome. Marks was an artist-in-residence at Altos de Chavon in the Dominican Republic and Auvillar, France. In 1991, Ms. Marks joined Connecticut College where she is now an Associate Professor of Art.

An Interview with Antoinette Brim

Folio: When did you start writing and what or who inspired you?

Antoinette: I began writing poetry as a child. I became enamored with Langston Hughes' poem *Dreams* and wanted to write.

Folio: How has your subject matter and style as a writer changed over your lifetime?

Antoinette: My writing has become bolder and more complex as time has passed. I think this is a by-product of maturity. If one is both introspective and outwardly observant, there is so much to be learned from the world (people and nature) and your interaction with it. Currently, I am writing poems in response to current events and other social phenomenon. It is my opportunity to add my voice to the discourse. As I grow as a writer and a woman, I become less afraid of how my poems are received. I trust my voice to be resonant and I trust my poems will find their audience.

Folio: What are some of your techniques for recovering from writer's block?

Antoinette: I write. I might start with simply recording my thoughts, but I sit at the computer and being writing. It might take a while, but I will feel myself "slip into gear" after a while. Ironically, the cure for writer's block is writing.

Folio: How would you describe your two collections of poetry "Icarus in Love" and

Antoinette: *Psalms of the Sunflower* and where did you find inspiration for each? *Icarus in Love* was my MFA thesis, written as my marriage was failing. I was finding myself again after ten years of silence and that process led me to the page to sort things out. I think the arc that emerged in the book is the arc that I lived while writing it. It wasn't until I sat down to order the manuscript that I saw for myself how I had moved through the stages of grief and into joy again. I would describe *Psalm of the Sunflower* as my coming of age story – of rediscovery and coming of age through divorce.

Icarus in Love came about after a dinner discussion with friends and colleagues about love. I was sitting with a group of historians, a philosopher and a musician. Each person's view of love was a mix of their academic discipline and personal experience. It was an interesting conversation to say the least. We closed the restaurant and stood in the street until we couldn't stand the mosquitos anymore. When we began walking away, one of my friends looked over his shoulder and said, "Antoinette, you are the poet. You

figure it out." The next morning, I began *Icarus in Love*, an exploration of love in its various incarnations.

Folio: How did you avoid using clichés when writing the love poems for "Icarus in Love"?

Antoinette: It's always about grounding the work in strong metaphors. Otherwise, you find yourself stuck in muddy abstractions. I do a fair amount of research to find new and exciting metaphors. I research nature, explore liturgical texts and art exhibits. I sit and contemplate the world news. There is so much yet undiscovered. There is no need to rely upon cliché.

Folio: In "Psalm of the Sunflower" which reflects on your experience with divorce, did you ever write a poem and think "Maybe I went too far?"

Antoinette: I learned early on to silence my internal censor. You can't write like that. I write as if I am the only one to see it and then I send it into the world. I write to discover and understand the world around me. I send my work into the world to participate in the larger discussion.

Folio: Do you have any advice for student creative writers?

Antoinette: Read! Read established writers. Read emerging writers. Read actively. Ask yourself how the poet uses the line break, prosody, metaphor, etc. Read criticism and consider what the author is espousing. Live intentionally and actively. Be open to new experiences – sights, tastes, sounds and then transfer these experiences into a cache of metaphors to draw upon. This will keep your writing fresh. And, don't ever stop writing. Life happens – dishes, work, kids and colds will happen. Just don't let any of it keep you from writing for long.

Folio: How do you feel being a woman has shaped your identity as a writer?

Antoinette: Being a woman affects how the world perceives me and how I must navigate the world because of its perceptions of me. These navigations are a part of my experience and eventually become fodder for my poetry. This is particularly evident in my first collection, *Psalm of the Sunflower*. Divorce affects women quite differently than men. This is borne out in statistics about income and quality of life. Compound this with societal expectations of women (i.e. primary caregiver of children and adult parents, etc.), divorce becomes a formidable challenge for women with children.

Currently, in light of the Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases, I am writing about the perils of mothering black boys. I am writing both as outlet (from my concerns for my own sons) and as advocate (adding my voice to the larger dialogue demanding social

justice). Who we are is never far from our work. If we try to extrapolate ourselves from our work, it will be wholly inauthentic. This does not make for good poetry.

Antoinette Brim, author of two collections of poetry “Icarus in Love” (Main Street Rag, 2013) and “Psalm of the Sunflower” (Willow Books, 2009), is a Cave Canem Foundation fellow, a recipient of the Walker Foundation Scholarship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Her poetry, memoir and critical work has appeared in various journals and magazines including the “Tidal Basin Review,” “95Notes” and “Southern Women’s Review,” as well as, anthologies including “Villanelles,” “Stand Our Ground: Poems for Trayvon Martin and Marissa Alexander,” “Critical Insights: Alice Walker,” “44 on 44: Forty-Four African American Writers on the 44th President of the United States,” “Not A Muse” and “Just Like A Girl: A Manifesta.”

Additionally, Brim is a former guest host of Patrick Oliver’s Literary Nation Talk Radio (KABF 88.3, Little Rock) for which she interviewed a variety of entertainers, literary figures, political pundits and community developers. A sought after speaker, editor, educator and consultant, Brim is an Assistant Professor of English at Capital Community College.

Contributors

KARIN GRACE is a senior at SCSU. She enjoys writing short stories and novels. She looks forward to continuing to hone both skills. She is a quirky and passionate introvert.

JOE GRILLO wrote his first poem, “Snow,” in kindergarten. It went: “Snow, / Snow, / I love snow, / Snow.” He’s gotten marginally better since then. Aside from writing, Joe divides his time between playing video games and picking dead bugs out of his beard. His poetry has appeared in *Chumbis Review*, *Dimby Dum-Dum Journal*, *Bonzo Grumblekin Quarterly*, *The Goddamned Toilet*, and even a few real places.

KYLE BRODERICK is a passionate freelance photographer out of New London County, CT. He enjoys shooting architecture, natural landscapes and [his personal favorite] wedding portraits! In his eyes, there is no smile more authentic than that of a bride and groom on their wedding day. Kyle is attending Southern Connecticut State University for a BA in Graphic Design.

LUKE HUNTER writes helicopter manuals now, and he waits to meet new people that he will soon not know again. He waits to write, and he writes in order to wait for more things to happen that he can write about, and then he waits in order to tell people about all of this through his writing. His writing doesn’t ever come through, unless it’s a passing song or passing thought, or maybe just a passing feeling. He writes helicopter manuals now.

PAUL BENJUNAS is a current biology education major and an avid wildlife photographer with a particular focus on reptiles and amphibians. One day Paul hopes to publish a book, documenting his stories and photos of his wildlife experiences.

GEORGIA RUSSELL is a graduating senior majoring in Theatre with a minor in English Literature. A few of her hobbies include doing *Frozen* sing-alongs, relating TV sitcoms to real life and cursing New England weather. Her future aspirations consist of working in Los Angeles and never seeing snow again.

CIARA ADAMS This is Ciara’s first time submitting to Folio, and she’s glad to be among such talented writers. She’s learned so much in the creative writing classes she’s taken at Southern. She is so glad she was able to be a part of the Folio team her last year here!

CARLIN HUCKEL is a Sophomore English major with a focus in creative writing. Carlin is a Resident Advisor in Wilkinson Hall and changes her hair color a lot. She has been writing since she was five years old and hopes to write video games one day.

DAN DECAMILLO is a visual artist, working most recently in a variety of photographic mediums. He is graduating in the Spring of 2014 as a Bachelor of Science in Fine Art with a focus in Photography. After taking some time off to work on his portfolio and save up some money, he plans on applying to various MFA Photography programs at Universities across the country. It is his dream to travel the world and experience everything this existence has to offer.

TAYLOR RICHARDS is a sophomore from Wethersfield, CT. Other than writing ramble-y poems and taking photos of my friends, she likes to listen to garage rock, pretend she's living in SoCal, and waste her money on weird clothes. Hopefully one day she'll move out of Connecticut, buy a nicer camera, visit Machu Picchu, and get published in a few more places. Until then, she'll be studying Journalism and working at American Apparel here in New Haven.

MIGUEL BENITEZ is a recent graduate of Southern applying to several graduate programs next year. His recent work explores themes of scale using miniature architecture and large scale pottery pieces to house them. He's also exploring the sculptural versatility of the potter's wheel, using throwing techniques to create all of the segments that form the piece. He hopes to ultimately redefine pottery into a sculpture medium beyond the niche of a functional craft.

AVÉ RIVERA is currently finishing her last semester to obtain a BS degree in Fine Art with a concentration in ceramics. She loves watching cartoons and listening to NPR, both of which are reflected in her body of work. When she's not in the studio working on her projects, you can find her posting to her blog with a good cup of tea.

BILL GELENEAU is bent on creating work to remind his viewers that everything is connected; that we are still a part of the raw earth despite the ever expanding concrete jungle. His meanings and messages lie somewhere between the subconscious and the subliminal while calling on imagery from primal to philosophical realms. With inspirations stemming from nature his work is heavily influenced by the materials therein; working intuitively in a give and take conversation with a chosen medium. Some pieces are ephemeral as a cairn on the river while others formed of ceramic pieces; the only surviving reach at immortality. For we we're once star-stuff and so we

shall return.

ZANNY STOWELL is a sophomore majoring in Anthropology. This is her first Folio publication, but she has been an avid writer since before she even knew how to write. Do not question the logistics of that statement. Every month she looks forward to Folio open mic nights, and is thrilled to be able to contribute her creativity to something she values so greatly. Zanny would like to thank her parents for their unwavering support in all of her baffling endeavors; and puppies, for existing. Thank you, Mom and Dad and puppies.

JESS BACHINSKI is a senior at Southern and majoring in Liberal Studies with concentrations in political science, women's studies, and Netflix. She enjoys cats, dancing, the Grateful Dead and more importantly dancing to cats meowing Grateful Dead tunes. When she isn't doing that, you can find her doing homework...just kidding! She's probably napping.

SAM ANGERMANN I am Sam, Sam I am. Graphic Designer from Brookfield, CT. When not creating a masterpiece in her Adobe workshop, you can find her drawing on her walls and exploring the world with her cat.

MEG RATTANNI is a moody English major and baby poet. She enjoys performing Wiccan ceremonies on High Holy days with her cat, Douglas, and having existential conversations with the chatty ghost of Frank O'hara when she is not emoting all over Microsoft Word. In the next year she would like to learn how to separate laundry properly and become a better liar. *mic drop*

CAITLIN MASSARO is a senior double majoring in elementary education and liberal studies, with one of her three concentrations being Creative Writing. In her spare time she enjoys reading and writing. She possesses a great appreciation for country music, photography and working with children. She wishes to thank her friends and family for their continued support of her journey with the creative writing process, particularly Jason Labbe, for his patience and also his plethora of dynamite knowledge. Caitlin is thankful for the chance to share her work in this magazine and hopes that this is just the start of her experience in publishing her work.

LUKE HERZOG is a Psychology major and Theater minor at SCSU. He is very passionate about dance and writing poetry. Especially through his poetry, he is able to express his complex thoughts and personal stories more clearly and creatively than in a normal social setting. He finds his absolute confidence when he dances or writes and

believes his movement and printed words help him speak his mind without actually having to say anything.

KATHERINE SULLIVAN is a returning student after 15 years deeply enjoying rewriting her story. She looks forward to exploring all that once frightened her. Returning at this point to Southern she is now willing to take risks, face challenges and enjoy the guidance and support from peers and faculty. By doing so, she hopes to instill in her sons, Ezra and Jacob that passionate goals may not always come easily but are worth pursuing with the utmost joy.

TIFFANY BARNETT is a studio arts major at Southern with a concentration in painting. She loves painting landscapes, but recently ventured into portraiture (mainly self-portraiture). After she graduates she wants to go to medical school, which she knows is a complete 180 from art but it's her dream. She's really just a person who believes that you can acquire all your dreams in life as long as you stay focused and determined.

MANDREW CARRION sees his life as poetry in motion. Francis of Assisi once said, "Do what is necessary, then what is possible." Right now he's coasting on a Schwinn bike, just trying to get his ends right. He presses onward in poetry because he wants his voice to be heard. His life is in these words and these words have become his life. Real talk. @MandrewCarrion

GABRIELLE MARTINEZ is a studio art major and feels strongly that art is a way to learn from one another. "Art is more about revealing things than it is about creating things. Everything has already been created before, and we cannot take credit for that, but not everything has been seen by everyone. My job is to show you. I just a promoter of the things unseen." And so she photographs things that she feels need to be highlighted in society. Her interests include traveling to random countries, American movies from the 1940s, being married to David Martinez, and explaining to people that her last name does not mean she is Latina, and that she in fact is of Italian and Polish descent. A fun fact is that her first paying job was dressing as the mouse at Chuck E. Cheese. Sorry to ruin the magic.

*Those without biographical statements: Katie Manente, Ciara Cumiskey, and Patrick Moody.

Folio would like to thank...

(in no particular order)

All of the students who submitted their work!

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Past Folio staff

The Media Board

Seattle AWP

Featured readers and artists

Open-mic participants

Everyone who attended our monthly readings

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Stop and Shop sale prices

Adobe Photoshop

InDesign tutorials

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Gummi bears

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You're all wonderful.