PASSAGES
MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGES
CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION
2017/2018
FOREWARD

This is the 30th edition of Passages, the annual collection of award-winning writings of the Maricopa Community Colleges Writing Competition. I continue to be impressed with the depth and breath of the writing and want to congratulate the talented students who found their voices and shared them with us. They have expressed their life stories, diverse backgrounds and imaginations in this publication. The quality of the writing is the evidence of the growth and discovery that is guided and supported by our faculty. The variety of subjects and styles of writing exemplifies the students who make our district a vital and exciting system.

For the students whose work is published in this volume, I hope that this award helps you to find strength and belief in your ability to accomplish your goals. Do not take this award lightly as your work has risen above many others. When you encounter difficulties in your career remember that this award has been bestowed on you for your talents. We, the faculty, administration and staff of the Maricopa Community Colleges believe in you.

LINDA M. SPERANZA, MFA
DISTRICT FINE ARTS COORDINATOR

Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction
Division of Academic and Student Affairs
Maricopa Community Colleges
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“Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.”

Robert Frost
POETRY WINNERS

How To Cross the Border Illegally or How To Make Tamales de Rajas
JACOBO PEREZ, MCC

1994 Toyota Pick-Up
KRYSTA EVANS, SCC

Moon Watch
DAVID GARN, MCC

White Dress
MORGAN RIFFLE, MCC

Jesus of Juarez
WILLIAM ALEWYN, CGCC

In My Dream
BY TAYLOR SHEPARD, MCC

Father
ANDIE VIDALES, MCC
A mother speaks of a coyote
Well, I recommend to you to tell your coworkers of the maquiladora that if they know someone who knows someone.
Yes, they are expensive, but it is better not to risk it alone and without anyone and if they’ve caught you.
Then if they catch you they’ll sentence you.

The devil shows you how to make tamales de rajas
I am the devil. I fucked my Desert my lover and the Saguaro were born. I gave her a bright necklace made from the teeth of illegals that I polished with their sweat. I hid two illegals from the Border Patrol inside her pubic hair and then turned them into Mesquite thorns. When I breathe, the wetbacks lose their breath. With such hard work I crave a delicacy.
Submerge the husks in water, just as the pregnant wetbacks baptize their anchor babies when they cross the Rio Grande. Make them pliable and smooth. Imagine they’re the soles of contraband Nikes of wetbacks. Keep them under the water longer. Drown them.

Legs of dogs
We started to walk just where the Chamizal Park ends there the River flows low.
We walked though chile, alfalfa and even cotton fields.
“Julio/ isn’t it/ true/ That the gringo’s tortilla/is as big as the sky?”
The coyote was 17 years old and was scared.
“You’ve got some beautiful shoes on you my son. Thank you, Jesusito. May you rest in peace, son”
But how he picked up the scent of the shortcuts.
“Water! /And the stars/Salt?” //
It was like that night the moon lit us up.
**Travel trailer**

“Did you already dine, Missus?”

A guy from Honduras cleaned nopales for a living, and said he also peeled his fingerprints off so if they caught him, he wouldn’t get traced.

“I’m not hungry, sir. Thank you”

You have to stay heads-up when they give food or else you won’t get nothing.

“We don’t want get sick and pale, do we Missus?”

Some were crying so this man who’s named Mariano said something pretty about us being like the wind in an unclosed window that wants to enter but cries because it can’t.

“Sir, I have been here three weeks. When do they cross us, sir?”

**The devil shows you how to make tamales de rajas**

In a large bowl beat the dough with lard. Beat it with your feet and hands making the lumps and stones fine with your knees so the Migra won’t see you when you crawl by the ditches fucking Culichi. Pour freshly boiled broth. Burn your hands.

**Customs**

This lady named Flower had milky skin and was told to pass herself off as the spouse of the one who was driving while we would pass through customs.

“What have you got inside there, Ma’am”

The others and us were quiet as mice and we covered ourselves with blankets those who were near the windows.

“If they stop us I’m gonna bail through the window”

All were praying to my God that they would not go inside to check.

“Lord, we are not airplanes . . . we are quail. We are short”

The other travel trailers got caught.

**The devil shows you how to make tamales de rajas**

Slice onions into crescent moons and sweat with oil in a skillet. Slice jalapeño peppers. Add them to the pan then the tomato. The rajas must have the water of your blisters. You wish you had, wetback with your mouth turned into a blanket, the spicy water of these rajas.
**Hotel**

It's because I paid $3000 to them to get me across. And thank God that they didn't stop us.

So just when we arrived in Albuquerque they distributed us into hotel rooms.

"*Who's going to Arizona? . . . Go with Adan to the Bus Station*"

In the hotel, well, you feel like a black cat like looking at all sides. You don't recognize anything.

"*I have my three daughters and my husband in Chicago. God willing tomorrow . . .*"

We turned the tele on in English to disguise us.

**The devil shows you how to make tamales of rajas**

Shake a husk and rest it on your palm. Make a nest with the dough where the illegals can sleep. Make a beautiful full moon that peasants can think what a beautiful tortilla. Add a cube of cheese and those red and white little snakes that are not going to sting you while you hide in the thicket. Fold the husks with symmetry, they are letters of the little wetbacks for their children and wives when they went asking to the Virgin Mary to care for them. Tie them with a thin ribbon of husk. Belt their bellies strongly so they shit the lizards a Chilango killed with a cholla he believed was a stone when he wiped his ass.

Align them in the steamer as beaners growing tamed and praying in a stinky trailer. Bring them to a boil. Their skins should be hardened. Smoked. They must be the dry shit of dinosaurs. The skin of Mexicans.

**a kid**

Mom when you die I will cry very much.

They stole my Next bike, ma.

When you come from Mexico I will be so happy.

Children sound weird and they're my friends.

Math is awesome and the playstashons.

The tamales at Christmas day were yummy.

You said that they were mushy.

★ ★ ★
POETRY – SECOND PLACE

1994 Toyota Pick-Up
BY KRYSTA EVANS, SCC

In the grey mist of the perspiring sky,
Red dirt turns to clay.
Your pickup’s tires stuck in the grips
Of unforgiving mud, but you just laugh
And climb out the window
Into the metal bed behind the cab. I follow.
I always follow where you go,
Like the smoke sewn on the edge of a fire.
The night casts shadows on your face,
But your bright eyes beckon me to move
In closer to you. Your beard tickles
My cheek when you tell me about your dad,
And how you’ll never be like him.
The calluses on your fingers, from plucking
Guitar strings, feel rough
Between my knuckles.
I cling to the climax
Of every breath you breathe,
Dropping an anchor with each exhale,
Trying to slow the rotation of the earth
Beneath the stuck tires.
But the earth keeps turning.

* * *
Moon Watch
BY DAVID GARN, MCC

I want to talk about my wrist watch.
How it makes me happy. It shouldn’t but it does.
Because I bought it for me, paid a pretty penny too.
Because it is a symbol that I am moving up in life.

And I can write about something as simple as a watch
Because I am just writing for me.
I am allowed to write about something boring
After all, boring is calm. Bad things don’t happen in boring.

If I am not being boring I might write about being molested in the 90s
Because I am not scared my parents will read it.
Because my poems aren’t interesting enough to read through.
Because it was only about a watch anyways.

It’s silver like the surface of a rocket. With a large 45mm case.
The face is black, like space it feels big and empty.
The white hands and markers like astronauts focused on their work.
The chronograph and the tachymeter blend in with any complex instrument panel.

I didn’t tell anyone until I was 24

And even when I did I only mentioned the girl.
I didn’t tell about her brother. I wonder why that is?
I was 6 and it wasn’t my fault, so why not even mention him?

At first I wanted to protect my watch.
I would take it off to shower and I would not wear it to work.
Now it goes everywhere with me. I sleep in it, I bathe in it,
I work out with it, I get drunk and fall over in it. And still not a scratch.
Was I scared I would be judged because he was a boy?
The girl was somehow better, an easier story to tell?
And I have to admit I am lucky because I don’t have to think about it often.
I didn’t even realize exactly what it was, until I was an adult.

So back to my watch, the real subject of this poem.
It’s not happy or sad, it lacks all emotion.
It can’t be phony, edgy, radical, angsty, or deep.
It is a very precise machine, to tell me the time.

I feel greedy when I write about something more than a watch.
When I capitalize off of sadness, tragedy, depression.
Or I sell out my happiness, friendship, or even love.
Even this poem. What the fuck is it doing? Let’s talk about something real.

The Bulova Moon Watch Chronograph Special Edition
“Replicates the timepiece worn on the 1971 Apollo 15 mission.”
“Astronaut-like accuracy and precision.”
“Water resistant to 50m” and it is fucking gorgeous.

* * *
White Dress
BY MORGAN RIFFLE, MCC

The dress I want is white and fitted, like an imperial toga. When the breeze whips through my neighborhood, the edges thrum like Nirvana’s bass against my knees. I can fight in this dress. My enemies will not be surprised; they will take the darts of my small breasts seriously, a warning sign for the rest of my weapons, hidden in the crevice their ancestors laughed about, in war tents and locker rooms, before I fought back.

***
Jesus of Juarez
BY WILLIAM ALEWYN, CGCC

Clare told me
“Don’t stick that screwdriver in your ear.
Use a cue-stick – that’s what they’re for.”

“Cue-stick?” I asked.
Clare’s old now and gets confused.

“Q-tip! Q-tip! You old fool!”
Clare’s right: I don’t hear well.
Last night I swear the radio announcer said
“With Jesus on the trombone.”
So, I told her, “Clare, Jesus is on the trombone.”
Clare’s Presbyterian and I thought she should know.

Polishing the silver in the other room, Clare shouted,
“Ralph, get that cue stick out of your ear!
Jesus doesn’t play the trombone.
Well, not like Tommy Dorsey.”

Jesus was on the trombone, I swear.
Turned out to be one of those brassy Mariachi bands
over in Juarez, XHNZ,
and they got a million and one Jesuses down there,
some on trumpet, some on trombone,
some play those funny fat guitars,
some sing a cappella on street corners
then sleep under two-wheeled taco carts
next to slack bellied mutts
with their ribs poking through.
I love their music, even though
a lot of them can’t come to America now.
Some say it’s because Mexicans
look too much like Syrians,
or maybe, these days I get confused,
Syrians look too much like Mexicans,
and they both look like those Palestinians
Clare and I once saw on our two-week
holiday to the Holy Land,
which is where Jesus is from,
originally, I mean,
before he immigrated to Juarez
and learned to play the trombone.

★★★★
In My Dream
BY TAYLOR SHEPARD, MCC

I befriended a lioness. It felt like a spiritual eclipse, like all the graphs of data lined up to weave a constellation.
I told her my pimple scars are maps of the stars, so I can remember they are all dippers. She didn’t get it. I talked sarcastic commentary of the socially accepted domestication of the docile ferret and the impatient yappy birds that gnaw on their cages as I’ve crossed them in PetSmart, looking for the cats.
We ran into the Big Lots so fast, like expensive hovercraft in fiction. She mauled a pompous dude in the parking lot after he made a face at me because I walked on all fours. I screamed at him, “It was in solidarity! What do you know about that? ASSHOLE!”
We slouched over a freeway median in summer and laughed into the car’s whooshes. She rolled her head in my direction, this means she’s hungry. I said sorry. We left the nebula of engine smog and strolled in zigzags to the deli. We made black prints on the linoleum. We chose turkey. The meat slicer didn’t say a word to us. At my house we sat at our now mangled table, bellies up and stared at each other from opposite ends. We slurped straggling turkey bits in silence. It was nice not to have to talk.
Father
BY ANDIE VIDALES, MCC

Father,
I have found that my breasts have guided me through most of my life. And that sharing my secret with older men, between hips and acrylic sheets, will get me through any Saturday night.

But the men don't come around only for me, they come for bits of you.

So, when I invite another man into my one-bedroom apartment that’s filled with Sylvia Plath and a week’s worth of half drank teacups I will let him pick me up and throw me onto my discounted mattress just so he can break your reflection into pieces.

He can take my hair, your copper hair, and pull it, even though he’ll pull away from me in the morning. He’ll take my hands, your hands, and hold me down, pressing me into the cheap cloud we are still thrashing through.
And he’ll make me close my eyes,
your blue-green eyes,
as I gasp and plead
for more.

My medical records claim this
is a defense mechanism.
I use my body
to fill the void from your abandonment.
But Father,
daddy issues will always sound more appropriate.

***
“Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t.”

Mark Twain
FICTION WINNERS

*Merry-Go-Round*
SARA STEVEN, CGCC

*Charitable People*
MALKA DASKAL, PVCC

*Darcy*
EMILY MCNEILL, SCC

*Orthodontist’s Armageddon*
AMBRIEL COOLEY, CGCC

*Scavengers*
COLLEEN MURRY, MCC

*Thorns to a Rose*
SERENITY DAVIS, MCC

*Ignes*
BY ANTHA PERKINS, SCC
The station wagon rebounded over speed bumps and dipped into potholes, the silver end of the bumper shiny in the morning sun, and when it passed the freckle of maple trees that lined the driveway leading up to the apartment complex, Elaine told Carla Mae to finish packing and to hurry it up, and when Carla Mae wouldn’t move from the vantage of the sliding glass door in the living room, Elaine pulled her by the arm through the apartment, past the bathroom that smelled like urine, and then the kitchen was next to that, so when they stood on dull linoleum she said,

“You’re going to need these,” reaching for the large brown craft paper bags she’d saved from the grocery store down the street, piled on top of the fridge and folded neatly so the seams melded into squares. She was good at that. Folding brown bags into squares. But when she pulled from the middle of the pile they fell down, brown bags scattered everywhere, and when she looked at Carla Mae she could feel the matted hair around her own head like the weight of a demented halo.

The girl picked up one bag, squeezing it to her chest.

“It feels like sandpaper,” she said, the size of it smothering the front of her little yellow sundress.

“I know it does. It’s like someone moving their fingernails down the rough side of a blackboard. Makes me shiver from neck to spine.”

“Don’t you have a suitcase I can borrow?”

“I don’t. But this will work just fine.”

They carried the bags to Carla Mae’s room, a ten by ten derivative of the bedroom next door, but the difference was in the paint on the walls, baby pink, where Elaine couldn’t want for anything other than the white walls the apartment had come with.

The bed had no blankets or sheets on it either because Carla Mae never wanted to sleep in it, and there was a stained pillow that never got much use, other than to house and pad the dolls she’d left lined up along the underbelly of synthetic foam stuffing.

What it lacked in bedding it made up for with clothing. T-shirts and holey jeans and pajamas and summer dresses, white underwear with the days of the week on the front,
all of it piled high on the mattress, and some of it spilled down the side of the bed into the forest of carpet below. Elaine opened one brown bag and put her arms inside it, spreading it wide with her hands, shivering, then she shook it a few times to make the bottom stick.

“You have to fill’em up,” she said, and she showed the girl how to do it, how to grab handfuls of clothing and shove clear to the bottom, and when she opened up another bag and placed it on its hind end was when the knocking on the front door had come, insistent and thick.

They stopped to look at one another.

“He’s gonna be mad,” Carla Mae said.

Elaine let out a breath that smelled like nicotine.

“You finish up. Just finish it up as fast as you can.”

She wanted to say that no one was at fault here, there would be no reason to get mad, but there wasn’t anything to do about it when the knocking wouldn’t stop, and she thought about the people from the church two blocks away who would come to the door like that, in twos, worried about her, worried about Carla Mae, worried about sins and salvation. When it happened she’d tell her daughter to shhh . . . and put a finger against the fat center of her lips, and they’d hide under the kitchen table so no one could see them, because the church people would go around to the back of the apartment if Elaine wouldn’t open the front door. They’d peer through the sliding glass door and into the apartment.

They wouldn’t see anything, not with the red cloth draped on top of the table, and only after the intruders stopped knocking and went away would Elaine crawl out first and offer a reward to Carla Mae, chocolate bars or hard candy.

She’d take the church people today.

She’d repent.

But she knew it would be Ronald at the door, wearing a bright green shirt that made it hard to look at anything else, and he asked if the girl was ready.

“Almost.”

“I don’t got all day, Elaine. You told me she’d be ready.”

“What’s the rush?” she said, and the shock of his shirt died down just enough so she could see past his thinning hairline, the slight rotund of his stomach, and then beyond him to the station wagon parked crooked in the lot. Children played outside, a few of them riding bicycles on black pavement.
She heard the bridge in the distance, the five lane highway of cars looping above the mossy waters of the Willamette, and there was a time Ronald had watched her climb on a merry-go-round at the park down by the river, and she sat on the blue green red wheel, stomach tied up sick but in a good way, body weightless above perforated steel while he pushed and pushed that wheel.

That was the old Ronald. Or maybe this was the old Ronald.

“This isn’t good,” he said, the smell of him like diesel.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

She left him standing in the threshold, walked over to the fridge and helped herself to a can of Dr. Pepper, removing it from its plastic circular snare left stranded on a frosted shelf.

“You want one?” she said as she popped the top and listened to it sizzle and crescendo, taking a sip and suckling away like a baby would. Mother’s milk, she called it.

“No. What I want is for Carla Mae to be ready. That’s not too much to ask,” and he said it like he knew exactly who he was in life, like he had all the answers, because he was Ronald fucking Johnson, the best damn forklift driver at the cannery, sliding three shift levers dead center with the grace of a dancer, hauling packed cardboard boxes with sweet peas and yellow corn stacked on ice in the freezer section at most of the grocery stores in the Pacific Northwest.

And that made Elaine stand up straighter, set the soda can on the counter and pull the midriff she wore down so it covered some of her fleshy belly, hide her cracked fingernails inside the thin fabric so he couldn’t see anymore of her than he already did, so he couldn’t see inside her.

“She’s almost done,” she said.

“How’s she holding up?”

“She’s doing good.”

He looked at the Formica counters with leftover spaghetti bowls that grew green fuzz, and then there were other things that she pretended didn’t exist, like sticky floors and stains and ashtrays filled with butts, empty bottles with flies that had landed inside and died there, their bodies washed out by decaying drops of liquid, and of course there was the bathroom and he crossed his arms over his chest and said he wanted to see the girl right now.
She knew she should get Carla Mae, but she thought about the station wagon, the way she and Ronald had parked on the edge of an abandoned lot one afternoon in open daylight, the passenger door an old war wound of rusted metal that creaked with every movement, and while Ronald moved on top of her he stared out the back window like he was searching for something, as though passing cars held everything, so when it was over and he asked Elaine if she were happy, she wasn’t sure if she was.

They went to the playground after it was over, spadefoot toads groaning from well-hidden hideouts, the merry-go-round clinking from the base with each completed rotation, and when it stood still Ronald sat next to her on the blue of the wheel until it got so dark, the rest of the playground was empty except for the toads, one lone light pole flicking maniacally above them.

"Do you remember that place we used to go to, by the river? The one with the merry-go-round?" she said, leaning against the fridge door.

“What’s that got to do with Carla Mae?”

He scratched his face and she could make out the boy he used to be when he had more hair, the one who blew hot air on glass and drew heart-shaped patterns inside the fog.

“Everything.”

“This isn’t my decision, Elaine.”

But it was. Like the way he’d gone to live with someone who wasn’t Elaine, someone with Aqua net bangs as long as their legs, and they moved clear out on the other side of town in a one bedroom walk-up. Elaine told everyone that Ronald was dead, run over by a forklift while working the early morning shift, squashed like one of the potato bugs Carla Mae liked coaxing from hidey holes beneath an unearthed rock, legs stretched out like fans until their shells cracked.

“All that was left of him were his favorite work boots,” she’d say, and they’d look at her all sympathetic, and even with Carla Mae around his visits spaced out like the dead end street she lived on, and when the visits stopped for good and the phone went silent, he made her feel red and wet.

It was all a decision.

“Why don’t you wanna talk about the playground, Ronald?”

“I remember it,” he said. “But it’s in the past.”

“It’s not. Not if you remember it.”
Carla Mae had come out of her room then, beautiful, and she stopped center of her makers, tall like her dad, shoulders curved and rounded out like Elaine’s.

“Can I bring my dolls?”

“You can bring one,” Ronald told her.

“I don’t know if I can pick just one.”

“There won’t be room for more than that.”

Elaine followed Carla Mae to her bedroom. There were three brown bags now, all lined up and bulging at the sides, refusing to hold anything else. The bed and floor were empty, and this made Elaine feel just as empty.

The dolls were still lined up in a row on the top of the bed, leaning up against the stained pillow, some with saran hair that had been cut off with scissors when Carla Mae had gone through her pretending to be a hairdresser phase, blunt edges sticking up in all directions.

Then there was the one that liked to wet itself, an annoyance that quickly got old, because no one wanted a doll that peed.

Carla Mae grazed a hand over the doll’s bodies, one by one, before she picked up the cabbage patch boy that had been named Ryan, a creamy bald baby with paint marks lining the top of his skull from the many times she scraped it along the hallway walls when she’d walk with him in her hand, head down.

“I think you should take Ryan,” Elaine said.

“I can’t. He’s yours.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s gonna need you to take good care of him.”

She laid the cabbage patch boy next to the brown bags, his tiny corduroy overalls bunching up at the knees.

“I want to bring more than one doll. I don’t understand why I can’t.”

“There are a lot of things that are hard to understand.”

“Do you think he’ll be scared, when he leaves?”

Elaine knelt in front of Carla Mae, rubbing her daughter’s bare arms, her bare shoulders.

“It’s only for the summer.”
The girl nodded but she looked at the floor, staring at her chipped pink toenails.

They carried the bags to the front door, Elaine with two, Carla Mae with one. She went back for Ryan while her father carried everything else to the station wagon, placing the bags in the back seat.

When he’d returned to the apartment, Elaine grabbed hard onto one of his hands, feeling the way hers were smooth inside his, the grit of hard living.

“Take care of her,” she said.

He wouldn’t look her in the eye, and when he let go of her hand he said it’s time to go now, and there were no children playing outside anymore, but the bikes were left on sidewalks, lying on their sides.

She watched the two of them from the threshold, identical from behind, the way their ankles curved inwards, long limbs, and when he opened the passenger door, it creaked even louder than it used to.

Carla Mae climbed inside and sat on sticky, hot seats. Elaine remembered how those seats could be. Then Ronald gently shut the door and went around the back, around the silver bumper, until he slid inside, revving up the engine. He looked briefly at Elaine, gave her a tiny wave before reversing out of the parking lot, and she wondered if he’d changed his mind when he stopped suddenly, but then he pulled forward, making his way towards the driveway.

She walked into the apartment, past the bathroom, and then she went back and stood in the doorway of it, braving the smell, looking at the tiny toothbrush leaning sideways in a plastic cup, a pink princess comb lying next to it on the sink.

She ran for the sliding glass door, placing her hands there while the station wagon rebounded over speed bumps and potholes again, and when they’d passed the maple trees Carla Mae was nothing more than the top of her head inside the vehicle, and then she was so far away she couldn’t be seen anymore.

* * *
Everyone knew that Lenny Mandelbaum and his wife Sylvia were charitable people. The Mandelbaum name was written in gold lettering above the door of the synagogue’s social hall, inscribed into the silver base of the eight-foot-tall Menorah which stood in the lobby of the Hebrew Academy (kindergarten through 8th), and shone from the largest of the brass plaques affixed to the wall outside the Yeshiva High School of Los Angeles’s brand new Beit Midrash. In every ad journal, the Mandelbaums could be counted on to contribute a full-page ad and at every event, they were either sitting at the dais, or at a table close enough to flick a penny and see it land in the dais’s floral centerpiece.

Lenny had turned sixty-three this year and life’s pomp and circumstance had settled itself around the wide girth of his waist and in the generous folds that ringed the back of his neck. He was the owner of the world’s largest safety pin manufacturing plant, a fact that gave him a secret thrill whenever it bobbed to the surface of his thoughts. As a pillar of the community, Lenny Mandelbaum took himself very seriously and expected others to do the same.

Lenny liked to arrive a little late to synagogue on Saturday mornings, the sweet spot was the time between Baruch Sheamar and Ashrei, when there were already a number of men sitting in their seats and a couple more loitering in the foyer. That way, when he entered the building, there would be a good amount of hearty handshakes and emphatic “good Shabboses” to go around and a few slaps on the back from the men who knew him well enough to take that liberty.

This Shabbat, he was late. That is, later than he wanted to be. And it was all Sylvia’s fault. It was one of their usual arguments. Sylvia had emerged from her closet in a dress that made her look like an ambulant potato, round at the edges, brown and lumpy in the middle. She had a wardrobe full of designer clothes from Paris and New York, dresses made out of fabrics that felt like rose petals but Sylvia insisted on wearing drab swamp-colored clothes bought from discount department stores. Lenny remembered when he had first met his wife. She had been at a party, a singles event, standing in a corner smiling shyly and Lenny had thought to himself that he had never seen such straight teeth, such perfectly square and even teeth. They were expensive looking teeth. And he had been right. Sylvia’s parents had paid a small fortune to have her teeth pulled and pushed into orderly rows, which was fine as her parents, it turned out, had money to spare on things like teeth. This was discovered when Lenny came...
to pick Sylvia up at her home for their first date. Every surface of the opulent house seemed polished and gleaming, much like Sylvia’s white teeth.

When Lenny showed up to claim Sylvia and her teeth, her parents were unimpressed. In every wedding picture, there were rows of beautiful teeth clenched tightly into an unconvincing impression of a smile. Even after he made his first million, they still treated him like a bee that had landed in the Rosh Hashanah honey bowl. Well, they were dead now and their teeth lay jumbled among their decaying bones somewhere six feet deep in a cemetery just outside of Jerusalem while Lenny’s machines spewed out rivers of quicksilver and the money poured in like white ticker-tape at a World Series victory parade.

Sylvia, to her credit, had never complained during the early years about the reduced circumstances their marriage had imposed on her. The problem was, as the circumstances became less reduced and more abundant, she had failed to keep up. She continued to shop at the same discount stores and seemed to take pleasure in clipping coupons. “What will people think,” Lenny would ask her, “what will they say if they see Sylvia Mandelbaum using coupons at the grocery store to buy chicken cutlets?” And when he tried to buy her expensive jewelry, she would either insist he return it or else take it straight to their safe at the bank. “A diamond cannot sparkle if there’s no one to see it,” he told her, impressed with his witticism. But Sylvia refused to listen. Her thoroughbred teeth turned out to be the mouth of a stubborn mule.

They entered the synagogue together. Sylvia went to the restroom to put on her hat in front of the mirror while Lenny tossed his tallis over his shoulders and walked towards the main sanctuary. He could hear the congregation through the thick double doors singing Az Yashir inside. He swung the door open and made his way up the aisle.

There were eighty-three pews in the sanctuary. Lenny knew this because he had paid for all the seats to be reupholstered last year. His seat was towards the back, row sixty-four, a safe enough distance from the Rabbi’s seat up on the bimah at the front that Lenny and his friends could spend much of the morning’s prayer engaged in the less sanctified act of gossip.

Saul Fischbein sat in the seat next to his. When Lenny entered the row, Saul pulled his knees in to allow him to pass.

“Shabbat Shalom,” Saul whispered as Lenny squeezed by.

“Shabbat Shalom,” Lenny responded.

“You’re late today. Trouble in paradise?” Saul asked, wagging his bushy eyebrows.

Lenny’s chest started feeling funny. This had been happening more frequently in the last few weeks. It was like there was a rotating hamster wheel that would stop suddenly.
and start up again with an unpleasant force. These palpitations would come and go with no warning and no reason. Saul's hairy eyebrows, the same color and texture as the wiry hairs sprouting from his ears, arched in mock concern.

“No.” Lenny answered a little more loudly than he had intended.

“Aha, I see I’ve struck a nerve.” Saul’s wide smile now accompanied his wagging eyebrows. Lenny wished he could immobilize Saul’s jumpy face with some strong tape.

Saul was a real piece of work, a lawyer who thought he had the brains of a surgeon and the charm of a politician when, in fact, he had neither and wasn’t even a particularly good lawyer.

Lenny looked up into the woman’s section and found his wife’s figure in the front row of the balcony bending reverently over the siddur in her hands, her brown hat now perched on her head like a ridiculous roosting hen. Something appeared vaguely inappropriate about the fervidness of her prayer. Lenny had prayed like that as a young man, but he was not young anymore. Religious sincerity was something you ought to outgrow like fairy tales and pop songs. The fact that his wife evidently did not realize this, made him feel embarrassed for her.

“Are you going to the Schultz’s bar mitzvah? I heard they hired Wolfgang Puck to cater and the orchestra is so large they had to build a new stage to accommodate all the players.” Marvin Gluck whispered into his ear from the row behind.

“Musicians, not players. And yes. I’m going,” Lenny whispered back.

Lenny looked down at his siddur and flipped through it to catch up to the correct page. The congregation rose to begin the Shemoneh Esrei. A low hum filled the room as the men and women mouthed the words just loud enough to hear their own prayer. Lenny shuffled three steps back and then three steps forward, bent his knees and took a bow.

My Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. Marvin Gluck was an idiot. Blessed are you God who bestows beneficial kindness. All he and anyone else wanted to talk about was the Shultz bar mitzvah. He sustains the living with kindness. The invitations had come in the mail last month on ultra-thick stock paper with gold embossed lettering and tiny pearls sewn into the elaborate border. Who is like You, O Master of mighty deeds? The invitation had declared that the bar mitzvah would take place in the Crystal Ballroom of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Your name is holy, and only holy ones praise You every day, forever. I mean, really. It’s a bar mitzvah, not a celebrity wedding for Christ sakes. Satisfy us from Your goodness and gladden us with Your salvation. It was in poor taste. That’s what it was. Crass and gaudy and showy. Everything alive will gratefully acknowledge You. Shultz was the owner of a chain of nursing homes but it would be more accurate to call him a slumlord. Lenny would
never put his parents in one of Shultz's nursing homes. That is, if he was still on speaking terms with his parents. Establish peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness, and compassion upon us. And all these people, idiots every one of them, thought Shultz was some kind of hero for throwing a lavish party for a pimply faced thirteen-year-old. Morons.

Lenny’s heart started its arrhythmic pounding and he sat down heavily in his chair. He could feel his heart beating rapidly in his chest, fierce and insistent like the ticking of a bomb. Most of the other congregants were still standing, swaying silently with their eyes scanning the words on the pages of the siddur. He disliked sitting down with everyone else towering above him.

After the conclusion of the morning prayer, Rabbi Schorr opened the Aron Kodesh and removed the largest of the Torahs from inside. This was the Torah that Lenny had purchased for the community two years ago, and for $40,000 dollars it was every bit as grand as one would want it to be. The mantle that covered the rolled-up scroll was a thick blue brocade with gold fringes on the edges. The crown that sat on the top of the scroll’s wooden finials was fashioned in ornate sterling silver that matched the resplendent breastplate draped across the mantle’s front. Lenny thought back to the day the synagogue had celebrated the completion and dedication of the new Torah. The city had shut down all six lanes of Olympic Boulevard so that the community could pour out of the synagogue singing and dancing in the street with the $40,000 Torah held high aloft like a bride at her wedding. And Lenny had been in the center of it all. Rabbi Schorr had said some very nice things about him, things about his generosity and the true spirit of community. Lenny had stood next to the Rabbi at the podium and had made a beautiful speech dedicating the Torah in loving memory to Sylvia’s parents while Sylvia had stood a few feet behind him muffling her phlegmy sobs with a tissue.

The Torah was brought to the table that stood in the center of the bimah and unrolled to reveal this week’s parsha, the portion of the Torah read by the ba’al koreh. After the first few sentences were read, Lenny shuffled out of his pew and headed into the synagogue’s social hall next to the main sanctuary. A small group of men, six to ten on an average Shabbos, would gather there during the Torah reading to have a small Kiddush and speak bombastically about their latest accomplishments which were of consequence to no one but themselves. This was the Kiddush club.

Samuel Kessler was already pouring generous amounts of vodka into a plastic shot glass and offered a serving as Lenny walked over. Lenny shook his head. It was important to set a good example. Not that these lushes could really help themselves. Lenny poured himself a modest amount of schnapps, said the blessing, borei pri hagafen, and took a sip.

“I hear you’re heading down to Florida for Pesach this year. Which program? The Fontainebleau?” David Horwitz asked Lenny. David was a close talker and unapologetic gossipier. Of course, he would know about Lenny’s travel plans.
“No, the other one in Miami. The Marco Polo Resort,” Lenny answered.

“Oh, that’s a nice one. My sister’s cousin went there last year and she said the food was spectacular. Got to watch out for the weather, though. Rain showers every afternoon.”

“I’ll bring a raincoat.” Lenny took another shot of schnapps having found there was none left in his cup.

“Don’t spend too much time at the beach either. With skin like yours, you’ll broil like a lobster.” This from Samuel who had taken the time to offer his indispensable advice in between loud slurps of Grey Goose.

“And try not to eat too much food while you’re down there. You don’t want to ruin your svelte figure.” Here came Saul and his wagging eyebrows making the trio of stooges complete.

“Yes, well, it will certainly be nice to get away for a while,” Lenny said looking pointedly at the three of them.

“Vacations are overrated,” said Saul, missing the subtext completely. “Traveling is exhausting, hotel rooms are overpriced and any place worth seeing is overrun with tourists. My wife and I went to the Grand Canyon last July. I could just catch a glimpse of it over the heads of the forty people in front of me. We traveled all that way to almost barely see a hole in the ground. Besides, I try not to take too much time off from work, you know. My clients really depend on me and my practice can’t just run itself. For me, my work is my priority.”

Lenny was running out of patience and his heart was jumping around in his chest like it had come loose from its ligaments. How dare Saul suggest that Lenny’s work was less important than practicing law. Everyone needs safety pins. Just because his company could run smoothly without him being in the same state, didn’t make his job any less vital. Saul was a terrible lawyer and most of his clients would be better off with him taking a permanent vacation.

Lenny left the social hall and returned to the main sanctuary where the Torah leining had already finished and Rabbi Schorr was giving his speech. Lenny took his seat quietly and tried to concentrate on what the Rabbi was saying.

*And so, while the obligation to make the pilgrimage to Israel is no longer a requirement today, it is necessary for our spiritual commitment to our history and our future to visit Israel and support the country with our presence and our contribution to its economy. In the weeks before Pesach, one of the shalosh regalim, one of the three Holidays when it was customary for all able-bodied Jews to travel to Jerusalem, it feels appropriate to reflect on the importance of being part of something*
larger than oneself. Being a part of a community that exists not because of each individual, but as a result of the unity of the whole. That type of unity requires a physical presence. It’s not enough to write a check, or attend an AIPAC dinner. You need to go. To be there. To walk the streets and eat in the restaurants. To stay in the hotels and support Israel by being a part of it. It may not be possible for everyone in this room to make Aliyah, a permanent move to Israel, but all of us are blessed with the ability to take a trip there, for the sake of your own identity as a Jew, but even more importantly for the sake of the national Jewish identity. Good Shabbos.

This was too much. This was too much. That the Rabbi could stand up there and lecture him, Lenny Mandelbaum, who had reupholstered the chairs, who served on the board of the high school, who had bought the shul a $40,000 Torah. It was simply too much. Lenny had done more than most people to support Israel. His wife helped organize the Purim baskets for the Israeli soldiers this year for Christ sake. And if he chose not to travel there because his Hebrew was rusty and the heat was oppressive, well that was his prerogative. Lenny wasn’t going to take this sitting down. He almost didn’t feel the wild galloping of his heart as he stood up and walked down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary, climbed the stairs to the bimah, marched past the Rabbi who stood frozen in astonishment, swung open the doors of the ark, pulled out his Torah and stalked out of the sanctuary and out the front doors of the synagogue.

The congregation sat in their seats in stunned silence. The sound of tires skidding on asphalt and the subsequent loud crash from the street outside felt magnified as it reverberated around the quiet room. The noise echoed from the soaring ceilings above the women’s balcony, traveling past the stained-glass windows trembling in their multi-colored grandeur, and coming to rest on the gold inlaid inscription above the ark’s wooden doors, da lifnei mi atah omed, know before Whom you stand.

When the congregation exited the synagogue, the first thing they saw was the Torah scroll which had completely unfurled, all one hundred and forty-eight feet of it lying face up on Olympic Boulevard, the words like a delicate black filigree glittering in the brilliant California sunshine. The force of the impact had caused the mantle, crown, and breastplate to fly off and land in the gutter, but the scroll was completely unharmed. Not a rip or even so much as a crease marred the calfskin parchment. Lenny, however, was not so fortunate.

At the one-year yahrzeit, the first anniversary of Lenny’s death, Sylvia made a very generous contribution in his name to Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Israel. Everyone agreed that it was precisely what he would have wanted because Lenny Mandelbaum, beloved friend and respected leader of the community, had always been an exceptionally charitable person.
Darcy
BY EMILY MCNEILL, SCC

There’s a man named Mr. Gillis who owns an antique shop down the road from my house. The exterior is musty, and crumbling, and resembles the neglected state of wares within; however, he paints the outside every few weeks to conceal the peeling, rotted panels. He tells me he can’t find the right color. Today, the walls are yellow; under the day’s rain gorged clouds, the building is a sun.

When I walk in, the bell jingles like a cat’s collar above my head. Mr. Gillis glances up from his work, and I wave while I muck off my shoes at the doormat. It’s wet and muggy outside, though the rain has stopped for the moment, and the overcast sky brings with it a feeling of aloneness that stays with me. The weather changes and does what people don’t want it to – it bars them as though it’s a detention sentence to the inside. The sky serves as an excuse for people to listen to the voices they want to ignore inside their heads, where thoughts become instruments of torture, parasites of their own mind.

Mr. Gillis is no exception, but he was different before. His wife died from an accident a few months ago, just before school got out. I didn’t go to the funeral, but I brought Mr. Gillis’ favorite candy the next time I came to see him. It didn’t make a difference, but he told me he was glad someone tried.

I visit him often – he offers me butterscotch and wafer cookies in crinkly plastic, and he doesn’t mind when I ask about where his antiques came from or how they were made. I ask him how they work, and he lets me draw the insides of the deteriorating relics as long as I’m careful with them. He understands in a way my father doesn’t; Mr. Gillis doesn’t tell me that my sketches are as primitive and useless as the antiques they depict, or that there’s something wrong with my head for reading a dictionary instead of my homework.

“Morning,” I say, but pause then I hear the ticking. It isn’t one noise, but a murmur of discordant timepieces all combating one another for attention. Frowning, I pinpoint each of the clocks sitting on dusty wooden shelves where each layer of mahogany is bowed in their centers from years of bearing heavy contents. My nose wrinkles at the sound – I move forward to study a small wooden clock nestled atop a stained cigar box. They are new; it isn’t unusual for him to return from a day trip from a flea market, but this is the first time he’s brought back so many of the same item.
“It’s after one o’clock, Darcy,” Mr. Gillis corrects, but he doesn’t say that I should be in school. He knows I come here when I want to get away from everyone else.

“Woke up late.” I watch him shake his head in disappointment that I don’t feel. Instead, he goes back to his business of the daily word cross and mumbles to himself under his breath. His mustache moves with the left side of his upper lip, dragging the right side into motion with stuttering twitches. Two years ago, he had a stroke that rendered half his face immovable, but it’s still easy to discern his mood through his expressions. It seems to be worse on the days he thinks deeper, when he doesn’t have anything else but the day’s crossword to do.

“Mr. Gillis?”

“Yes, son?”

“Where’d you get all these?” I gesture to the ticking pieces strewn around the store.

The shop is a layered archaeological site. Books are found within and between every spare inch, shoved beneath coffee grinders and carnival glass. Jewelry from a century past sit as opulent queens upon pilled velvet, denoting a craftsmanship of a time long gone. Parts of machinery lay scattered amongst paintings leaning against bookcases; yellowing newspapers and weathered photos line up like soldiers within boxes; dust lingers in the air as its own layer of impenetrable dirt. The incessant ticking breaks what should be the silence of forgotten things. It makes me angry, because they don’t tick all at once. They are inharmonious, an irregular rhythm that ticks and clicks and taps in all the wrong ways.

Mr. Gillis hums, as though he is proud of these objects he’s brought into his store. “Aren’t they lovely? The clock shop in Joplin went out of business. Got all these on the cheap. They kinda liven things up, I think.”

“Sure,” I say. I don’t think they did anything but make noise, like too many people in a room. One or two, they could be spoken to or ignored or studied without a problem. A dozen crowded into a small space makes the sound claustrophobic, a chattering noise that buzzes like insects in my ear.

He crinkles a weak, half faced smile and gestures over to the chair he has for me at the table that would have been set for a family dinner a century ago. “You seem restless.”

“They’re noisy.”

“I thought you’d like them.”

“I do. I don’t like them all at once.” I don’t want him to misunderstand me. Clocks are fascinating. They work the same as people. I’ve been told that other people can become
a part of themselves, that they become necessary to their own bodies; an instrumental component that gives them vibrancy, a cog in the mechanisms that drive them to function.

There is one clock that stands on its own; small, dark, covered with veneer, it sits like a perched raven above the collected works of Zane Grey. I pick it up and take it back to the table, a small clearing open amongst the stacks of papers and trinkets. Tools are waiting for me, a small box set aside for me to unscrew and pick apart what interests me that day. I appreciate the inner workings of hardware more than most people, and understand how they work.

Hearts are built in the same way as clocks. Their insides are constructed of small parts; pulmonary veins and coiled springs, pumping atriums and grinding wheels, the powerful aorta to the hands of the hours-minutes-seconds. There is the consistency of beats; every burst of potential energy jolts a hand or a heart into the next. I feel the face of the clock staring back at me as though it understands my questions, whether the time between seconds is at rest or fighting to keep moving forward.

I am used to the air of people who do nothing but let their hearts beat. Their faces begin to resemble a clock’s – blank and expressionless, when all they’ve become is numbers and dates to mark the passing of time. Mr. Gillis has become one of those people, after his wife fell down the stairs and cracked her head on the tile. He lost a part of him that once fueled his excitement for antiques, and for that I dislike his wife for not being more careful.

“Put it back together when you’re done. I’ll make you pay for it if it ends up broken,” Mr. Gillis informs me, but he pats my back and moves to dust off the shelves. There is something different about today, and I want to blame the rain, but I know that isn’t right. I’ve never seen him dust in the store before. The ticking seems to be getting louder, and it somehow makes me hear every rustle of his clothes and scrape of his shoes on the floor as though they are happening beside my ear.

I can’t focus. “Yes sir.”

He pauses and glances at me, and the skin of his forehead pulls like taffy to hood over his eyes – I can still see the sentiment. Sometimes Mr. Gillis looks at me in the way someone might look at an abused dog. I want to tell him that I’m not; a dog is what my father hit until she stopped yipping, until her tongue hung over the side of her mouth like a worm that wriggled in and suffocated as it tried to slide down her throat. Her eyes had bulged in long remembered pain, but her voice had run dry long before the legs stopped twitching. I want to tell him, I would know if I was abused like a dog.

“Are you okay, Mr. Gillis?” I end up asking, because he has not bothered me about my day, or offered me a snack yet.
“I’m fine, son.” He hesitated before answering, and I frowned at the thought of him lying to me.

The clocks wear at my comfort. My fingers tap against the ancient oak. I set the clock onto the table. I ripped off the back and pulled out a cog. It stopped ticking at me, but there are over a half dozen others surrounding us. The haven I’ve come to see this place transforms into a supermarket on a busy day. I can feel the presence of people, how they stand around me in place of inanimate objects.

“You’re acting weird.” My mouth forms words. The dragging shuffle of his soles against the brittle wood floor grate into my ears, and I hear feedback from a microphone.

He says nothing in return, but I notice the tremor in his hands while he dusts.

“Is this about Mrs. Gillis?” I ask him, because he occasionally spoke of her in soft breaths, reminiscing about her home cooked meals and clever nature and how she could solve any one of the daily crosswords when he got stuck.

Mr. Gillis stops, staring forward into the spot he’d just dusted. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s okay. I understand,” I say, and he looks at me again as though I am an innocent pet without a way to fight back. There are the clocks interfering our conversation, each one offering its voice to my thoughts; I hate it. “She was a really nice lady.”

Nodding, he swallowed against the marble in his throat. He wants to talk about her to people, but they avoid it because it’s uncomfortable, as if it’s taboo to speak of the dead in front of the ones who miss them the most.

I continue, prodding him to answer. “You miss her a lot.”

“Yes, very much. A love like ours – ” He cut himself off. “We were together since high school. Never left each other’s side. Thing is, we never felt like we were necessary for each other to live, not until we got too old to think about it. She’d tell me to shake it off, find a pretty little fox. I would, but she’s still here with me. I can feel it.”

He’s denying that he’s missing a piece, pretending he can still feel what is absent. He doesn’t understand that what is gone will always be gone. There’s a quiver on the left side of his lip. The right side remains impassive and unphased, untouched by the stirred emotions his body will not allow him to express. His face is that of a clock; his innards work with one of its parts missing and it makes time go twice as slow.

God, the clocks. I can’t ignore them. They started dull, but their persistence has become inescapable. They are trying to speed time up, making up for the difference within Mr. Gillis, whispering the inevitable. I understand then, that this is his swan song.
“I’m sure you wish you could be together again.”

He is silent. I feel the table begin to rock, my leg hitting up against it in spasmic rhythm, but Mr. Gillis doesn’t notice. It makes the same tap-tap noise the clocks are all emanating now, shrieking in my ears, a screaming animal caught in a snare.

The store falls away from me, my vision bleeds into a memory. The stuttering ribcage of a dying border collie, her wilting body lying beneath my whimpering one, both of us pressed down into the dirt encrusted floor, the filth turning thick and gooey and gritty. It’s different reading that bones are made of a mineral hard as a stone and then seeing the milky white that reminds me of broken ceramic. Her skin beats against my hands. I beg her, don’t die, please don’t, but her heart is falling out through her chest, her blood a drink where the cracks in our wood paneling is the chalice.

Her heart thunks awkwardly, but it ticks in my head, heavy and deafening, and it is as though there is a dense blanket over my head that blunts them into dull thumps. There is a hole in her, but it can’t be plugged up. There’s no hope for clotting when blood is spilling from her in lurching, syrupy gushes that pump in sync with each beat into the next. The heart which once kept her alive now kills her faster, and there is the sound of water boiling over, rising from a frothing stomach. I close my eyes and sniffle. When they open again, there is nothing but her white, bulging eyes and motionless fur to press my face into.

And there is another clock in my hand. I don’t remember moving across the room. It shakes in my fingers when I bring it to my table; it’s frightened of me, and how I will rip its heart from its chest. I want to stop its cries for help, to make the hands on its face stop pleading with me to save it even though it is beyond my power.

He knew, he understood that I wanted the silence. I am suddenly, irrevocably convinced he is trying to drive me from his store. I am too young, too irritating a presence.

The clock made a noise, a squeak, like a mouse that had run into a trap. Nails plunging into its workings, ripping the cogs from their settings, thrusting them to the floor. It came apart in my hands. The wood splintered from my grip; shaking, clicking, breathing, smashing, innards scattered across the floor.

“Darcy? What the – ?”

For a moment, I do not notice Mr. Gillis behind me, but I turn to stare at him when he grabs my shoulder.

“Please,” I say, but don’t know why.
He stops, worn eyes frozen, as if he just realized something. There is a look in his gaze, and I recognize it from my dog’s, from the eyes that meet mine in the bathroom.

“Darcy,” he says.

“I bet she misses you just as much.”

I see his body shudder. I care about Mr. Gillis, but he has lived this long without realizing that there is no way to be happy. It is in this way that he is a simple mind, because clocks move their hands forward without any reason to do so – they work without their minds, only hearts, doing as they were built to do. He is suffering because it’s in his nature, because the little gears in his body tell him so, because they have suddenly stopped keeping time.

“I think it’s worse to be the one left behind,” I say. “She’s supposed to be in heaven right? I don’t see how it’s fair when you’re like this. She’s there and you’re here.”

He frowns, white caterpillar eyebrows furrowing into deep crevices. His voice speaks, but his body sags, becomes melting crayon wax under heat. “I wouldn’t want anything else for her.”

“Of course not,” I say firmly, nodding though it makes me dizzy to move my head. “But she’d want you to be happy too.”

I am not saying anything he hasn’t already thought about. It is the childish innocence in my words that makes him stop to think further; his inner turmoil would have brought him to the same conclusion, slower, more painfully. As any child would look after their grandfather, I want what’s best for Mr. Gillis.

“I’m an old man. I’ll be all right given some time.”

“But will you be happy? I don’t want you to be so sad.” Timepieces become cicadas trilling at me from every corner of the store, but in this I would not be swayed. “I don’t think my visits really help much.”

“I think you’re the only one who comes to visit me anymore, son.” There is a faint tone of softness, a longing in the coarse breaks of his voice.

I taste brackish water and the staleness of decomposed creatures long dead within the dirt. I know what he feels; that the damage is irreversible, that he will not return from this.

I smile, then. Weak, waning. Later, I think that I will regret not smiling more. I can’t bring myself to widen mine when there is so much noise it is overwhelming, turning my brain to fog.
“I think I’d come visit whether you were in the store or not,” I say, and it’s true. I go to see his wife sometimes too, on his worst days. It’s peaceful there – sometimes I bring my lunch from school, and I sit in the grass to watch the ants crawl over the stone.

Mr. Gillis clears his throat. “I’m glad to know that.”

There is something familiar in the way he says it that makes my lungs struggle to stay within my chest and my eyes feel as though smoke is burning them. The wrinkles in his face blur until he is nothing more than shapes and colors.

“Yeah.” I nod, and it becomes a promise. He pats my shoulder and squeezes it firmly; my head ducks and each of my senses is tensed, sore, every part of me rubbed raw. Paying attention is impossible. My thoughts are filled with whimpers and cracked bone, my ears with blood pulsing through them.

“Head on home, son.”

Breathing, seeing, hearing; all of my senses are inaccessible. “Okay.”

I step outside, and there’s a ringing slack between me and the clocks. The world goes mute. When I look back, Mr. Gillis is turning around the faded shop door sign to closed.

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Orthodontist’s Armageddon

BY AMBRIEL COOLEY, CGCC

There was once a building hidden away in a dark cave made out of red throbbing breathing flesh. It was living, it was alive. It held a row of twelve people on each of its two floors. Some were brown. Some were yellow. Some were white. Some were a mix of each. One day they all got out of line, and a behemoth watching over each of them began to put them back into place. For his first order of business he put them all in metal cages strung with a wire. Their homes were now a color-coded prison. Latex gloves snapped, sausage-shaped appendages probed the area, and they did nothing to stop it. It didn’t take long until he kicked out two elderly couples who had waited their whole lives to stay. What he did next wasn’t much better he swiped the baby from the neighbors and replaced it with an impostor who latched onto them and never let go. With no one quite understanding his methods he continued on his work. For one moment a broke man would be given a silver crown, while the dying children in the back alleyway would be covered by a plastic casket. Another time a group of large claws swooped down to scraped the backs of its victims that simultaneously spread and cured the plague of those infected citizens. For every change there were those who suffered and those who gained, but only nineteen now remained. Although it wasn’t just the residents who had to endure constant change, the building itself was still under renovation. Hard clear ooze was used to fill in between each hole and chasm. After a while the cave walls overflowed with foamy fluid went over the crimson waterfall that runs from top to bottom. The walls were often cleansed with the smell of fresh mint leaves, but thanks to a new electric machine the smell of burnt flesh lingered in the air. One day, without notice the very foundation of the building shook when two metal corkscrews drilled themselves into the floor. The aftermath of the wreckage left only a heap of pink lumpy rubble at the bottom center of the building. Beneath their roots they could hear the ground screaming. They had enough. The changes needed to stop. They finally banded together connected against their oppressor, and escaped their metal prison. The behemoth left for his work was done. They were all in line.
“Counterpart! Come! Come and see what I have found!” The excited shout echoed up from the bottom of a muddy embankment. During the rains, water flowed freely through the ravine – swift and strong enough to carry away anything foolish enough to go near, removing it forever from the known world. But it was only faintly soggy, now, and the sense of danger surrounding the place had grown stale.

The listener – a small construct of metal, with four rounded wheels and a boxy frame – faltered at the crumbling edge. “We should not be here!”

“What harm is there? A little mud cannot disable us. Come down! Come see!”

With a quiet, nervous chattering, the listener obeyed. All clanking metal and muttered curses, it made its way down the slope, then gave a grating shriek as it fell the last meter or so to land beside its counterpart. The first waited eagerly while the second picked itself up, shaking out one wheel to rid it of mud.

“I cannot believe . . . !” the little machine huffed, then shook its control center to scatter bits of soil. Blinking round optic sensors, it made an outraged chirruping sound as its counterpart’s single sensory panel lit with humor. “Do not be amused!” it chirped. “It is not so easy for those who have wheels!”

“Speak to your creators, then, about getting something else,” the other replied smartly, and the second machine’s chirping grew more indignant.

“And end up with gangly things like yours, instead? I think I will not, in fact!”

“Your own creator has limbs rather than wheels, if you had not noticed.”

“Of course I had noticed! Just because a respected individual chose them does not mean I think them any less unsightly and ineffective.”

“I do believe you just called a creator of yours ‘unsightly.’”

“I did not!”

“You did.”

“I did n – ! . . . Did.”
“You did.”

“It is your fault, N6-Skaw, all your fault!” the little machine chirped. “Your word-tricks have tricked me and I meant none of it! It is your fault such words even came through my speakers!”

The two machines – dubbed by their creators N6-Skaw and Z3-Neer – had wandered some distance from their settlement. The place where water usually flowed was a largely unexplored section of wilderness; the plumes of smoke just visible on the horizon indicated the general direction of home, but there were no other signs of inhabitation so far out. Young machines, however, were driven to fill gaps in the information they possessed – and the drive was often strong enough to goad them out into unfamiliar territory when their makers weren’t watching.

“What do you think this is?” N6-Skaw, all but forgetting about the momentary disagreement, held up its find. Z3-Neer made a soft grinding noise.

“I . . . no, there is nothing . . . “ Z3-Neer scanned the strange, grayish object that its counterpart held out. “I find no match.”

“Neither do I,” N6-Skaw said, turning the thing this way and then that in its four-pronged hands. “And look – more of them.” It pointed to a heap of well-weathered objects, which lay half-buried in the ancient mud.

“A whole great number of them . . . ” Z3-Neer murmured, rolling forward to pull one from the grasp of the earth. “They look like . . . parts.”

“Primitive parts, perhaps!” N6-Skaw ran its hands across a particularly long object.

“But would these things not be far too brittle to make a decent framework?” the other asked, holding up a seemingly broken piece for demonstration. N6-Skaw made a negative beeping.

“There is not any telling how long these things have been here, not when we have not even a record of their existence and purpose. They may have been much stronger when they functioned, or perhaps had much exterior support from something that has since broken down into dust.” The little machine’s words tumbled out in a jumble as it fiddled with its find, and it held up a particularly strange object – a domed structure with a bumpy ridge at its underside, as well as two empty holes which seemed to stare out at the machines. “This seems like it could be a control center, with these holes housing primitive visual sensors. Do you not think?”
“It seems possible . . .” Z3-Neer admitted. When it became too uncomfortable to stare into the suggested visual sensor sockets, it looked down at the mud-crusted, broken rod it held; said softly, “But perhaps improbable. Calcium? Who would build a thing out of such brittle material, anyway?”

“If that is still the best argument you have against it,” N3-Skaw scoffed, turning the domed artifact toward themselves, “then I will declare I am right. I think my hypothesis is most reasonable.”

“So you think these all fit together to form some sort of . . . machine?” Z3-Neer asked in exasperation, motioning to the chaotic jumble of artifacts. “Do you also think it held consciousness?”

“It could have,” N3-Skaw said defensively, and its companion made a grinding little sound of disbelief.

“You should have your creators check your control center for damage,” it said, tossing the broken artifact down and turning back to the slope the two had come down. “I will not stay any longer – we will both head back, yes?”

“I want to stay here.”

“What?” Z3-Neer turned back, its speakers crackling with surprise. “Why? In any case, you need to get the mud cleaned out of your gears before it clogs something.”

“I want to try to reassemble it,” N6-Skaw said simply, with a strange affection as it gazed at the domed artifact in its hands. “Perhaps I can even get it functioning again. Would that not be something entirely incredible? A whole new being that has been lost up until now – would that not be something truly incredible?”

“In-credible, yes. By definition, not credible. Not plausible.”

“Reboot yourself, counterpart.”

“I will have to tell your creators where you are,” Z3-Neer threatened. “They will come to fetch you, you know. They will upload quite a scolding into you when they find out.”

“Your threat is empty,” N6-Skaw asserted. “They would not understand, anyway.” It set the artifact down on a slightly elevated stone, picking up another for close examination.

Z3-Neer watched for a moment, then gave a rattling sigh and struggled back up the embankment. N6-Skaw was still fiddling with the pile of objects by the time its counterpart turned back, and Z3-Neer gave a resigned shake of its control center.

“Fine! Only be back before dark, yes? You are not equipped with sufficient external lighting to continue work after that point, regardless.”
“Right,” N6-Skaw called back, without looking up. It was too focused on the task at hand, trying to piece together its find in the most logical way it could fathom. With another clanking sigh, Z3-Neer departed.

“It is only you and I, then,” the little machine called N6-Skaw whispered to its find – to the strange, rounded artifact that N6-Skaw thought had been the control center of a being which had stopped functioning long ago. “I hope I can manage to assemble you.

“I think we would get on most well with one another. I desire strongly to learn, and I think you could tell the most incredible stories, were you able.”

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Whispers. That was all I ever heard around my home, if I could even call it home anymore. The place was cold to me. It was cut off like a frost-bitten finger or toe you just had to let go of even though it was a part of you and you really didn’t want to. I couldn’t understand why it became that way. Maybe I did know why, but my mind was my own captor. It held its invisible hand over my mouth and shushed me into a definite silence. My thoughts were not my own. Inside of me was another person who controlled me. I had come to know her only a few months before my mother passed. She sometimes controlled my thoughts and feelings. The words that came from my mouth, she spoke for me.

She was the reason I barely had anything to say at all. I knew she loved making me cry. A feeling that would build up in my chest as she pushed memories of my mother through my head, would make tears spring to my eyes and my heart would squeeze in and out as if fighting off an attacker. I didn’t feel relief from it until I felt the tears slip down my cheeks and plop onto my hands. The whispers, snatches and bits of whispers around a home that I didn’t recognize anymore would catch my attention. My ears slightly perked up at the sounds of – “Mentally unstable.” I wandered into the living room one afternoon, while my grandmother had company. They were women I grew accustomed to seeing after the funeral. And maybe even before then, but I had been too young to remember. Mrs. Perkins was the smallest old woman I have ever seen. She walked in little duck steps on beige orthopedic shoes, her silver hair of wisdom always swept neatly into a small bun and she never went anywhere without her sewing needle. Mrs. Whitley was sweet, her face always reminded me of the shape of a heart, her cheeks plump and pink. When she smiled it was sympathetic and genuine, as if no matter what you did to upset her she would always bake cookies and lemon pies for you. I always felt in some small way I loved Mrs. Whitley the best, maybe even more than my own grandmother. In the living area, I listened to the other elderly women discuss my mental health as if I wasn’t even in the room. I just stared out the window, or at the wall. Listening. Absentmindedly playing with the buttons on the front of my shirt, twisting invisible threads and knots between my fingers. My eyes would scan the top of the grandfather clock, analyzing each little crystal angel figurine positioned just so on top of it. Sometimes, my gaze would shift to the floor, following the pattern of daisies and tulips embroidered in the carpet.
“The poor thing is nearly hysterical, it’s a wonder she’s held on so long,” said Mrs. Perkins. She pulled her sewing needle in and out of a small hand cloth vigorously. Just from observing my hunched shoulders, the gauntness of my pale face, and the dark circles under my eyes. She could tell it was any day now until I would crack open like a violently shaken can of soda pop. Despite Mrs. Perkins prediction I don’t think I had any intention of becoming “Hysterical.” But that really wasn’t up to me, she made every choice for us on the outside.

Things were vastly different inside. I spoke nothing of the solid emptiness I felt digging into my soul. One inch at a time. Nearly consuming us both. As I watched Mrs. Whitley, Mrs. Perkins, and my grandmother sewing I realized they were talking about me quietly amongst themselves.

“Rose dear, how have you been feeling lately?” asked Mrs. Perkins She looked at me with wide eyes from behind her round gold-rimmed glasses, they made her pale blue eyes look three times larger than they were. I didn’t look at her. I barely said the word – “Fine.” At this point I had blocked their voices out. I slipped under the heavy blanket of depression I always sought comfort in. My hiding place. A mental veil of darkness where it was peaceful and quiet and I didn’t have to answer any more questions or hear anymore whispers. “Oh, well that’s very good to hear sweetheart.” Mrs. Whitley cleared her throat and sipped her ginger tea from a little white China cup with my grandma, her lips pressed firmly together. Minutes of awkward silence pass. I hear thudding down the stairs and lack of curiosity keeps my eyes in my lap. I zone out. It’s something I’m very good at when no one is paying any mind, but the loud pitch of voices calls me back to attention. “You have to look after your sister, Christopher. She’s not doing very well. Why don’t you take Rose with you for a change? The fresh air will do her some good, you know how she used to love to play outside.”

Chris was my older brother. He and I barely saw much of each other for three years until our mother passed. Then he came to visit every weekend even though all he did was watch TV with me, and attempt to strike up conversations I was never really interested in. Chris was attending college in California. Every weekend he came home with a nice golden tan and sun-bleached brown hair.

He was always grinning whenever he told my grandmother of the latest girlfriend he had. When Chris would go too far sometimes my grandmother would tell me to leave the room for a moment or shut my ears. I was tired of secrets. So, I’ve listened in on them once or twice before.

It was all her idea, my inner Rose. Listening in wasn’t too interesting either. All Chris did was talk about the body shape of a woman using terms I’ve only heard on television programs. It is no wonder Chris has so many different women falling all over him.
My brother was very good-looking, the best looking out of us two. We got our looks from our mother, but Chris resented that. He never loved mother as much as I did. Her death came as a surprise to us all, but not Chris. When he had first come home from the airport all I could offer him was a cold, blank stare. Chris looked right into my eyes and shook his arms out, as if he had just felt a sudden chill.

“You look just like her” he muttered and walked past me to hug grandmother. It didn’t take me long to figure out what he meant.

“Aw, grandma can’t I take her tomorrow? The guys are waiting for me. I have to go right now.” Chris complained. He wasn’t about to waste his only weekends off babysitting me. I reminded him too much of our mother. A memory of which all he wanted to do was escape.

“Rose is very sick; we must help her get better. Going outside for Rose will be an accomplishment. Christopher please.” My grandmother began twisting her wrinkled hands anxiously with a well-worn look of distress. Chris glanced at me and shook his head with a heavy sigh. We had both changed so much. It was like two strangers noticing each other for the first time. All the summers he spent with father. Years of brainwashing him and turning him against mother. My father always had a way of having the last word. Even if it was permanently.

Chris briefly closed his eyes and turned his head away, it was almost as if he was disgusted with the mere thought of taking me out with him. If she hadn’t been coiled so tight within me it would have hurt my feelings. But I gave Chris a blank stare and continued to play with my invisible ball of knotted threads. “All right, all right I’ll take her. Rose get your shoes on right now. I’ll be outside.” Without another word Chris left out the front door. He slammed it closed behind himself. If this had been any other time I would have begged for him to take me with him. “Sick,” I whispered quietly. She whispered back. Sick. We’re sick. I had been sitting in the bay window seat watching them. But now I had lost interest and turned to my left to press my nose against the warm glass of the window. The sun was shining outside and a light breeze blew through the bright green tree tops of the front lawn. Down the street I saw other kids mostly younger than me, wobbly pedaling on their bikes and slapping their feet down on the asphalt to scoot themselves away faster on scooters. I saw one boy on a skateboard. He swayed and rocked smoothly down the street. He saw me watching in the window then he threw a friendly smile in my direction and waved. I shyly waved back. My eyes followed him until he was just a tiny dot amongst the rows and rows of other houses.

“You’re going out today Rose, won’t that be fun?” My grandmother patted my back gently. I sighed and my voice shook. “But I—I’m sick,” the words were more of a question than a statement. My grandmother could only stroke my hair and repeat calm words of inspiration.
“You’re very beautiful darling, as beautiful as your mother. It’s so sad to see such a pretty girl waste away. Your mother loved you very much, she would be so disappointed to see you in such a state. You have to get better for her so, please try my Rose.” said my grandmother.

I nodded quietly. Even though I didn’t understand. I wanted my grandmother to stop worrying.

I stood up and walked to my bedroom slipping my shoes on along with my sweater.

“Hurry up Rose!” Chris stuck his head back inside to yell at me. I walked as quickly as I could outside to him. We trudged along the street in silence for several minutes until Chris spoke up. “What the hell happened to you, Rose? Why are you so . . .”

Chris trailed off, kicking at small piles of dead leaves and gutter garbage along the curb. I glance over at him and shrug. “I don’t know.” My voice sounds foreign to me, and creaky. It hasn’t been in use for a while.

She’s always prevented me from using my own voice. So, I used hers. I cough to clear my throat. “Nothing.” I said to him. Chris looks over at me quickly. A bit of surprise registers on his face as we keep walking. I guess he thought I had turned into a mute. “Nothing? Come on Rose, I’m not dumb. What’s up with you? I know it’s not nothing.” The fresh air feels nice against my skin. I almost want to smile and ignore my brother. “I don’t know.” I reply to him quickly. Chris doesn’t say anything more until we reach the local park where the basketball courts are. “Oh, by the way, Logan is here so don’t say anything stupid.”

“Hey, look who’s here!” The boys step up to greet my brother and I’m left in his shadow. I feel more and more sick standing there. One of Chris’s friends, the one named Logan notices me.

“And you brought Rose, hey there cutie”

His fingers gently pinch my cheek, I lose control and she takes over, turning my head quickly I can feel myself bite his hand as hard as I can. I don’t care how loud he starts to scream; I keep my teeth sunken into his flesh.

“Rose! What the hell are you doing?!” Chris grabs me and yanks me backwards, we stumble though the snow together. I taste blood, but it’s not my own. Logan is swearing every word he can think of, shaking his hand out. Spatters of blood stain the snow, I blink and realize she surfaced for a moment.

The rest of what happens after Chris begins dragging me away from the basketball courts is a blur. I can tell he’s angry with me, but it’s not my fault. It’s hers.
“I am never taking you out with me again, I don’t care what the hell grandma says. You’re a little psycho.”

Chris pushed me through the front door of the house a while later, and then he left again. My grandmother was taking a nap; the house was quiet. I wiped my mouth with the sleeve of my jacket and sat on the floor in front of the door. Waiting. I glanced at the grandfather clock, silently counting down the seconds, to minutes, to hours.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do now and she knew as well. This was the first time we had ever come to a mutual understanding. As the clock struck 8:30, I stood up and left out the front door again, by myself.

Thirty minutes later, I sat grudgingly at the edge of Humphrey Lake slipping my shoes off and swirling the tips of my toes through the freezing cold water. I stared down at the black darkness that seemed to resemble so much of what my life looked like at the moment, dark and empty. I slipped both feet into the water and slightly gasped, scrunching up my brow from the shocking cold of the water, working its icy chill up my feet and my legs into the rest of my body before wrapping itself around my spine to stay a while. I slowly inched off the edge of the dock.

The air blowing in and out of my lungs displayed itself in valorous clouds around my mouth. I was numbing over quickly. The silent pain felt much like how I accepted the sudden death of her mother – swift and dutifully. Before I knew it, I had plunged my whole body into the lake. The shock of the cold stunned me so much my limbs went rigid and tense. The chill in my spine was no match for the painful, frozen cocoon my body was becoming wrapped in beneath the surface.

My hair floated around me in a light platinum arc and a small smile appeared on my lips, as the realization of death settled into me. The light pink headband that had been in my hair, fell away and drifted beneath me. My lungs began burning for air, begging me to scratch the surface. I could not swim, even if I wanted to change my mind about this fate. What’s done is done. Crushing reflex ignited within me as I kicked my arms and legs in all directions, my clothes were a heavy prison on my body. I looked up and saw the fading light of the moon, no matter how blurred my vision was. I could see the light, it looked so close but yet so far, and my energy was leaving quickly. Her will to fight was as weak as my own. It might have left us a long time ago, but now it was completely gone.

My lungs were aching now, sobbing in shallows of tight and overwhelming pain. I felt death wrapping its arms around me in a loving embrace and calling me home. It was a few seconds slowly crawling by, like a time lapse of pain taking its sweet time to claim my life. My eyes slid closed, a bubble of air escaped my blue lips. I opened them again
and I reached my hand up towards the light. I was thinking that maybe if I thought hard about it in that last moment it would pull me up out of the water. But then my vision clouded over in dark inky black spots before I finally gave up.

Years seemed to pass but it was only a matter of minutes, maybe even seconds before I felt myself being yanked back into reality. I heard voices, but my eyelids seemed to weigh a thousand pounds each and I could not open them. I tried with all my might. “I think she’s coming around dad!” yelled one of the voices. I could tell it was a boy probably not too much older than I was, kind of raspy and hoarse. It was right above me. I could also hear the crunch of dead leaves underfoot, approaching me. “Hello? Miss? Can you hear me?” A gruffer, deeper voice joined the first one. I felt a hand pressing hard on my chest repeatedly. I coughed and sputtered, throwing up possibly over a gallon of murky water from the lake. I tried to drag each ragged breath in slowly. “She’s alive! She’s alive dad!” the first voice seemed excited but he was quickly shushed by his father. “Hush Cade we still have to get her to a hospital,” he older man said. although I was not yet fully conscious he helped me to sit up. “Hey there, can you talk to me? Where does it hurt?” I drowsily opened my eyes and saw the man and his son, staring at me with deep concern. My throat was raw and sore from coughing so violently. I could only look and shake my head at them and place a shaking hand over my chest. I wanted to fall asleep again that blissful silent, darkness was addictive. I felt my head droop backwards but the man continued to hold me up. “All right then girly, let’s get some help for you. Cade call an ambulance while I put her in the truck.” said the man. He swept me up into his arms and carried me far from the dock. He moved quickly and quietly. I barely knew what was going on but I knew that I was being saved. Quite thankfully I was being saved.

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The resource officer sitting outside his office door was the only thing that stopped elementary school principal Ian Gordon from pulling a cigarette from the hidden compartment in his desk and lighting it with one of the matches he had confiscated from fourth-grader Ignes Madsen.

Outside, the school playground was empty. Gordon was used to seeing it like this – he worked after school hours most days, but today the sun was far too low in the sky for the vacancy to feel normal. If he allowed himself to look through the blinds that covered his window, he knew that he would find the patch of singed grass on the field near the old art building where, just hours before, second-grader Pompey Florence was carried out on a stretcher by a team of paramedics.

Gordon viewed himself to be a relatively fair man. Though he had never been particularly good with children, he genuinely liked them, and he deemed the level of compassion he showed to special needs students appropriate for a man in his position. “Problem children,” as he called them in the private confines of his own mind, were the ones he felt needed his help the most; dealing with their often equally-troubled parents was the downside of his job.

(The parents of problem children: problem children themselves who, never growing out of it, became problem adults.)

In his fifteen years of experience, Gordon had perfected his well-mannered demeanor in the face of even the most devilish young delinquents, and his congested schedule of meetings with combative parents was always dealt with in a timely fashion. They met with him on grounds of uncomfortable issues ranging anywhere from fist fights to on-campus masturbation, but nothing had prepared him for the sheer malice behind Ignes’ actions earlier that day.

Ignes was troubled to a degree that even the class bullies left her alone, feeling that their childish taunts were not worth the risk of inciting one of her violent tantrums. They, along with concerned faculty members, had witnessed her demented actions first-hand, stabbing at bugs and dead things with sticks while threatening to do the same to people who upset her.

Her mother, Dormance, was another matter. No other parent had a knack for unsettling him quite so thoroughly as the quiet, disfigured woman he was forced to
meet with on a near-weekly basis. Gordon found Dormance to have an uncanny resemblance to her daughter — not in appearance, but in the way she spoke, something predatory creeping under the surface with every impatient word from her missing lips.

Gordon glanced at the clock, feeling the tick of each second squeeze his chest with agitation. Dormance was meant to be here over an hour ago, and he had made the dire nature of Ignes’ actions clear over the phone. Though had never known her to be on time, she was unemployed and living on disability, so he could never imagine the reason for her delays.

After what Gordon knew to be too long, voices rose from outside the door and the shadow of a person melted into the blurred glass. The door opened, and the familiar figure of Dormance emerged.

Before he’d grown used to it, the sight of Dormance had once gripped Gordon with a festering nausea that corroded his stomach. Skin grafts and meaty scar tissue merged like crayon wax melting down her face and neck; they covered her hollow left eye socket like a threadbare, discolored blanket and replaced what once was an ear with a stub of lumpy flesh. Like a human patchwork quilt with too many re-stitchings, this skin was not her own, and Gordon used to take it home at night, the after-image of her grotesque form smoldering behind his eyelids like the inferno that had congealed Dormance’s cheek to her neck.

It was with arthritic slowness that Dormance lowered herself into the blue chair on the other side of Gordon’s desk, each limb placed onto the plastic as if her brittle bones might snap from the barest pressure. She didn’t speak; she never did. Instead she waited, her single eye wandering around the room as if the uncluttered walls and fake potted plants would somehow allow her to flee the conversation.

This was their routine — Dormance saying nothing as she entered, Gordon forced to take the first word. He had grown so used to this that the strangeness of not being offered even a simple hello no longer struck him, but today the silence made his body blister with feverish heat as he watched her eye dodge his prickly stare; the circumstances of this meeting were far from normal, and he hated the lack of variance in her actions.

Gordon picked up a wooden pencil resting on the surface in front of him, squeezing it between his fingers until the grooves of splintered wood made his hands ache.

“Would you like to know how the child is?” Gordon imagined each word being thrust like the point of a newly-sharpened pencil; he wanted to spit them at her, as if that might somehow shake the indifference from her face.
Dormance’s gaze peeled away from the wall like slow-moving magma – leisurely, deliberately. She rested her eye on him, her body still.

“She was outside the door when I came in,” she said.

While Gordon had grown used to looking at Dormance’s mutilated body, the sound of her voice was something that always struck him with rattling alarm. Though not particularly deep, there was power behind it in a way that Gordon found almost threatening; illogically, the forcefulness of her voice gave him the sense that she was far less fragile than people were led to believe.

Gordon gripped the pencil wood tighter, which was now slippery with a light sheen of sweat.

“Do you honestly believe,” he began, voice pricking with needle-like severity, “that I am referring to Ignes?” Each word was filtered through clenched teeth, a cage to keep his sizzling frustration from bursting out.

“No,” Dormance admitted. “How is Pompey Florence?”

Gordon could only stare, his outrage outweighing all other emotion. She was playing with him – he could tell, but he could only imagine as to why. He didn’t want to think about it. The image of Dormance hiding a sickening smile behind her toneless expression struck Gordon abruptly, her mouth filled with hooked chimera teeth too disproportionately large to fit in the small cavity of her jaw.

Gordon took a short breath and closed his eyes, pushing the image from his mind.

“I don’t even know what to say, Dormance.” As if his intention were to puncture wood, Gordon shoved the eraser-end of the pencil into his desk as heat flooded his body.

“Your daughter tried to burn Pompey alive.”

Dormance’s eye shifted toward the clock as the muted tick of the second hand amplified the silence that fell between them.

“You said that over the phone,” she said, as if hearing the statement repeated was a waste of her time.

Gordon rubbed his hand over his face and took a breath, looking at the accusing box of matches sitting just a few feet away. “Yes. I did. And Ignes is extremely lucky that he wasn’t injured too badly.” He curled his fingers in an attempt to retain his polite tone.

“Where would she have found matches in the first place?”

Dormance crinkled her nose, creasing the skin that was not her own. “Where does any child find matches?”
She asked it as if it were rhetorical, as if children bringing matches to school to burn their classmates was behavior that happened every other week. Gordon shifted his eyes toward the ceiling.

“I don’t know, Dormance,” he said through a deep exhale. “I don’t know, because most children her age – when they find matches – they know to leave them alone.”

_And Ignes, of all people, should be the first person to understand the importance of fire safety_, Gordon was tempted to add, but he would not allow his mask of politeness to be dissolved so thoroughly. His desire to retain a pleasant demeanor also stopped him from bringing up that he was quite sure Ignes had known exactly what she was trying to do to Pompey Florence when she set him ablaze.

“I doubt she was trying to hurt anybody,” Dormance said. “She’s only a child.”

Gordon could almost smell the bullshit in her tone. They both knew what Ignes was like; Dormance’s most recent meeting with Gordon had been just the week prior, and it had involved an argument about whether Ignes had murdered a rabbit or if it was already dead when she found it. Gordon had felt strongly that it was the former, but in the end he had let Ignes off with just a few days of detention and a warning. His colleagues always looked at him with disapproval when he chose not to go easy on Dormance, so it was for the sake of reputation that Ignes was often allowed to leave unpunished. Gordon would never dare to say that Dormance did not give off the impression of a woman who needed any pity; on the contrary, their meetings would often end with him feeling like he was a toy being played with.

Gordon cleared his throat. “People can be bullies at any age. Children come into my office every day because they’ve intentionally hurt others,” he said. “Your daughter is perfectly capable of it.”

“My daughter is not a bully.”

There was a clipped, dangerous edge to Dormance’s voice, a kind of predatory stillness that clattered against his ribcage. It was when Dormance used this tone that Gordon could not look at her and see the helpless victim of a serial arsonist’s attempted murder; it was this tone that reminded him of Ignes, mocking and wicked. Every nerve ending in Gordon’s body shrieked not to be alone in the room with her.

Gordon pressed his hand to his forehead, exhaustion beginning to creep up and gnaw at his mind. “Then what is she?”

Dormance made a slight gesture towards the door where Ignes sat with the resource officer outside. “Have you asked her?”
Gordon crinkled his brow. “I’m not going to ask a kid whether they think they’re a bully. Their actions speak for themselves.”

Gordon chose not to mention that he enjoyed talking to Ignes as much as he enjoyed children vomiting in his hallway. Her strangeness went beyond what was ordinary for other kids who struggled to fit in; she didn’t care to speak much to others, just as they didn’t care much to speak to her. In the barest of terms, Ignes creeped people out.

Dormance’s breath was audible as she slowly slid one arm across the other. “Then I guess you won’t know why she did it,” Dormance said.

“Do you know why?”

“No.”

The mutual glare between them sizzled like fireworks ready to burst, the static buildup before a lightning strike holding them captive. It only took a few moments for Gordon to realize that Dormance wouldn’t be satisfied until he gave Ignes a chance to explain herself, so finally he relented. Dropping both hands down onto his desk in defeat, he said, “Fine, let’s bring her in then.”

The tension in the room did not seem to ease; rather, the exhale of held breath made the sound of a too-tight violin cord getting plucked – a brief release before springing back to its original position.

Dormance’s eye followed Gordon as he moved the matches from the top of his desk to the compartment where his cigarettes were held. He felt it was safer to keep them out of Ignes’ sight, despite his supervision. Standing, he went and opened the door to retrieve Ignes.

Ignes Madsen sat on the hallway bench with the resource officer as she’d been doing for the past two hours. Her dangling legs were too short to touch the ground, and she swung them back and forth restlessly as the officer rested his chin in his hand. Any fourth-grader would have trouble with sitting still for so long, and the resource officer had the narrowed eyes of a man who wanted nothing but to go home. Gordon understood the feeling.

“Come in, Ignes,” Gordon said, making a gesture as if waving her into his office. “Your mother and I want to speak to you.”

Ignes looked at him with a playful smile, her upper lip pulled back so her teeth were visible. “FWOOSH!” Throwing her arms up as if imitating the flames of a large bonfire, she burst into a fit of childish giggles, clutching at her sides like she was being tickled by an invisible hand. Gordon took an instinctive step back as his stomach clenched around itself, blinking at her in an attempt to focus his vision. Her wild laughter stopped almost as soon as it began and her eyes settled on him with intense focus. “Just kidding,” she said.
The resource officer simply closed his eyes and gave a small sigh, as though these antics were not new behavior. Gordon didn’t feel like there was enough air in his chest when he heard himself say, “Don’t do that, Ignes.” His voice was foreign, hollow, not his own.

Ignes hopped down from the bench and rolled her eyes. “I said I was kidding.” She bounded into his office.

By all outward appearances, Ignes seemed to be the exact opposite of her mother—rampant with a wild energy that seemed to surge through her body, driving her speech and what he assumed to be her morbid curiosities. It was only after he’d seen Dormance and Ignes interact together in the same room that Gordon identified they both seemed reminiscent of some feral thing, ravenous and ready to lunge.

Ignes whispered something in her mother’s ear as she pulled up a chair next to her; her words tugged one corner of Dormance’s mouth slightly upward, as if the pair had found amusement in some aspect of the situation. Gordon leaned back in his chair; it was now he who had a darting gaze, watching as Dormance whispered something in return that made Ignes nod.

“Ignes,” Gordon started, uncomfortable with the idea of a hushed conversation taking place right in front of him. He would be concise, get straight to the point; the Madsen’s presence in his office was nauseating. “Why did you burn Pompey?”

If the question made Ignes feel even the slightest twinge of regret, it didn’t show on her face. Instead, she merely took a brief glance at her mother and shrank ever so slightly in her chair.

“Does she have to be here?” Ignes asked, gesturing toward Dormance. Her voice was now quiet, as if filled with the genuine nervousness of any regular fourth grader; Gordon wasn’t sure why he got the inexplicable sense that she was silently mocking him.

If Dormance was bothered by her daughter’s request, she didn’t show it, absently picking at pieces of lint on her clothes.

“No,” Dormance said, her voice uninterested. “I’m fine with leaving.” She stood and looked at Gordon, as if to assert that he had no objections to her absence. Seeing no real reason not to allow Ignes to speak with him in private, Gordon gave a curt nod.

“Okay,” he said. Once the door had closed behind Dormance, Gordon turned to Ignes and pressed his hands together, trying to ignore her teasing expression and the way she stalked him with her eyes. They darted in quick, unnatural intervals, readjusting themselves to every slight movement Gordon made like a fox might watch a hen. He cleared his throat. “Your mother is gone. What was it that you couldn’t tell me while she was here?”
Ignes didn’t respond. Instead, she slid out of her chair and walked over to his desk.

“I wanted to make people be nice to him,” she whispered, leaning in as close as she could. Her breath smelled like rancid food and was hot against his ear, turning his stomach as though it was filled with worms. “Like my mum. They’re all nice to her. She says it’s because of her face.”

Ignes paused and Gordon jerked away from the contact, but she mimicked the action with all the wild reflexes of a leopard.

She eyed the drawer that contained the box of matches. Dormance was the only one who had seen where Gordon had hidden them, and there was no way for Ignes to know that they were there unless she had been told. Pressing her lips even further against Gordon’s ear, she said, “It was also really fun.”

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A good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in not out.

Virginia Woolf
ESSAY WINNERS

Rage
BY BREE HOFFMAN, SCC

Rain, Dirt, and Sky
BY LAURA MANNA, RSC

The Devil in October
BY LIESL MEADOR, GCC

Memoir
BY CASSANDRA KELLOGG, SMCC

Nowhere to be Found
BY BENJAMIN HOGBERG, MCC

Tearing Off a Vest
BY GAVIN RICCOBENE, SCC

How to Kill a Writer
BY MORGAN BUTTERS, MCC
Our home was haunted by the time He was finished with it. An upturned casket of books and picture frames. My mother had never been good at picking the men which she brought into our lives. He had surpassed even the lowest of expectations I’d had for Him when she found the drugs wrapped in plastic among the landscape blueprints in His office. Within the month, He would burn my mother’s clothes in the bathtub, cover our belongings in candle wax, bar the entrances of the house with pieces of furniture, break the windows, kick a hole through the lock on my bedroom door, and raze my world to ash like a firestorm with a name. When the police arrived, they said we were lucky we weren’t home at the time. They also asked my mother what she had done to provoke Him. No one would be able to protect us from this.

Regardless of circumstance, I believe that there are an insurmountable number of devastating thoughts and demons fighting to escape from the body and mind of any sixteen-year-old girl. But words failed me then, when I stood beside my mother at the wavering precipice where a part of us both died, where we did not know which things to grieve first.

As we left that house for the last time, I was no longer a teenager. I was a harbinger of something eternal and boundless, which had coiled in the incongruous pit of my stomach like a restless serpent. I would never forgive Him. Instead I would bathe in the fury, refusing to let it die and refusing to live in its absence. Wishing that at sixteen years old, I’d had enough courage and awareness of my own ferocity to break my knuckles against His flesh the way He had broken through the meticulous veil of our lives, which I had used to keep intruders out for so long before Him. For years after leaving Him, we were poor, and the fatigue of my mother’s working limbs clung to the damp walls and popcorn ceiling of our single bedroom apartment. I shared my mattress with dust mites and bed bugs, and in the confined corners of my room, dim light struggled through the metal bars on my window. I named the cockroaches who did not fear the single fluorescent light bulb of the kitchen, and I counted the splotches of white in the discolored tiles. For the days my mother took the car, I fought the sounds of arguing neighbors with the blaring of the television, waiting for days to bleed together as I was trapped in a room that kept getting smaller. What was meant to be a temporary home would evolve — and the four walls would gradually shrink inward, inch by inch, for three years.
It’s a strange thing to feel relieved when someone has died. Especially when you have envisioned and begged for their suffering for so long that the reality of the situation causes you to look at your own hands as though you would find them stained red; taking credit for what your mind has craved for so long. I didn’t know whether I could wish someone dead with the agonizing desire of my own rage, but I wished that I could. And I do know that I’m glad He’s dead.

After our first year in the confines of that miserable apartment, we were out to dinner with family one night when my mother’s phone rang. The phone displayed the familiar name of His adult son, and as the knot churned in my stomach, my mother excused herself. She was gone for what felt like hours, each minute ticking away in arduous lethargy, and in many ways she’s never come back from that phone call.

“Wendell’s dead.”

The words felt sticky, hard to grasp and harder yet to swallow. It had been raining, and I found her standing in one of the many obsidian puddles that had gathered near our car in the parking lot of the restaurant. She spoke the words beneath the harsh, cascading yellow lights above our heads, our faces shrouded in shadow. My mother repeated the words, convincing herself of their truth before continuing, her features murky and her voice hollow, like knocking on the door to an empty house.

“He was found in a hotel room. They say He went on a bender. They don’t know the cause of death yet. It could have been a suicide; they’re not sure yet, except . . .”

She continued speaking, but the words trailed off somehow. In that moment it didn’t matter to me how it happened, only that it did. There was a lot of blood, she said. I remember my feet taking root, snapping back into my body, tethered like an elastic noose when she had spoken those words, but still she continued.

“‘That’s not the only reason His son called.’

My mother’s voice lowered, and the shine of her eyes could very well have been the fluorescent reflection of unshed tears, but I didn’t notice. She began to ask me questions. Had He ever touched me? Made me do something I didn’t want to do? Had He hurt me? She had only then discovered He had raped His younger sister as a teenager, as He had raped His daughter when she was my age. Did He do to me what He had done to them? For a moment I wished it could be that simple. I wished that every symptom of distrust was the accumulation of a single nightmare instead of a lifetime of irreparable trauma whose roots were now untraceable and lost in the past.
I cannot say what forgiveness tastes like, but I can tell you that rage swells like bile in the back of my throat – metallic, bitter and corrosive. And even though my mother’s guilt-ridden tears were not mine to endure, she grieves anyways in stunned, whispered penance: “I’m sorry, B. I’m so sorry.”

The fire in her flickered that night – crackled, and then died. The rain started up again. I imagined her tears taste like ozone. Without remorse, my thoughts went back to Him. Details about His death revealed it was accidental. He didn’t kill Himself, but He did die in pain. I carried that with me like a candle in the darkness, a torch of proof that some kind of divine justice could smite the wicked, as though I had ever believed in such a thing in the first place. And yet I could not swallow that bitter, corrosive taste, which would follow me in car rides and while reading books, in classes or in libraries. There was no one to answer for my mother’s defeat nor the way she still doubts her decisions and has sworn off letting any men close to her. Meanwhile, I was lost in dark visions of red, where I spat on His grave and extinguished His name from the mouths of others, because what else is there to take from the dead?

My mother’s guilt and shame fill each room to this day. She is plagued by close calls and potential disasters that could have happened, though for my sake she swallows it, tucking it between her ribs until she sees past me. He did not hurt me in the way she fears, I tell her. At this revelation she exhales her held breath like sweet scented anguish and my only desire is to tell her I told you so. But her shame and fragility do not extinguish late into the evening; instead they re-ignite and burn down to the wick until she is so lost in her own self-loathing that I decide to become vengeful enough for the both of us. On that day, where we walked through no man’s land, which by then only slightly resembled the skeletal bones of the house we had once shared with Him, I understood the difference between my mother and me.

Family and friends alike, who came to help us scavenge through the remains of a past life, in that rotting corpse of matted carpet and crumbling drywall, regarded the both of us in transparent pity. But I was the one who did not need it. I was devastated but I survived – if only to spite Him and all of His attempts to destroy an unshakable foundation whose bones were reinforced with steel. It has been several years since His death and I still do not know what forgiveness tastes like, and I do not know that I ever will. But I do know what it is like to rise from the ashes of ruins left by an uninvited ghost, and how to stand on broken legs until the creaking joints and rattled bones learn to knit themselves back together once more.
My rage is righteous and raw and He did not have to rape me in order to force the weight of His malice into my body. He does not deserve my forgiveness, or my mother’s, His sister’s, or His daughter’s. Forgiveness is not the answer to a yes or no question. It is not black or white, good or bad, right or wrong. Forgiveness is not a requirement of my happiness, and forgetting Him will be easier than absolving Him of the damage He’s caused and the people He’s ruined. To this day, the thought of Him makes me feel like I am sixteen and defenseless all over again. But with experience comes new perspective – one that has convinced me to let dead things stay dead.

* * *

66
Rain, Dirt, and Sky

BY LAURA MANNA, RSC

I feel blessed that I am able to recall many events in my life when I was 4 years old as if they were long distant, vivid dreams. My parents saw the opportunity to achieve the American Dream by giving me and my sister a better future when they were offered employment in a small farm town called Aguila, working in the fields where housing was provided. Some of my best memories are from my early childhood. I remember when we lived in Mexico, left on a long drive into the United States, and arrived at our new house in a small farming town in Arizona.

Before we moved to the United States, we lived in a small coral-colored duplex with brown trim in Mexico in the busy city of Mexicali, Baja California. The houses and stores were made of brick, and even without close observation, you could see cosmetic cracks along the sides of some of the buildings because of the frequency of earthquakes in the area. The earthquakes never scared me because I never noticed them. I was lucky enough to live where the roads were paved, and we had a rectangular concrete patch in front of the house, the size of a large rug, that was covered in dirt. Every time my mother would sweep it clean, it was like having a new surface to play on. When our grandparents would watch us, my grandfather would let my sister and me go to the store on the corner and buy baby food (banana flavor was our favorite snack), and on a rainy day we would play outside and collect the metallic smelling rain in the baby food jars to “save it” from being absorbed into the ground.

One day, we packed only our clothing and bedding and said goodbye to our home, our neighbors, and our relatives. My parents were nervous and excited about this new journey we were about to embark on, and their enthusiasm rubbed off on me and my older sister, who was 6 at the time. We traveled to the United States. We drove past the cities, then far beyond into a desert, where the sun was bright and the wind had shaped the sand dunes to look like the surface of a freshly opened tub of butter. After driving past the sand dunes, we continued down a long and lonely stretch of road for what seemed like days to me (even though it was only minutes) because I kept taking naps in the blankets my mom had laid out in the back of our brown van.
At that time, the dusty Highway 60 was bustling with traffic, and seeing semi-trucks was all too common. There were no windows in the back. I would remove my seat belt, stand next to my parents, and observe the trucks and moving landscapes out of the van’s large front window. I remember there was a section of road where there were many hills and dips in the road. It was like driving on a small roller coaster. At first, it was fun, but every time we went down another hill, I could feel the gravitational force weighing down my stomach and causing some uneasiness. When I grew tired of staring out the window, I would go back to sleep.

Eventually, we drove past different types of desert scenery with occasional mountains that were close or so distant that you would begin to wonder how far from civilization you were. When the mountains began to get closer, we saw a unique mountain that was shaped like an eagle’s head. The space under its head formed a small eye. That mountain, called Eagle Eye Peak, was part of the Harquahala mountain range. This range, along with the Harcuvar Mountains, formed a valley that was surrounded by creosote bushes and farming land, and in it was nestled the small town of Aguila.

We drove off the highway onto a dirt path lined with tall eucalyptus trees that took us to a community of white cabins, housing for the farm workers where my parents had just received employment. These homes were completely surrounded by fields. The landscape was beautiful to me. The earth of the farm fields was a rich brown with vibrant green lines composed of crops that seemed to touch the horizon, and on the horizon lay the dark blue mountains that contrasted against the light blue sky during daylight.

I fell in love with the place, and it felt like home because the smell of dirt reminded me of my mom’s sweeping of the concrete ground outside our old home. I was happy to be at our new home, which was bigger than the duplex we had lived in. At nighttime, I was amazed by the vastness of space and how the stars were so bright in the dark. It was majestic. When I missed my grandparents, the smell of the rain would remind me of them. To this day, the smell of dirt reminds me of my old home in Mexico, the rain reminds me of my grandparents, and long trips remind me of the first time I ever saw the vastness of the desert night sky. Even though moving from Mexico to the United States was a big change for us my memories comfort me and allow me to carry home wherever I go.

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I could smell it on his breath before he even opened his mouth.

I couldn’t help but think that I was too young to know the indicators of that smell. I was too innocent to understand its implications, but I was robbed of my childhood as surely as I knew that my father was drunk in that very moment.

Despite my youthful age of ten, I also knew that he probably shouldn’t be driving.

I also shouldn’t have been in the truck alongside him.

My older brother sat in the backseat, exchanging terrified glances with me as we watched our father take another swig of whiskey from the bottle he had protectively placed between his legs. I tensed as I observed the speedometer creep past the 70-mph notch. The Devil was surely riding with us that cold October night.

“We are our own family now,” my father slurred, black specks of tobacco spitting from his mouth and landing on the dashboard. “We ain’t got anyone anymore.”

We knew better than to question him. My cheek still stung from where he had slapped me earlier after my pitiful attempt to dispose of his treasured alcohol. The alcohol that, at some point, had become more valuable to him than his own children.

I closed my eyes, tears flowing persistently and violently landing on the seat, and prayed for someone to rescue me. I longed for my mother’s comforting arms, but my heart squeezed with the remembrance of her abandonment. Shooting a sidelong look at my pathetic excuse for a father, I could scarcely blame her for leaving.

Soft sobs sounded from the backseat. I turned my head and smiled reassuringly at my brother, reaching for his hand. Even though he was older, it was I who would always take care of him. It was my responsibility to protect him.

“Ya gotta man up,” my father snarled, glaring at my brother through the rear view mirror.

I scowled at my father in disgust, giving my brother’s hand a comforting squeeze.
I could make out our house in the distance. It grew quickly in size as the speedometer on the truck flirted with the 90-mph notch. My brother’s grip on my hand tightened painfully. I could feel my heart start to race as I silently pleaded with God to stop the truck before we crashed.

It came to a screeching halt as we tore into the driveway.

There were already a multitude of cars outside our house.

“What the fuck is this?!” My father leapt out of the truck, almost collapsing in his drunken state, and veered off towards the house like a charging bull. My brother and I sat frozen in place the cold October air biting us in the face from the open driver’s side door.

Warily, we exited the truck and made our way to the front door.

It wasn’t until we entered the house that we realized the mistake in our pursuit.

Several members of our family stood in a half circle around the dining room. From the group I recognized my aunt, my grandparents, and a few cousins that I couldn’t quite remember the names of.

But that wasn’t what caught my attention.

It was my father. He stood at the center of the group, his eyes flashing wildly from one terrified face to another.

But it wasn’t my father’s drunken state that made me stare. It wasn’t his bloodshot eyes or the reeking stench of alcohol that crept across the room and raped my nostrils. It wasn’t his disheveled appearance or the obviousness that he hadn’t seen the underside of a shower head for a couple days. These were things that I had grown accustomed to.

What had caught my attention was the red gallon jug that he had clasped in his hand. The jug’s yellow snout leered derisively at its petrified audience.

“Get out of my house, or I’ll burn this mother fucker to the ground.”

My aunt’s eyes widened in horror as she spotted my brother and me standing in the doorway. She rushed forward and placed herself in front of us, shielding us from the nightmare.

She glanced over her shoulder at us. “Get upstairs. Now. Hide.”
I clutched my brother’s hand and tugged on him, struggling to free him from his frozen state of fear. The smell of urine wafted through the air. I glanced down and observed a dark stain blossoming onto his jeans. Tears of embarrassment and horror washed his cheeks. I tugged desperately on his arm, and we rushed upstairs, running past our father before he could grab us.

I heard my father’s roar of rage followed quickly by the overpowering aroma of gasoline.

God left our house a long time ago.

The Devil was with us that night.

He was inside my father.

* * *


Memoir
BY CASSANDRA KELLOGG, SMCC

I am walking down crowded halls full of strangers and couples pressed against their lockers, eyes locked. My first day of high school and all the stereotypes I had seen in movies seem to be coming to life. Having a boyfriend never was on my radar, as all the boyfriends I had in middle school were behind my parents backs and they would’ve killed me if it was otherwise. I knew my future. Friends, sports, and school.

Football season started, and every Friday night my friends and I wear purple and gold, feeling more than ready to cheer on the mediocre football team. Number 42 catches everyone’s attention, as he is only a freshman on varsity. Even though we are not a stellar team, having a freshman on the varsity football team is a big deal. The crowd knows Tyler is something special – especially his girlfriend, Erica, who rocks his second jersey within the crowd. Not only does she support him during football season, but for all three sports he is the star of. As freshman year is coming to an end, his relationship seems to be crashing down with it. I hear rumors every day about how he had cheated on her, and how stupid she was for staying. People seem to overlook how horribly he treats her, and instead judge her for putting up with it. Even though I hear these speculations, I still fantasize about him and how things could be different if he was with me. My secret crush stays a secret, as it will get me nowhere if anyone knew I liked the most popular boy in school-I was a nobody.

My freshman year ends in one month and I could not dream of a better way to end the year. I have so many friends, my grades are solid, and Tyler told me I was beautiful. He tells me every night. I lie in my bed with the biggest smile on my face. I scream just reading the words on my phone screen. Every night I look forward to talking to him about his day, and him telling me all about what he did. He knows exactly what to say, and I get butterflies in my stomach. I lie in bed fangirling about him right before I fall asleep. He thinks I am beautiful.

Months pass by and he still has not asked me to be his girlfriend. We hang out about two times a week, and it is usually on the weekends. Since we just started hanging out more, I think he’s going to pop the question soon. When we go out it’s a double date with his friend Trevor and my friend Laura. Often we go to the movies, or out to eat as a group, but as time goes by they seem to be there less and less, and it is more one on one time with Tyler and I. We have so many common interests – and some I was willing to change just so that he would like me more. We love comedy movies and
spend a lot of time watching them. Not only am I attracted to his looks, but it is the feeling I have with him that makes him so perfect. He knows how to make me laugh and loves to admire me while doing so. He holds my hand just right, and softly drags his finger across my skin. I am mesmerized. Classmates notice we are getting serious and the drama begins. I hear little whispers about how he is talking to other girls, but I can’t let them ruin the good thing I have. Besides, they are just jealous that Tyler Stankiewicz has a crush on ME.

Summer is almost over and Tyler has broken most of the trust between us. I can’t talk myself out of seeing him, even though we still are not official. Besides, we aren’t a couple, so what he did behind my back is not my business. No one has ever understood me like Tyler has. Our conversations flow so easily, and I know I can tell him anything that is on my mind. He is my best friend. Plus, his tall, built body has me blind, and I then understand how Erica could not leave him either.

It is homecoming week of my sophomore year and Tyler is my date. After the dance ends we go back to his house and start to get ready to go to bed. It is my first sleepover with a boy, so butterflies fill my stomach with excitement. He falls asleep fast, but I cannot stop staring at this perfect human in front of me. His long eyelashes curl just right, his small, pointed nose facing me, and his blonde hairs curl slightly at the edges. I dream about him all night, before he wakes me up with his constant rolling around. His ocean blue eyes open, followed by his pouty lips ask me to be his girlfriend. All that I say is, “YES YES YES!” I love this boy. Six months of falling for him more and more every day, and I finally get to be his official girlfriend. I have the boy of my dreams!!! My insides are jumping. I cannot fall asleep for the rest of the night. I want to spend every single moment of the rest of my life staring at my dream come true. Life is only getting better from here.

Nine months in and I still fall for him more and more. I just turned 16, and so I drove us to the movie theatre in my brand new car. It is about six o’clock at night, so the orange sky begins turning darker and darker. I cannot figure out how to turn my lights on for the life of me, so I drive with them off for some of the trip while it is doable. People are flashing their lights at me, as the sky turns black, but I still can’t find where the lights are. Tyler and I do not go to the same high school anymore, so it is becoming a routine for us to check each others’ phones every time we see each other. In the heat of the moment of him being so mad at me for not knowing how to turn the lights on, as well as him thinking I am flirting with my guy friends, his big football hands punch my delicate arm. Tears accumulate in my eyes, a red, finger mark appears on my arms, and my voice begins to tremble. “You are a fucking whore Casey. All you do is talk to all these guys while I am so good to you. You’re such a cunt.” I turn my head. “How can you do this to me? I thought you loved me.” Silly me. I stay.
Our anniversary is today. We talk about being together forever. It is often a topic we often talk about, along with what kind of car we will buy, how many kids we want, and where we want to live. A whole year and a half of getting to spend almost every day with him, and he still makes me feel so excited. He still hits me but I love him enough not to leave. My body is marked with bruises as we head to the city to spend our day together. The bruises are not visible to me anymore, but other people constantly ask what happened. I make some story up. He sits next to me on the train and places his hand on my thigh. I still feel butterflies – that is how I know I still love him. People in the city praise us. “You guys are such a cute couple!” I can’t help to think. If only they knew. I let that thought escape my mind. This is our love. His arms wrap around me as he holds me in close for a hug. I feel warm and cared for and like nothing else in the world matters. His parents and friends constantly telling us to break up is overshadowed by moments like these. They only see the bad times, but if only they knew we really loved each other. If they were able to understand how we feel when we are together their annoying comments would fall to silence.

I hate to acknowledge it, but when I get hit and every time that I get called a bitch and a whore, my self-esteem rapidly turns into nothing and anxiety runs through my body. I do not remember the last time that I truly felt happy and free. He is all I think about. He is the love of my life. We are going to college together, and I know that once we start going to the same school, our trust will be back. Sadly, I emotionally do not feel I can last that much longer. Suicide runs across my mind. When we fight I cannot help to think to just end my life. The fighting will stop, the hell I go through with my parents will be over, and I can finally stop feeling. I do not see a point to life anymore. The devil constantly tries convincing me to end the pain. Tyler tells me to kill myself every other day. I lost a lot of friends. I barely eat anything, and my clothes stop fitting me. I run away from home thinking I will find a better life if I run away from the one I have created. I block my parents’ numbers on my phone so that I do not receive their phone calls. Tyler calls me multiple times trying to find me, as it has been a whole day of my parents not knowing where I am staying. The police are at Tyler’s house, and they are looking for me. My parents have filed a missing child’s report and Tyler’s parents are furious that he is involved in this mess. He wants nothing to do with me anymore. He tells me he can’t talk to me, but I beg for him. I beg for him to love me again and make me feel like how he used to. It hits me and I know he is going to leave. I want to kill myself. I do not want to live a life without Tyler. I go home since there is nowhere for me to turn. My mom opens the door trembling with tears in her eyes. Her voice shaky and scared, “Casey I was worried sick about you I could not sleep without knowing where you were.” I tell her everything. My mom knew I was suicidal, but in this moment she knew something had to be done. I am (finally) taken to mental
hospital much later than I should have. They have me sitting in a room much like a jail cell. There are no windows, and I keep shaking myself to sleep trying to escape this nightmare my life has become. Everything is taken from me. My phone, clothes, bra, shoelaces – my dignity. I call Tyler every day, but he stops being there for me. My one phone call a day is wasted on a boy I am so hopelessly in love with, as he hangs up every single time I call. He tells me we are going to work things out, but mentions to me how hard it is going to be since no one wants us together anymore. The thought of Tyler leaving makes my ears ring and makes my mind blur, and the girls surrounding me do not make me feel any better. Ten huge foster black girls, and one white wanna-be black girl, surround me. I room with a girl with heavy signs of anger management, and I very uncomfortably lie in bed hoping nothing happens to me as my mind dozes off. She will not stop screaming, making it even harder for me to fall asleep. Nurses come into the room and inject her buttock with a needle full of medicine, making her knock out. They do it often, and thank god it works. I am in the hospital for seven days. Seven days of tossing and turning myself to sleep, not having a phone, horrible food, 50 counseling appointments, 300 gallons of tears shed, and family visits. Counselors tell me Tyler is making me crazy, but they really do not know that when he looks in my eyes I feel more sane than ever. When he tells me that he won't ever hurt me again, I believe him, and my doctors should too. The psychologists that talk to me tell me I suffer from major depression and anxiety. They hand me these pills like it is going to help. In the past depression pills only made me gain 15 pounds and had me crying every day. I just take the pills, so they let me leave this hell hole sooner.

I am finally released at 8:09 a.m. My parents pull the car up to the door, and I hold my phone so close to my body. I sigh deeply and squeal knowing I can see the love of my life in a short six hours. I unlock my phone to hundreds of messages of girls from the swim team telling me how much they love and miss me. They want what they think is best for me, but they do not understand that for me that is Tyler. He is the only one that makes falling asleep easy. The only one that knows the exact words to say that make me smile. The one who has been in my life these past two and a half years. No one can replace what I have with him. As I scroll I go straight to looking for Tyler's text. My head is spinning, vomit pushing to the top of my throat. My phone reads a message from 6:03 a.m., “Casey I love you with all of my heart, but we can't do this anymore.” I scream, I cry, I panic. My parents do not know what to do. My dad seems furious calling him a coward, and my mom is too nervous to say a word not knowing whether I will attack her for anything negative that she says about him. The ride home is hell. Tyler will not text me back telling me that he takes it back, and every stupid song on the radio talks about love and I want it off. Every single part of me just wants to die.
My wishes have to be postponed as I have the most important swim meet of the whole season after three more practices, and I need to get back in the pool. My 50-yard butterfly time is a whole four seconds slower than what it was before I was admitted into the hospital. My body doesn’t feel like living, and much less does it feel like swimming. Too much is on my mind, and after that long practice I finally got to go home. Fifteen girls hug me and tell me how much they love me. Fifteen girls worry about me and want to be there for me.

A whole year has passed, and I only got here thanks to the help of my friends and family. I have not seen Tyler in months and can proudly say that I do not feel the need to ever see him again. My mind is healthy and my self-esteem is slowly being worked on. Depression medications are no longer a part of my life, as I turn to loved ones if I ever have dark thoughts that occasionally linger. I plan on focusing on school and do not want to have a boyfriend for a long time. Tyler made three years of my life hell, but it has shaped me into the person I am today. I learned the hard way, but this toxic relationship showed me what signs I should pay attention to and to know when to run away from one. I am in control of my life now, and no one will bring me down.

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Nowhere to be Found
BY BENJAMIN HOGBERG, MCC

In July your heart breaks in two. After burying half of it at home, you quit your job and board a train from Flagstaff to Los Angeles carrying what remains of it. There are no months of planning, itineraries, or well-packed bags. It was a fever-dream decision you made over the weekend, an attempt to cast off the shackles of responsibility and steer your life off the beaten path. The chair next to yours is occupied by a fat Frenchman who does not stop talking, his bulbous arms spilling into your seat whenever he stops waving them around. He’s running away from family trouble back home.

“And that’s why I’m here, but how about you?” he says.

You say something about adventure, about finding yourself. When the words come out you realize how flimsy they are. The Frenchman laughs distinctly at you, not with you.

“It’s not about finding yourself.” He says. “It’s about making yourself.”

You are not having a good time, his body spills into half your seat and the train doesn’t stop shaking. The lights stay on when the sun goes down so you cannot see the stars. The Observation Car seems like a better place to sleep. It is a maze of cafeteria-style tables and uncomfortable benches and small patches of empty carpet, but most of them are taken by other sleeping passengers. You find a small clearing and curl up, using your nearly empty backpack as a pillow. You don’t fall asleep until four in the morning.

At six a.m. you wake, the train is pulling in to Union Station in Los Angeles. When you disembark you realize that your phone is dead. The station is a labyrinth of vaulted ceilings and shiny floors. A wave of busy people in suits crashes into you from your left against the beach of panhandlers in kelpish rags to your right. The floor of the bathroom is wet and your shoes stick with each step. It smells like a kennel.

Stepping out, the city overwhelms you. Everyone tries their hardest to look mean. You made whimsical plans to live like a vagrant, to carve a niche of a life bereft of utility bills and expectations. ‘L.A. doesn’t seem like the right town for that.’ You think, in light of the city’s distinct abrasive tone. You walk until you find a coffee shop and buy a drink so you can charge your phone. You are the only one here and the barista makes small talk.

“My friend owns a hostel in Hollywood.” She says. It’s easy to let someone else make decisions for you. You get the number and call to reserve a room for forty dollars.
When your phone is charged you look up directions and start walking. It smells like urine and ripe dumpsters but there’s something beautiful in the filth. Shouts and car horns echo off tall buildings around you.

You arrive two hours later, soaked in sweat. The room is empty so you shower, dress yourself, and sit in the empty. Two men enter and start speaking at you in German. You respond in English. They continue speaking and you laugh and smile and focus on the parking lot beyond the window. The sun really is gold in California.

The Germans leave. The floor is classic checkerboard linoleum, the walls are red and the ceiling is yellow. Quaint is the word that comes to mind. You imagine yourself living in a room like this and then decide to take a walk. The Germans are sitting cross-legged outside the door and they exclaim when you exit. One of them passes you a joint and cheers when you smoke. It hits you on your way down the stairs and into the courtyard that you were on your couch wondering what to do this weekend yesterday. You don’t know why you are here or if you are enjoying it.

The neighborhood is laced across hills and brimming with old houses. Trees reach high into the air and then for each other covering most of the street. You walk past a church hosting a weekly supper for the homeless and consider attending, but you don’t feel homeless enough. You have been walking all day, so you get tired quickly and return to your room. An old friend texts you, he lives in Portland now and invites you to come stay in a spare bedroom. Saving money sounds nice and L.A. is not the right scene for you, so you call and reserve your ticket for the morning.

It takes two hours to walk to Union Station after you awaken. This is harder than expected. The girl next to you introduces herself as Camille. She’s on the opposite end of your journey, returning to the life she slipped away from five years ago when she took her own leap of faith into the unknown. She shows you her copy of *The Alchemist* when she sees yours.

“It inspired my trip, too.” She says. You nod, not having the heart to tell her you picked it up along the way. She smiles incessantly and hums in your ear about what the last five years have taught her. You appreciate the advice, but you’re here to learn for yourself.

The train carves a path through mountaintops and over deep ravines stuffed with pines drinking from lazy trickling streams. The passengers all rush to one side when the windows open up to a valley too large to comprehend. Clouds hang below the tracks and you can see rays of the sun beating down on their tops, their shadows lording over great swaths of trees. A forest climbs the opposite mountain, never quite finding its way to the top, and the way the morning sun crests the mountain peak is so striking it should be a production company logo. Your mind floods with dreams of hiking.
through the pines below. Seconds later, everything goes black. The train enters a tunnel and the valley is lost forever.

You arrive in Portland but your friend does not answer. Portland breathes mountains and cries clouds. The streets are crowded with trees. You follow the banks of the Willamette instead, its calm waters reflecting the overcast abyss above. Your phone rings.

“My wife is in labor.” Your friend says. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to find somewhere else to stay tonight.”

You would feel like a fourth wheel if you visited your friend tomorrow, so you book tickets to Seattle in the morning. After that comes more aimless walking, long after the sun cozies up with the horizon. You turn your phone off at two a.m. and sleep on a park bench that night, with no blanket. The clothes on your back are the same as they were the day you left. Vagrancy turns out to not be what you hoped for.

You wake up a few hours later. The sun is rising and your train is at six a.m., so you walk back to the station. It’s easy to fall asleep on the trip to Seattle and so you do, but it only lasts an hour.

Seattle is new to you, and the sky is gray, and you feel gray. You walk around the city but get lost and stop to ask some kids for directions. They offer you a cigarette and you sit next to them on the sidewalk, blowing your own clouds at the ones in the sky. They talk to each other and barely acknowledge your presence. When you stand up to leave they tell you they are homeless and ask if you have any change to spare. You do not. One of them tells you to have a nice day.

“You too.” You say. He scowls and spits.

“Ain’t no fuckin’ nice days.”

You find another coffee shop and buy a drink while you charge your phone. The interior is all rustic wood but the walls are adorned with modern art. You spend most of your tired afternoon there. A cute girl takes a seat at the table next to yours, she has dreadlocks and piercings and tattoos and it works very well for her. You tell her you’re not from around here and ask what there is to do in Seattle. She invites you to an album release party for a local rapper she likes. You get out of your comfort zone and agree.

You enter a club for the first time in your life. The music is too loud so you can’t tell if it’s any good. It reeks of weed and cologne. You lose track of the girl and start drinking at the bar, and stop counting after the fourth shot. Things get hazy and you probably dance, then you run in to the girl again. You get dragged by the arm, the walls are spinning and you do not know where you are anymore. You find yourself in the VIP room sitting in a booth next to the man of the hour, he laughs at something you say
and you wonder how he heard it. He dedicates a bottle of champagne to you. This is not your scene but you keep drinking in the hope of finding yourself in a bottle.

You wake up hung over on a bench outside the train station with a ticket to Montana in your wallet. You have little memory of the night before. Your rotten stomach twists when you stand, the train will be here in an hour. You’re glad you are where you are, even if the only thing it is teaching you is that you were perfectly fine where you were before. The ride to Montana takes eighteen hours and you sleep through the entirety.

It’s early morning when the train arrives at West Glacier. Tree-coated hills give way to snow-capped mountains that look photoshopped. Everything is so far away that you could never reach it on foot.

You buy a turkey sandwich at a cafe, the bread is stale but the scenery makes it exquisite. You don’t know what day it is. You walk through the woods and beside the river, between deep green pines. The silence is eerie, distant shouts and bird calls are faint whispers. Your thoughts feel petty and unimportant. You walk for a long time. ‘This is probably the first time in my life I have ever been really, deeply, truly alone.’ You think. It’s not as profound as you expected. You try again, saying the words out loud. Nothing changes. It’s been less than a week since you were sitting on your couch wondering what came next, and now here you are, peeing in the forest. You wonder if it means anything, if it changed you into who you are supposed to be. You still feel the same as you always have. Forgetting about finding yourself, you remember where you left yourself. You turn around and walk back to the train station.

You line up a trip back to Seattle that evening, and then you use your credit card to buy a plane ticket home. You can pay it off when you find a job. It is immensely difficult to break up with a place like this. You remember the Frenchman from your first night on the train.

“ It’s not about finding yourself.” He said. “It’s about making yourself.”

Finding yourself did not pan out, but making yourself sounds achievable. You fly home and take a shower. You lie in bed and regret not walking to the mountains. You do not regret going as far as you did. Your heart breaks again as you realize that you are nothing profound, that you are not the protagonist and your life is not a novel. You dwell on your failure for several months, but in time it feels like less of a failure. Your life goes on to take strange twists and turns, but now you know that its tragedies were not written for you.
There are undoubtedly many people who had rough, dirty, and downright scarring childhoods, but at least most of these people had a relatively normal journey through the twisted bowels of the countless classes and courses they've had to take in order to have a successful education. My own fantastic voyage into the great depths of education was a much more critical undertaking than it had any right to be, as I had been an outcast to the educational department for many years. Spanning an eternal time period between the baby steps of first grade, all the way to the ultimate challenge of graduating as a high school senior, roughly half of that era was spent in various “special education” programs; now that I look back at it, I can understand why the common people called the programs “special” in the first place. As I was born and diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, which is one of the many levels of the Autism Spectrum, I truly was a special child in a sense; not in the sense that I’m a child with remarkable and flashy superpowers, but rather in the sense that I belonged with mentally handicapped children who were more-or-less like me. I went through all of the hardships, responsibilities and frustrations which a child of that caliber likely had to endure, and yet here I am, a perfectly independent and capable student out in the equally independent world of college. It’s a common occurrence for me to look back at my bothersome past and ask myself, “How did this happen? How did I manage to extricate myself from such a mess?” If I had to give myself a detailed and truthful answer, by being abnormally stubborn and mindless of special education’s nature at first, I was eventually able to discover a realization of my true colors, and thus I underwent a significant effort to better myself and catch up with the rest of the world and its ways.

By being so brainless and hotheaded initially, the first chapter of my educational saga was one of the toughest components to deal with. At the beginning of it all, in the very first grade of elementary school, I was attending dull, uneventful classes, which were handled in a typical and professionally organized matter. The teachers would hand out worksheets for students to complete like a flock of sheep with a shared hivemind. Despite the obviousness of the classwork, however, I had already set the roots for my downfall, as I had a rubberband-like temper that could snap at any inopportune moment. The teachers and staff who tried to help me, justifiably angry over my own bouts of rage, would physically restrain me with a soft, fuzzy but incredibly tight vest; that vest was all it took for them to reduce me to a state of sobbing, before I could...
regain my more positive attitude. What seemed to be the lead cause of these red-hot fits of mine was to fail at any task, which ended up being the precise reason for my eventual detour into the highway exit that was special education. I struggled furiously, and eventually cried in despair, to write down any new word which seemed daunting to me. If I had a poor day at school, I would write in bold and capitalized letters. Between the conflict of my stubborn nature and the school’s staff, a seemingly innocent spelling game dubbed “Sparkle” was the peak of it. When asked to spell a word one letter at a time, the other students managed to spell the assigned phrase with precision, but when it was my turn to prove my destiny, I had mistakenly chosen the wrong letter. When my instructor corrected me with the proper symbol, a simple apostrophe, my fear of failure took me in like a ghost taking possession of its next prey. The ghost looked over at a girl by my side, and it swiftly told me about her fate. In what felt like an instinctual reaction of some animal, my body ended up losing freedom of control and swinging its arm towards the girl, resulting in a hard smack that broke the back of the camel that was the school’s administration. Sometime after the event, my parents got a phone call back from the school; “Your son, Gavin, is too uncontrollable and a clear threat to ourselves and our students. We urge you to bring him to a special education program, where he can fit with other students like him.” To my parents’ dismay, and to my own confusion, the school district itself had kicked me out of its paradise and sent me flying towards a kind of ironic hell that would remain with me for the coming years.

These years, to put it lightly, were an experience beyond the comprehension and respect of any grown-up student. Instead of trekking from one class to the next, I was confined to a single, cubical room for every day of the week, and for every week of the four years I was convicted. This room was rather small, and occupying it was a variety of people; some were teachers who would act as Big Brothers monitoring everyone’s day, and others were students who more-or-less shared my conditions. Some students were capable of expressing their thoughts with words, but others only made animalistic noises to communicate. Some students were energetic and playful, while others lacked so much emotion that they seemed vegetative. All of these students showed the same issues that I demonstrated back at first grade, which was the lack of ability to control themselves. Sometimes, my classmates would ignite themselves in flames full of unexplained fury, which would occasionally spread out to anyone standing in their path. I was just as much of a victim to this flame as the others, sometimes randomly growing enraged and having my ghost try to lay the smack down on whatever seemed to cause my distress. With all of the uncontrollable rage that emanated from me and others, most of my days in prison were chaotic sights, as the Big Brothers watching over us were frustrated with trying to keep the group stable. Nothing about the experience, however, batted an eye for me; I thought it was normal to be in a single room, all day
and every day, with students who spontaneously went berserk. I thought there was nothing wrong with being unable to visit any of the other classrooms. I stayed at that tiny room, from second grade all the way through fifth grade, because I was too brainless to consider the alternative. I was seeping away at my potential for life without realizing it at first; that would all change with the coming of sixth grade.

Having transitioned from the prison cell that was elementary school to the prison camp that was middle school, I had more freedom on my end, but I was still not entirely unleashed. With the cessation of having to be in only one classroom for the whole day, my once dominant temper had withered away behind time, but that aspect of me was traded in for a sense of mischievousness. For one prime example, I decided to place a bloody wad of my nose mucus onto a wall nearby the staircase, which was my own equivalent of a student’s work from art class being hung up on a hallway. This unethical behavior of mine resulted in special education having the same grip on me as the vest from first grade; I was not only stuck in a “speech” class, but an assistant was assigned to watch over me, much like the Big Brothers. This remained until seventh grade, where one car ride home inadvertently leaked some insight. As my twin brother attended the same school with me, he talked with our mother during the car ride about the “getting to know you” project that many classes had nowadays, and he had told her about a classmate who introduced herself by saying, “I have Autism.” As I never heard about that term before, I talked with my parents when I got back home about the mysterious word dubbed “autism” and whether or not I had it myself. It was then that my father decided to reveal that I and my brother had a variation of Autism known as Asperger’s syndrome. As I learned about the symptoms of the disorder, I came to a realization of my true ways; that the path I was taking through education wouldn’t get me anywhere. Armed with this new information, I approached my mother with the question that would free me from the bonds of the vest that the school had cast onto me; “Mom, do I really need special education anymore?” The answer to that question would unravel itself from the beginning of eighth grade and beyond, where I started to take a turn for good.

The fruit of my emergence fell into my hands at a fast pace. After a meeting with all of the staff who had kept me under chains for so long, we came to an agreement by eighth grade, which was the last year of middle school. Due to the agreement, not only did I lack any form of modified class, which let me live an educational life just like the other students, but I finally was able to do my daily classwork without the need for an assistant. For once in my life, I was working on the assignments the school spoon-fed me, with no obstructions in the cavernous mouth that belonged to my brain. This, along with the gradual elimination of my temper and bad habits, carried over to the high school years, where I was again without any assistants or modified courses. It was these four grades,
from the mere freshman to the responsible senior, which caused the most of my pupation from a caterpillar to a butterfly. I was learning important concepts like biology and physical health, and I was not afraid to seek out a counselor or tutor to give me any support. With all of this and more being fed to my brain, I recognized the reality of not only what it’s like to be a normal student attending class, but also what it’s like to be a human at the fullest potential. It got to the point where other students would sometimes greet me and open up some small talk, but I wasn’t able to make a long-term friend out of it. With the effort I had put into given assignments, I could see my grades skyrocketing; what used to be Cs or Ds became Bs or As as I pushed through the years. Quite a few of my teachers were impressed with my work, especially my senior English teacher. The sense of pride the teachers had for my work filled me with a sort of glee that I never experienced in special education, and that kind of emotion gave me stronger motivation to do the best I could on my work. As I bettered myself over the years, the time came for graduation, which marked the end of the road for education. As I walked up to the ceremony stage, more satisfied with myself than I had ever been, I grabbed a piece of paper that had been the ultimate physical prize all along. With that diploma came hardly any cheers from the audience, except for my older brother, but that didn’t matter to me; what mattered, in the end, was that I discovered the purpose of my past, ripped off the vest that was applied to me ever since first grade, overcame my violent nature, rid myself of the common traits of the mentally handicapped, and saw the resolution of How to Succeed in Education: The Book through the eyes of a relatively normal student.

★★★★
ESSAY – HONORABLE MENTION

How to Kill a Writer
BY MORGAN BUTTERS, MCC

It is truly a worrisome thing to look at our world and see such an abundance of aspiring writers around us. Whilst necessary, working-class jobs lay vacant, in need of willing hands to fill them, these dreamers instead waste their lives striving to write something worth reading – an impossible task, because, as we all know, everything worth reading has already been written. It is neither an easy, nor a pleasant task, to kill a writer. Extermination of this kind is most efficient when the mind is young, frightened, and flexible, but with patience and persistence, even the most seasoned writer can be eradicated effectively.

Fortunately, most writers are on the verge of suicide as it is. To write is to be vulnerable, naked, and exposed to the ridicule of millions, and therefore authors are, by nature, a fragile breed of people. They need only a voice of reason to help them take that last step off the edge. Mentor-assisted suicide is the leading cause of death in writers across the globe. Where one mentor does not suffice, the stronger force of the community can easily be substituted – a point that we will discuss in further detail shortly. Death may be a long and painful process for your writer, but do not be discouraged . . . only think of the good you will be doing for them and for the world, when you liberate your writer from the detrimental delusion of pending success!

Killing a writer is a four-step process, the first of which is torture. Torture is an essential step, and is best initiated when the scheme of writing first burrows into a young mind. As the first mention of writing for a living is brought to your attention, it is crucial to respond with nothing more than a polite stare and smile, which is best followed by the mention of a successful relative who holds a steady job. Every mention of writing must always be countered with the mention of a more practical, stable profession. Torture can also be inflicted by kindly advising them to have a back-up plan, should their writing fail them. You know very well that it will fail them in time, but there is no need at this step of the annihilation process to mention this. Back-up plans are the best way to plant seeds of doubt in your writer, without seeming, at first, to be their enemy. In the meantime, continue to allow the media to portray writers as drunk, homeless recluses who die in lonely disgrace, their life’s work still unfinished.
The second step should begin shortly after the first. Starvation is yet another form of torture, after all, and can be implemented as soon as you see the opportunity. Starve your writer of books and beautiful words that could potentially tempt them to bear their soul to the world. Starve them of inspirational words and encouragement, and, at all costs, do not tell them to “follow their dream” or “listen to their heart.” Starve them of an audience that will take the time to listen and make the effort to understand. Starve them of honest feedback that could potentially strengthen their writing skills. Above all, take care to starve them of the opportunity to profit from writing. Tragically, writers who receive adequate compensation for their work hardly ever look back.

Poison is the next phase of our literary homicide. By now, your writer should begin to feel hesitant of their ability to subsist as an author in this modern world, and should be so long deprived of quality prose that they no longer remember what it feels like to have a piece of art resonate with them. Now you must become more vocal, more outspoken about your lethal intentions. Do not be alarmed or afraid of resistance now. At this stage, nearly all writers are weary from struggling, and ready to listen to well-intended guidance. In choosing your toxin, may I advise that there is no poison as potent as reality. Remind your starving writer that all probabilities point to them failing miserably at their desired profession. Remind them that writing caused Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf to end their lives, and that Edgar Allan Poe died in disgrace and was buried in an unmarked grave after a life as depressing as any of his poems. . . and that despite the romantic novels Jane Austen wrote, she died alone, with no lover by her side. Poison them against any creative venture by reminding them of the necessity of a steady income. Poison your writer with the likelihood of bankruptcy, failure, and poverty, and, with any luck, the last step may not be necessary at all.

Picture this happy sight – your writer is tortured, starved, poisoned, and on the brink of surrender. Now, we must drown the writer, hammering the last nail into their literary coffin. Drown your writer in the impossible expectations of monetary success that the media has created for them. Drown your writer in busy work, bill paying, burger flipping. . . anything that will keep them too busy to pick up a novel or crack open a notebook will suffice. Drown them in mindless social media, YouTube videos, and trashy movies. If all else fails, drown them in silence, shut them out entirely, and when, in despair, they take their own literary life (as they no doubt will, without support, feedback, inspiration, or encouragement), when they give up, when they “go gentle into that good night” of submission, of mind-numbing, practical, mechanical living, then, and only then, run to them. Tell them at last how proud you are of them. Flood them with happy thoughts of the prosperity they will enjoy, the job security they will possess, and the boon to society they will now be. Your happiness will act as the glue that will seal their fate, for if they ever thought of turning back to their art, they must face your open, tragic disappointment in them.
My friends, by freeing your loved ones from the shackles of creative writing, you are doing this world a great service. I was once one of them, and when I felt myself standing on that ledge, a whisper away from death, how I railed against those that would throw me over! How I “raged against the dying of the light,” as Dylan Thomas had... how I mourned that “life had killed the dream I dreamed,” as Schönberg so eloquently put it. But when you face these protests, remember, if you can, that the world needs more doctors, plumbers, lawyers, and barbers, but the one thing that we simply do not need more of, is more writers. After all, what more can be said that has not already been said? In our fast-paced, technological world, writers are a dying breed, and their extinction can be helped along by well-meaning mentors with the bravery to tell them the truth they need to hear.

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For me, playwriting is and has always been like making a chair. Your concerns are balance, form, timing, lights, space, music. If you don’t have these essentials, you might as well be writing a theoretical essay, not a play.

Sam Shepard
ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT WINNERS

A Glitch in the Turing Test
BY ADAM CADENA, SCC

What's in a Name?
BY JAIME ROBINSON, MCC

Hell for the Company
BY ROBIN HARTWELL, SCC

Poor William, Poor Doug
BY ALEX OZERS, PC
ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT – FIRST PLACE

A Glitch in the Turing Test
BY ADAM CADENA, SCC

ACT I, Scene 1
Dr. Smith enters a robotics laboratory in slight disarray carrying a clipboard and sipping a cup of coffee. Seated in a chair, staring blankly, is the humanoid robot ANDI.

DR. SMITH: ‘morning ANDI. How’d you sleep?

ANDI: The Autonomous Numerating Database of Inhabitants is charged via a nano-string solar array woven meticulously to be indistinguishable from normal human hair. It requires no sleep and can . . .

DR. SMITH: Hold . . .

ANDI abruptly stops speaking and remains in its rigid posture. Dr Smith walks around ANDI jotting down specs from invisible gauges hidden in the creases of its elbows and behind its ear.

DR. SMITH: That’s what they got you guys saying in the new demo? I guess they didn’t want y’all walkin around telling the brass that your personality protocol is only 67% complete . . . or that you damn sure won’t be up and running in four months.

(To ANDI) Let’s see where you are . . . Run “AmiableAndi.EXE”

ANDI morphs into warm and personable, however it tries a little too hard to keep eye contact.

ANDI: Good morning, Doc!

DR. SMITH: ’morning Andi, How’d you sleep?

ANDI: Oh, Doc, I don’t need sleep, I’ve got these neat little solar nano strings for my hair. They charge my batteries when I’m walking aro . . .

DR. SMITH: . . . What the . . . I thought . . .

(To ANDI) Hold

(goes through clipboard sheets looking for answers) Why the hell did Rhetoric and Charisma sign off if they . . . ANDI state sarcasm algorithm completion date.
ANDI: Sarcasm algorithm completed on April 15. Sarcasm protocol successfully tested on July 24.

*Dr. Smith still struggles to figure out what the issue is.*

ANDI: This unit would like to make a suggestion.

DR. SMITH: OK.

ANDI: This unit recommends Dr. Smith activates feature “Read Sarcastic Intent.”

DR. SMITH: Turn on “Read Sarcastic Intent.”

*ANDI twitches a bit.*

DR. SMITH: *(exasperated)* ’Morning Andi. How’d you sleep?

ANDI: Like a baby, doc

*Doc is finally pleased.*

DR. SMITH: Great to have you back ANDI. Let’s start with some word association.

ANDI: I would love to.

DR. SMITH: Dog. ANDI: *(frowns)* . . . suffering.

ANDI: *(smiles)* . . . furry. DR. SMITH: Channing Tatum

DR. SMITH: Pain. ANDI: *(Swoons)* . . . dreamy.

DR. SMITH: Good . . . Good . . . All right ANDI time to get to work. Minimize “AmiableAndi.exe.” Run “Dailygrind.exe” in simulation mode.

*ANDI stands and retrieves a clipboard.*

ANDI: State desired entry.

*Dr. Smith walks opposite ANDI and points to a spot on the floor between them. ANDI stomp-knocks three times.*

DR. SMITH: Who is it?

ANDI: *(courteously)* Good afternoon, Sir or Ma’am, My name is Andi and I am a representative of the U.S. Census Bureau. Would you mind if I had a moment of your time.
Dr. Smith pantomimes opening the invisible door and ANDI steps through.

ANDI: We appreciate your participation. This won’t take long. May I sit?

Dr. Smith nods, points to the chair ANDI had been sitting in, and takes the opposite seat.

This is wonderful. Thank you. Would you like to proceed?

DR. SMITH: Sure, that would be great.

ANDI: May I ask your full name, please?

DR. SMITH: Doctor Morgan Smith.

ANDI: And, Doctor, How many people currently live at this residence?

DR. SMITH: Just myself. *(Looking at watch)* Shoot . . . I’m kind of in a hurry . . .

ANDI: *(Robotic voice)* Activating “Not-Interested-Mode.” Pleasantries lowered to 25%. Survey Efficiency priority . . . On. *(ANDI becomes personable again)* Age and date of birth?

DR. SMITH: *(Actor appropriate)*

ANDI: Sex?

DR. SMITH: *(Actor appropriate)*

ANDI: Ra . . . Ra . . . RRRR *(ANDI’s glitch sends it rigid)* Error code 1-1-1-8-6-3

DR. SMITH: Come on . . . I don’t have . . . *(To ANDI)* Define error code 111863.

ANDI: Error code 1-1-1-8-6-3, undefined parameter.

DR. SMITH: Dammit . . . ANDI read current volume of human knowledge index.

ANDI: Human Knowledge Index currently at 1,436 petabytes. Download 91% complete.

DR. SMITH: There’s no way you’d miss . . . *(To ANDI)* Define “Race.”


DR. SMITH: What?! Retrieve and read deleted definition.

ANDI: Race . . . Noun . . . A group of persons related by common descent or heredity. Deleted in accordance with directive 4, preservation of storage space. Redundant definition of “Family.”
Concerned, Dr. Smith walks over to the lab phone, picks up the receiver, and dials a few numbers.

DR. SMITH: Smith in Personality . . . Hey, you remember that problem we were having with the Rev. 6 ANDIs? I think it’s happening again . . . Yeah, redundant definition for race . . . I thought it was fixed too . . . Do, what? . . . All right, I’ll give it a shot.

Dr. Smith hangs up the phone and walks over to ANDI. Doc simultaneously presses behind ANDI’s right ear, left temple, and its nose sending it into a restart. As ANDI begins to boot back up, Doc starts to issue commands.

DR. SMITH: Safe mode. Authorization word “kumquat.”

ANDI finishes loading and waits rigidly for the next command.

DR. SMITH: Enter learning mode.

ANDI becomes childlike.

ANDI: Oh, Hello!

DR. SMITH: Hey there, li’l buddy. Is my star pupil ready to do some learning?

ANDI: You betcha!

Dr. Smith tussles ANDI’s hair.

DR. SMITH: OK, bud. Got a new definition for you.

ANDI: OK!

DR. SMITH: Race . . . Noun . . . A group of persons related by common descent or heredity.

ANDI: But, Doc, isn’t that the same thing as a family.

DR. SMITH: No, not necessarily. It means more . . . more like . . . where your family was from.

ANDI: Oh! . . . I don’t understand.

DR. SMITH: Race pertains to where your ancestry is from. Say if your family immigrated to the United States from Mexico, than they would be Mexican.

ANDI: But, I thought if you were born here you’d be an American.
DR. SMITH: Well, yes, you would be. But that’s not race, that’s nationality. Race is a little different from that.

ANDI: Oh! . . . I don’t understand.

DR. SMITH: Shoot . . . uh . . . OK, let’s say if you’re Jewish . . .

ANDI: You are religious?

DR. SMITH: No, . . . yes but some say Jewish people are a race unto themselves.

ANDI: So . . . Doc . . . Your race is . . . Jedi?

DR. SMITH: Not . . . no . . . Race isn’t specifically religion, nationality, any one thing. It’s more like an amalgamation of culture, creed, and color with its basis in heredity.

ANDI: Race is based on genetics?

DR. SMITH: Yes! There you go.

ANDI: All humans are 99.9% identical. Further sub-categorization seems to be irrelevant.

DR. SMITH: No . . . Not . . . Race is important. For instance if you need a kidney you have to find a donor with your same ethnicity.

ANDI: Untrue. Transplant recipients must have similar genes in their immune systems to those of the donor.

DR. SMITH: Right. So if you’re African-American, you’re more likely to be a match with another African-American.

ANDI: Untrue. One is likely to be a match if their immune systems are similar.

DR. SMITH: That’s what I’m saying.

ANDI: Untrue. The Doctor is attempting to make a false correlation between genetics, assumed culture, and physical characteristics. While physical characteristics are dictated by genetics, this unit can find no credible link between genetics and intangible social constructs such as religion or culture.

DR. SMITH: Dammit! Fine. How do you explain the transplant thing?!

ANDI: Evolutionary regional adaptation.

DR. SMITH: What?
ANDI: The human immune system responds to regional flora and fauna. A 2015 Stanford study showed that environmental influences on immune systems surpassed inherited influences four to one.

Dr. Smith struggles to come up with a rebuttal then gives up. Doc makes another call.

DR. SMITH: Smith in Personality again . . . We’ve got a real issue here . . . I did that . . . Yeah . . . That, yes . . . No, it’s just not going to accept that definition . . . Yes I said that. “Evolutionary Regional Adaptation.” How the hell am I supposed to know? I’m a behaviorist. I have no idea. Well, I say we scrap the race question anyway. I know, but what else are we going to do? Run it up the flag pole. See what they say. Yeah, I’ll wait. They said, “No.” Already? Well, then . . . They said make it just like the form. “Verbal check boxes?” All right . . . I think I know what they’re trying to say. Thanks.

Doc hangs up and returns to ANDI who has been sitting idle.

DR. SMITH: ANDI enable developer control. Access census question matrix. Enter file questions “Race.” Create macro. “To any and all questions pertaining to race or ethnicity, enable list mode. Options are as follows . . .”

Doc flips a few pages on the clipboard and starts to read from a census form.

DR. SMITH: White . . . Black or African American . . . American Indian or Alaskan Native . . . Asian . . . (under breath) This is so stupid.

ANDI: Error . . . Please clarify.

DR. SMITH: No . . . Uh . . . Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. List complete.

ANDI: List complete. Save list?

DR. SMITH: Yes. NO!

ANDI: Error . . . Please clarify.

DR. SMITH: . . . Stand by.

ANDI: Standing by.


Lights fade as a news report is heard.
REPORTER
It’s been nearly 30 years since a clever teen unlocked a secret list of ethnicities in the now decommissioned census robot ANDI; but what has been affectionately dubbed “The Race Game” still seems to delight. With the last census upset of Hobbits outnumbering Dothraki, everyone seems to be speculating. Will Beliebers outnumber Juggalos? Will the Eloi outnumber the Na’vi. We’ll soon find out but, no matter what you say you are, enjoy being who you are.

End.
ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT – SECOND PLACE

What’s in a Name?
BY JAIME ROBINSON, MCC

Characters

AARON: Elizabeth’s husband. A manipulative, possessive man who can switch temperaments in an instant. Unemployed Age: 20s-mid 30s, any ethnicity.

ELIZABETH: Aaron’s wife. Kind-hearted, strong, tired, two months pregnant. Art gallery curator 20s-mid 30s, any ethnicity.

Setting

It is around 7 pm, in the autumn, in an apartment in Los Angeles, during the 2010s. This is the home to an unhappy couple. Aaron does not trust Elizabeth even though she has never given him a reason not to. Aaron has given Elizabeth every reason to distrust him, and is fed up with this mistreatment. The stage is set up with three rooms. The first room, stage right, is a small hallway with a door to enter the apartment. This door has a double-sided lock, each side of the door needs a key, you cannot enter or exit the room without a key. The second room is set up as a living room. When entering the living room from the hall, there should be a small table upstage of the door against the wall and upstage of that a coat rack. Hanging above that is a small board with hooks to hang keys. Upstage in the center of the room is a door that leads to an unseen kitchen. There is a couch downstage from the hall door, there are matching end tables on each side of the couch. There is another door that leads to the third room which is the bedroom. In the bedroom stage left there is a door that leads to an unseen bathroom. Upstage against the wall there is a bed, at the foot of the bed is a cedar chest. There is also a dresser upstage of the bathroom door.

Lights up in the living room. It’s the evening. Aaron is pacing the room waiting for Elizabeth to arrive home. Fury paints his features, he stops and he leans over the back of the couch looking at his watch awaiting Elizabeth’s arrival. Lights up in the hall. Elizabeth enters into the hall holding a briefcase in one hand, a purse in the other and a coat draped over her arm. She stops when she reaches the door, setting down her briefcase and coat and rifles through her purse for her keys. Once she finds them she smooths out her skirt and her blouse, then tucks her hair behind her ear. She grimaces and takes a deep breath as if to prepare herself for something unpleasant. She plasters on half a smile as if it’s all she can muster and unlocks the door and enters. Lights down in the hallway.
ELIZABETH: (hanging her coat up and keys up. She sets her briefcase under the table and sets her phone and purse on the table. She avoids eye contact with him, speaking as she sets everything down.) Hey sweetie, how was your day?

AARON: (He stands up straight turning his body towards her) Where have you been Elizabeth? You got off an hour ago.

ELIZABETH: (she is seen bracing herself once more before turning to face him. As if he responded to her question.) You know I’m feeling great, busy day at the gallery. Sold a couple of those pieces I mentioned, and the artist was thrilled. Thanks for asking!

AARON: Where have you been Elizabeth? It only takes 27 minutes to get from here to the gallery.

ELIZABETH: (She crosses a bit timid towards AARON pleading) Do we have to go straight into it tonight Aaron? Can’t we relax? Can we just not fight? Please?

AARON: Hm, still not hearing much of an answer . . .

ELIZABETH: (she sighs giving into his need for conflict) Did you check the traffic report?

AARON: (Looks embarrassed stays silent)

ELIZABETH: There were several accidents on the highway. You know the traffic is unpredictable, especially in Los Angeles.

AARON: (Softening in tone, finally turning and acknowledging her) I-I’m sorry Lizzie I was just worried.

ELIZABETH: (Under her breath and she parts from him, finding a seat on the couch) Worried, that’s the word.

AARON: (He comes downstage sitting next to her) Oh come on, what’s that supposed to mean?

ELIZABETH: Nothing I’m just tired.

AARON: Tired of me?

ELIZABETH: Just tired Aaron.

AARON: I don’t believe you.

ELIZABETH: (In an exhausted broken tone) Fine, you want to know what I’m tired of? It is absolutely you. It’s you masking jealous insecurities as concern. It’s you picking a fight every chance you get, I (beat) I just want to come home from work (beat) and not argue for one night.
AARON: *(his tone is a tinge sharp)* That’s what you think this is? Jealous insecurity? I don’t want to argue with you Elizabeth. *(His tone soften as he wraps his arm around her shoulder)* I love you Lizzie. You’re my wife. You’re pregnant with my child. I worry about you.

ELIZABETH: Are you sure?

AARON: Am I sure that I worry about you? Of cour –

ELIZABETH: No. That this is your child? I mean when I gave you the news, you said I was, “screwing around.” So there was no way you could be sure.

AARON: I think you’re exaggerating.

ELIZABETH: No. You tend to remember something like that pretty well. I mean it’s not every day your husband accuses you of having someone else’s kid.

AARON: Well, Elizabeth, I don’t think that would bother you so much if it weren’t true.

ELIZABETH: I’m not having this conversation with you again Aaron. I’m not sleeping around. I’ve always been faithful to you. Honestly I’m not the one who’s had infidelity issues.

AARON: You really want to throw that in my face? Can you not be a harpy about this. Elizabeth? It happened once!

ELIZABETH: Oh you mean once in the kitchen, once in the living room, once in our bed? That’s still “one” more time than I’ve ever been guilty of.

AARON: That was a cheap shot and you know it. That was over a year ago! I don’t understand why you can’t get over this!

ELIZABETH: *(rise outraged)* Because you will never be in a place to question me! You almost destroyed this marriage! If you didn’t want to hear about it you shouldn’t have done it, and you sure as hell shouldn’t be accusing me of anything!

AARON: *(grabs her wrist and rises almost looming over her)* Elizabeth I suggest you shut your mouth, or I will shut it for you. Understand?

ELIZABETH: *(Frightened, questioning her next move)* Aaron . . .

AARON: *(Tightening his grip)* Open your mouth again, I dare you Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: *(uneasy she looks at him before snatching her arm away and rushing to the bedroom. Lights up on the bedroom Elizabeth pulls a duffel bag from the cedar chest, placing it on the bed and begins to pack)*

AARON: *(realizing what he’s said he goes to the bedroom. lights dim in the living room)* Lizzie I didn’t mean to – *(Seeing her packing)* come on Lizzie don’t do this.
ELIZABETH: (unresponsive)

AARON: Lizzie talk to me. (beat) Lizzie!

ELIZABETH: (continuing to pack) Stop calling me that.

AARON: But that’s your name!

ELIZABETH: My name is Elizabeth.

AARON: It’s the same thing Lizzie.

ELIZABETH: (cringing, she stops packing and looks up at him) No it’s not! You buried me beneath that name. Fun Lizzie, cute Lizzie, perfect Lizzie, your Lizzie!

AARON: But you are my perfect Lizzie!

ELIZABETH: A few minutes ago I was a lying, cheating, harpy, but I guess you wouldn’t want the harpy Elizabeth as your wife, when you can have “perfect” Lizzie. When is the last time you called me Elizabeth when you weren’t angry?

AARON: I don’t just call you Elizabeth when I’m angry.

ELIZABETH: I – No. (Finding this laughable.) I’m not doing this with you. I’m not indulging this conversation.

AARON: You know I don’t mean too. It just slips out.

ELIZABETH: It just slips out? It just slips out! You use my name like profanity!

AARON: It’s not that big of a deal!

ELIZABETH: It’s my name, it’s me Aaron, do you not understand that?

AARON: Just let it go.

ELIZABETH: (She continues packing) You’re going to have to be more specific.

AARON: Excuse me?

ELIZABETH: (She looks at him smugly) What do you want me to let go of? The name thing, the cheating, the abuse? I let each of those things go the first time, and the second, and the third, and so many times I’ve lost count. So tell me when is it enough? How many times should I “let it go” Aaron?

AARON: (visibly angry but restraining, then making a sudden switch to a gentle tone) Liz – (beat) Elizabeth I’m sorry. I’ve been an awful husband to you. I’ve done everything wrong. I’ve cheated, I’ve put my hands on you, I’m not providing for you. I can’t even get your name right! I’ve been everything but good to you. I’ll change I want to change
for you. I swear. I’ll go out and get a job, I’ll call you Elizabeth. I’ll never so much as look at another woman. I’ll be the man you need me to be! Just please don’t leave me.

ELIZABETH: Why should I believe you? I’ve heard this all before.

AARON: Because I love you.

ELIZABETH: You love Lizzie, if you can even call it that. *(Elizabeth zips up her bag and puts it on her shoulder)*

AARON: Lizzie, you’re not leaving, you can’t.

ELIZABETH: Oh no, Lizzie is staying here with you *(she takes off her wedding ring and hands it to him)* She was a naive little girl desperate for love who let you force your way into her life.

AARON: *(He grabs her shoulders)* Force? You think I forced my way in? I loved *(beat) I love you. You’re right, you were desperate for love and I gave you that love, no one will ever love you the way I do.

ELIZABETH: I pray to God they won’t ever “love” me the way you do. I’m done with you Aaron. *(Elizabeth goes towards the bedroom door and Aaron grabs her, she drops her bag)*

AARON: Did you think I was kidding? You’re not leaving. Especially not with my kid. You don’t want them thinking their dad is a deadbeat, who didn’t want them? I know you Elizabeth, you want a family.

ELIZABETH: *(trying to pull away but held firmly by AARON)*

AARON: What kind of family is a mother and no father? You’ll be back by tomorrow and we both know it Elizabeth, so cut the crap.

ELIZABETH: *(struggles with him)* It’s a better family than one with a father like you, now let go of me, you’re hurting me!

AARON: *(Wraps his arms around her making it harder for her to get away)* Tell me you’re not leaving.

ELIZABETH: *(she presses her hands against his chest)* Aaron stop!

AARON: Tell me you love me Lizzie.

ELIZABETH: Please Aaron!

AARON: Just give me a chance to change Lizzie.

ELIZABETH: *(starting to panic, and cry)* Please let go of me! You can’t fix this!
AARON: Lizzie just love me! (forcing a kiss)

ELIZABETH: (Disgusted and still crying she kneels him in the stomach)

AARON: (He groans and lets go of her hunched over holding his stomach)

ELIZABETH: (She grabs her bags and heads for the bedroom door)

AARON: (gaining his breath back he grabs the bag pulling ELIZABETH back)

ELIZABETH: (jolted back she falls and screams)

AARON: (climbs on top of ELIZABETH holding both of her wrist in one hand and covering her mouth) Lizzie you can't leave! I love you so much! No one will ever love you the way I love you! I know you love me Lizzie! Tell me you love me!

ELIZABETH: (crying and shaking her head no)

AARON: No? Come on I know that's not true, tell the truth.

ELIZABETH: (she ceases struggling, her body shaking as she sobs, she finally nods yes)

AARON: (moves his hand) Say it?

ELIZABETH: (She turns her face from him grimacing)

AARON: (He grabs her face violently jerking it to face him again) Say it, I swear I will choke the life out of you Elizabeth. If you don't say it to me you won't say it to anyone else, not even that thing growing inside you.

ELIZABETH: (Choking out) You wouldn't hurt the baby.

AARON: (He hit the ground beside her head, ELIZABETH screams and flinches) Test me. I don't even know that the little parasite is mine. (beat) SAY IT ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH: (coughs and stutters out) I-I love you.

AARON: And?

ELIZABETH: I-I’m sorry. I won’t leave.

AARON: That's my girl, I knew you’d stay. (He stands up and pulls her to her feet, pulling her into a tight embrace, he runs his fingers through her hair, and kisses her forehead. He then guides her to the bed, and sits on the edge then wipes her face)

ELIZABETH: (Still catching her breath) May I go to the kitchen? I need some water.

AARON: Of course Lizzie, you don't have to ask. But first (he puts the ring on her finger) My Lizzie.
ELIZABETH: (a forced smile) Your Lizzie. (she pauses looking down at her bag and walks past it entering the living room. lights up)

AARON: (Pulls his phone out of his pocket and lays back in the bed, he puts an earbud in)

ELIZABETH: Do you want anything while I’m in here? (frantically scribbles out a note on the stage right end table beside the couch)

AARON: (Half acknowledging her) Nothing for me, but you should get some ice for that wrist, we don’t want it bruising.

ELIZABETH: (rushing to grab her keys, and her phone) Of course not! (before leaving she sets her ring on the note, she looks in the direction of the bedroom, then rushes back to the front door grabbing AARON’s keys off of the hook she drops the keys and panics picking them up)

AARON: (He hears the clang of keys hitting the floor, snapping him back to the moment he looks up from his phone) Lizzie?

ELIZABETH: (She scrambles to get out of the door, locking it behind her.)

AARON: (He hears the door slam and jumps to his feet) Elizabeth answer me. (He rushes into the living room searching for Elizabeth he run to the door turning the knob to find it locked. It reaches for his keys and sees they are missing. He begins to pound on the door with open palms) Lizzie? Lizzie! Are you out there? I thought we worked this out! Open the door! (Hearing no response he begins to ram his shoulder into the door trying to break it down, screaming) Elizabeth, open the door! You can’t run! (He rams into the door again shouting) Elizabeth! (He finally gives up exhausted slumping down against the door breathing heavily. He leans his head back and notices something glistening on the table. Aaron rises to his feet and walks over to the end table. He discovers Elizabeth’s wedding ring and picks up the note.)

ELIZABETH: (Offstage, or voice-over) “I told you Lizzie is staying, but Elizabeth is gone.”

AARON: (Lets out a yell of anger and anguish flipping the table, and rushing back to the door pounding against it screaming) Lizzie! Lizzie! Come back! Lizzie! I need you! (He drops to his knees half-heartedly pounding on the door, breaking down)

Lights out

** * * **
ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT – THIRD PLACE

Hell for the Company
BY ROBIN HARTWELL, SCC

Cast
GRACE: A girl in her early-to-mid-20s. Passionate and rowdy.
SAMMY: A girl in her early-to-mid-20s. Laid back and caring.
JUSTICE: A girl in her early-to-mid-20s. Sensible and determined.
DEVIL: A demon on the job. Male, but could be played by any gender if desired.
GOD: The powerful, male-sounding voice of God. Is only heard, never seen.

Setting: Hell. The overall area is red and threatening, but the clearing the girls are in is safer looking, possibly being lit with cooler or more neutral lights.

At Rise: Sammy is sitting patiently, with her sisters lying next to her. She’s waiting for her sisters to wake up.

GRACE: (slowly waking up) Ugh . . .

SAMMY: Hi, Grace!

GRACE: Sammy? What – Is this place on fire?

SAMMY: (soothingly) No, don’t worry, we’re fine, probably.

(Justice is awoken by Grace’s shout, and when she sees where she is, scrambles to her feet.)

JUSTICE: Where am I? Sammy, Grace, what’s going on?

GRACE: I don’t know, I just woke up and everything’s on fire –

SAMMY: Now, don’t panic, but I think we might be in hell.

(The two sisters stare at Sammy.)

GRACE: Don’t panic?

JUSTICE: Hell?

SAMMY: See, the thing that tipped me off was the flames, and also I found this brochure that says “Welcome to Hell, Please Don’t Enjoy Your Stay.”

(Justice and Grace take the brochure and look at it.)
GRACE: “A Hundred and One Not-So-Fun things to do in Hell.”

SAMMY: Can either of you remember how we died? I vaguely remember being in a car, but otherwise I’ve got nothing.

JUSTICE: We can’t be dead dead, can we? I don’t feel dead.

GRACE: (throwing the brochure over her shoulder.) Forget that, why are we in Hell? I thought we’ve been pretty good people.

SAMMY: Yeah, I won’t pretend I’ve been perfect, but I’ve tried to lead a good life.

JUSTICE: Is there something we’re forgetting? None of us have ever, like, murdered people, right?

GRACE: (thinking) No, I think I’d remember that. Maybe it’s a, like, guilt by association thing? Maybe we accidentally helped a murderer once.

JUSTICE: And we got sent to hell for it? That seems harsh.

SAMMY: Maybe it was a clerical error.

(Grace and Justice stare at her.)

JUSTICE: (teasingly) Shut up, Sammy.

GRACE: (ditto) You’re so stupid.

SAMMY: (defensively) What? I don’t know! Do you guys know how hell works?

GRACE: (to Justice) You know what’s weird, though?

JUSTICE: (sarcastically) No, what about this situation is weird to you, Grace.

GRACE: If we’re in hell, there’s a distinct lack of, like, torture happening.

SAMMY: Well, I for one, am thankful for that.

JUSTICE: Yeah, this is a lot more laid back than I would have expected. Maybe there’s been a mistake. Do you think there’s someone we could talk to?

GRACE: Is it a good idea to call attention to ourselves?

SAMMY: Well, we’ve got nothing to lose at this point.

JUSTICE: I suppose they can’t send us to hell twice. Is there a reception desk or something?

GRACE: I’ll handle this. (Grace takes a deep breath and yells.) Can we get some service over here?
(A devil enters, with a clipboard.)

DEVIL: Can I help you?

SAMMY: (amused, gesturing to Grace) She used to do that at Applebee’s, too.

JUSTICE: Maybe you’re in Hell for harassing waiters.

GRACE: (Crossing to the Devil) Hi, yeah – are you the devil?

DEVIL: Oh, goodness no, I’m just a lowly demon.

GRACE: Okay, but my sisters and I are definitely in hell?

DEVIL: Yep!

JUSTICE: We think there’s been some sort of mistake.

DEVIL: What seems to be the problem?

GRACE: We’re not feeling particularly tortured.

SAMMY: I’m actually having a great time.

DEVIL: (frowning and looking at their clipboard) Hmm. That is unusual. What demon was assigned to torture you?

JUSTICE: None.

SAMMY: We just woke up here.

GRACE: Can we talk to your supervisor?

JUSTICE: Is your supervisor the devil?

GRACE: Can we talk to the devil?

DEVIL: Well, I’m afraid the devil is much too busy right now.

SAMMY: That makes sense. (To Justice) He is a running a business.

DEVIL: I could get you on the line with God, though.

(beat)

GRACE: (turning back to her sisters)

Do we want to talk to God?

SAMMY: Yes, please.

JUSTICE: Yeah, could you get God on the line for us?
DEVIL: Not a problem! Wait here for just a second.

(He exits quickly.)

GRACE: (calling after him) Are you going to bring us a phone, or – (Realizing he can’t hear her, she turns back to her sisters.) The customer service in this place is terrible.

JUSTICE: Well, it is hell.

SAMMY: How long do you think it takes to call God?

GOD: Hello, my children.

(The moment the voice is heard, the girls are illuminated by a holy beam of light. It can also be accompanied by a brief musical cue. The sisters jump and look towards the light.)

SAMMY: (startled) Oh my God.

GOD: Yes, I Am.

GRACE: You’re God?

GOD: I Am who I Am.

JUSTICE: It’s just that, you sound exactly like our dad.

GOD: I am everyone’s dad.

SAMMY: No, I mean, our real – our earth dad. The biological one.

GOD: I sound like everyone’s father.

GRACE: Wait, so, no matter who you talk to, you sound like their dad?

GOD: Yes, my child.

GRACE: Well, that’s bullshit.

JUSTICE: Grace! Don’t swear at God!

GRACE: Oh, he’s heard it before. (to God) If my girlfriend and I adopted a kid, whose voice would they hear?

GOD: It was humankind that decided I needed a voice. It was they who decided that voice should be male.

GRACE: Okay, so what, you’re just whatever people believe you are?

GOD: If that’s what you believe.
GRACE: Are you messing with me?

GOD: Do you believe I am?

GRACE: *(stepping forward as if to start a fight)* I swear to God –

GOD: Yes, you do.

*(Justice and Sammy quickly grab her and attempt to soothe and restrain her with soft shushing sounds, like you would with a dog afraid of fireworks.)*

JUSTICE: Grace, you can’t fight God!

GRACE: I can and will! We’re dead and in hell, Justice! I’m long past both the frying pan and the fire, I’ve got nothing to lose! And I’ve got some beef with God!

SAMMY: *(half to self)* I think a part of me always knew it’d end like this.

GRACE: He sent us to hell, which I’m not thrilled about, and it’s not the 1950s so I really don’t think I can let the whole “mega-dad” thing slide, and he’s really let us dick up the earth lately –

JUSTICE: Grace! You have lost your talk-to-God privileges.

GRACE: Oh, come on!

SAMMY: Let us handle this, okay?

*(Sammy gives Grace an encouraging double-thumbs-up. Grace makes a face and goes to the back to sulk.)*

JUSTICE: So, um, Hello Mr. God, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Justice, these are my sisters Samantha –

SAMMY: Hi! Big fan of your work.

JUSTICE: – and Grace, who you’ve met, and we were just wondering, uh, why we’re in hell?

SAMMY: I’m kind of disappointed that there is a hell, honestly. I was hoping it’d be more of a “Que sera, sera” sort of deal.

JUSTICE: *(To Sammy)* Well, depending on the theology –

GOD: You aren’t meant to be in hell.

JUSTICE: Excuse me?

SAMMY: Could you say that again, Sir?
GOD: You were not the ones meant to be sent here.

GRACE: Then we’re in hell because . . .

GOD: It appears to have been a clerical error.

GRACE: Oh, come on!

GOD: Do not be afraid, my child. It’s a simple matter of paperwork, and can easily be fixed.

( the devil re-enters. )

DEVIL: Hey, you three – you talked to the big guy yet?

GOD: Yes, they have.

DEVIL: Oh! Hey, champ. ( to the sisters ) So, it’s the man driving the car that crashed into you that’s supposed to be here. You kids are meant to be upstairs.

JUSTICE: The car that – Then we really died?

DEVIL: Them’s the breaks.

GRACE: Do you want to maybe show a little more respect for the dead there, buddy?

DEVIL: ( taking a careful step back ) But on the bright side, at least you aren’t supposed to be down here.

SAMMY: How did it happen?

JUSTICE: I can remember . . . I can remember being in a car –

DEVIL: You’ll have a lot of time to remember the details, don’t try to force it now. It’s a lot to process, your head will just explode.

( Justice reacts very badly to this. )

I didn’t mean literally. Just calm down, okay? The important thing is, it wasn’t legally your fault.

GRACE: ( deeply sarcastic ) Oh, thank God we didn’t break the law, for a second I was almost worried.

DEVIL: Look, I just work here, okay?

JUSTICE: ( on the edge of freaking out ) I really don’t know how to deal with this. I kind of only have experience dealing with death from, like, the other side? The living perspective.

( to Sammy ) You seem to be doing all right.
SAMMY: I sort of came to terms with things when I woke up here, honestly. I thought we were dead in hell, though, so if anything, things are looking up.

GRACE: Could you stop being so Zen for once in your Goddamn life? Look at your sisters, we’re having breakdowns. Can’t you just have a nice, friendly existential crisis like a normal person?

DEVIL: There’ll be all the time in the universe for existential crises when you reach your eternal resting place, which, you know is not here, and I’ve really got work to be doing, so if you don’t mind . . .

GRACE: We can go?

DEVIL: Yep!

SAMMY: We can just walk out of hell?

DEVIL: (pointing to offstage right) Door’s over there.

GRACE: There’s a door out of hell?

DEVIL: Yup, with the big neon exit sign.

JUSTICE: (taking a deep breath) Okay, there’s a lot going on right now, so I’m just going to skip to the final stage of grief here.

(Grace, although rather annoyed by the ‘neon exit sign’ thing, goes to comfort Justice. Sammy crosses to talk personally to the devil.)

SAMMY: Hey – I don’t think we ever caught your name?

DEVIL: Oh, I’m Gary.

SAMMY: (with a friendly wave) Hi, Gary! I was just wondering – what’s going to happen to the person who crashed into us?

DEVIL: He’ll come down here instead of you three.

SAMMY: Then – we’re sending someone to hell?

DEVIL: We have to keep the books balanced. (a pause. The sisters look at each other.)

SAMMY: I . . . I really don’t feel good about that.

GRACE: But they, like, deserved it, right? The accident was their fault.

DEVIL: Technically, yes.

GRACE: Technically? You’ll put someone in hell for technically?
GOD: If that’s what you belie –

GRACE: *(interrupting)* Oh, do NOT start with me! When I get up there, you and I are having some words.

GOD: The person in question believes they are to blame for your deaths.

DEVIL: I mean, hey, I’m as sympathetic as the next guy. Mistakes happen. But if someone thinks they deserve to be down here . . . I mean, I’m certainly not going to argue, you know?

SAMMY: So . . . because the three of us died, for an accident that was only technically his fault – he’s going to send himself to hell forever?

GOD: It wouldn’t be forever.

DEVIL: An eternity is generally overkill, if you’ll pardon the expression. And really, having everyone since the dawn of time down here FOREVER is a logistical nightmare, so . . .

JUSTICE: So how long would it be?

DEVIL: *(checking his clipboard)* Well, it was only an accident on his part, and this is his only major grievance, so it’d only be about . . . three human years.

GRACE: Great, we’re worth a year each.

SAMMY: Just three years?

DEVIL: Yup.

*(Pause)*

SAMMY: What if I –

GRACE and JUSTICE: NO.

SAMMY: *(to the devil)* If we just did, like, a swapsies –

JUSTICE: Samantha!

SAMMY: It’s only three years!

JUSTICE: IN HELL!

GRACE: Sammy, you’ve had a lot of bad ideas, but this one might be the worst.

SAMMY: What am I supposed to do, just let someone go to hell because of me?
JUSTICE: We’re not saying that, we’re just – we’re not letting our sister stay in hell for three years!

DEVIL: (to self, underneath the arguing) Yikes.

SAMMY: That’s exactly what you’re saying! They were already going to send themselves to hell for this, don’t you think that’s punishment enough?

GRACE: That’s not your decision! It’s up to – (she points at both God and the devil) – these clowns, and as much as I’d love to piss them off –

JUSTICE: It’s not going to matter what we want when Grace gets us sent to hell for calling God a clown!

SAMMY: (to Grace) Come on, it’ll be just like when I went to detention for you in 5th grade, remember?

JUSTICE: Yeah, and you shouldn’t have done that either! Look how Grace turned out, she’s in hell now!

GRACE: Okay, sassypants, we’re ALL in hell now, and that wasn’t technically my fault –

GOD: (Loud, with an almighty echo) IF I MAY INTERRUPT.

(the girls freeze.)

DEVIL: Oh, thank God.

GOD: If you wanted to do this –

GRACE: Don’t encourage her! (She points towards God.) You’re on thin ice, buddy.

SAMMY: Then I could do it?

GOD: If it is of your own free will . . . Then yes, you may serve the three years in his place, then rejoin your sisters when they are done.

GRACE: This is unbelievable. (To the devil) Don’t you have anything to say about this?

DEVIL: No, I’m into it. This is hell, we appreciate a good loophole down here.

JUSTICE: Okay, Sammy, Listen – how about this. What if instead of three years for one person, it was one year for three people?

(Her sisters turn to argue but she continues without pause)

Now hear me out. It’d be pretty weird going to heaven knowing we’re the reason some guy’s in hell. And we obviously can’t let Sammy stay here alone – don’t argue, Sammy, we aren’t doing it. But a year – we can manage that, Right?
GRACE: How bad is hell?

DEVIL: Have you ever worked retail?

(*the three girls inhale sharply in response*)

GRACE: Okay, well, that’s the worst, but – one year? That’s not bad. We can manage a year.

JUSTICE: Then you’re in?

GRACE: Well, obviously. Don’t get me wrong, I think this is a dumb idea and you’re both dumb for suggesting it, and I will, quite literally, give you hell for it. But no way am I letting you morons stay down here alone.

(*While Grace and Justice talk, Sammy has retrieved the brochure.*)

SAMMY: It won’t be that bad, guys. Look, they’ve got mini-golf down here.

JUSTICE: Oh, that’s fun.

GOD: Are you three decided?

(*the sisters look at each other.*)

GRACE: Yup.

JUSTICE: We’d like to stay here, please.

SAMMY: Thank you.

DEVIL: (*Gesturing to offstage left*) Well then, if you’d like to come this way, I’ll show you to your rooms.

JUSTICE: (*as she exits*) Oh, we get rooms, guys.

GRACE: (*following Justice*) Do you think it’s too optimistic to hope for bunk beds?

(*Justice and Grace exit. Sammy starts to follow.*)

GOD: Samantha?

(*Sammy stops and looks towards God.*)

SAMMY: Yes, sir?

GOD: That was a very selfless thing you and your sisters have done. I’ll be watching over you three.

SAMMY: Oh! Thank you, sir.
GOD: Goodbye, Samantha.

(Sammy exits after her sisters. The devil looks up at God with a mischievous smile.)

DEVIL: Got your eye on another one, huh?

GOD: Perhaps.

DEVIL: Don't get ahead of yourself, big guy! I've got them for a year, I might convince one of them to stay.

GOD: (with a hint of a challenge) I don't think so.

(The devil laughs good-naturedly and, going back to his work, exits left.)

* * *
ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT – HONORABLE MENTION

Poor William, Poor Doug
BY ALEX OZERS, PC

DOUG: Slightly less blue-collar than he thinks, 30s.
WILLIAM: Slightly less urbane than he thinks, 30s.
DOCENT: Her uniform is shabbier than would be appropriate.

Several abstract paintings hang on the walls in the corner of an art museum. A minimal cushioned bench rests in the center of the gallery. A docent comes and goes, occasionally eavesdropping.

(William paces and waits. The docent stands against the wall. Doug enters.)

DOUG: Willy!
WILLIAM: Doug. Hey.

DOUG: Hey nothing! What, no hug? C’mon, bring it in!


DOUG: Willy, c’mon man, we’re family!

WILLIAM: Well, technically, that’s just not –

DOUG: Nope. Don’t. No, if you just got me down here to talk about that. I don’t want to talk about that.

WILLIAM: I’m going by William now.

DOUG: Willy it is! Fine. William. (Pointing off stage.) What the hell is this painting?

WILLIAM: What do you mean?

DOUG: I think my kid could do it. Big, though. How do they –

WILLIAM: Doug! You can’t touch it!

(The docent cringes. Then, when the painting isn’t touched, exits.)


WILLIAM: Oh, Doug. You can’t buy the art in museums. It’s not a gallery.
DOUG: The hell it isn’t. Says right there on the map, Cornell Gallery. And the security guard said gallery too!

WILLIAM: That’s just the name of the room. It doesn’t mean gallery in the sense that anything is for sale. I mean, there are donors who give money to put their name on the . . . never mind. It doesn’t matter.

DOUG: Whatever. Then I’ll get Johnny to paint a copy for you. He’s in the third grade now. I bet he could pull that off. Hell, looks like it was painted with a hairbrush. You missed his birthday again, y’know. No card?

WILLIAM: Yeah, sorry about that. Do kids really care about cards?

DOUG: A card is the least you could do! Kids like toys. You’re his uncle. You probably owe him a remote control car, or something. Shit, I don’t know.

WILLIAM: They’re not security guards either. They’re docents, volunteers.

DOUG: What?

(The docent returns, hearing her mention. William gestures her away, he wasn’t calling her.)

WILLIAM: You said the security guard directed you. They’re not security. They volunteer here. They’ve studied art, have a background. That’s why they’re here.

DOUG: (Indicating off-stage.) That one, it kind of looks like a race car, doesn’t it? If you look at it like this? It should be called Kid Paints a Race Car.

WILLIAM: Well, it’s not.

DOUG: (He reads the title card.) Huh, Death at Home. That’s a weird title. So, is that part of the body then? I don’t get it. Funny you would like it, though.

WILLIAM: Why is that funny?

DOUG: Uh, well. I dunno. The death part. I don’t know. Why didn’t you come to Dad’s service?

WILLIAM: I don’t know what I should say to that.

DOUG: You should have been there. That’s what you should say. That’s what you should have done.

WILLIAM: Doug, he wasn’t really my father. I barely knew him. He wasn’t my dad even when I thought he was. And I thought you didn’t want to have this conversation.

DOUG: So you just, what? So all of us on Dad’s side, wain’t your family anymore? You and your mom both . . . you’re just like her. You look down on us.
WILLIAM: That’s not true.

DOUG: Jesus, *William*, you made me meet you at the fucking museum.

WILLIAM: Can we keep it down please?

DOUG: Hey y’all! This guy’s not really fancy! We used to swim in mud pits and –


DOUG: Nobody cares, man. So uptight.

WILLIAM: Do you or do you not want to talk about this? Because I’m willing to have the conversation.

DOUG: Oh, William the Willing. What a title he has. Sir, sir, how much was this jacket?

WILLIAM: Don’t start.

DOUG: I remember when you thought your mom was a snob too. About us, I mean … But here you are.

WILLIAM: We’re not snobs, we just … We have different values.

DOUG: That’s for sure. Your mom didn’t know who your real dad was!

WILLIAM: Well. Do you remember that summer at the lake, when she wouldn’t go in the water?

DOUG: Too dirty. *(In a woman’s voice.)* Why is the water green?

WILLIAM: *(In a woman’s voice.)* Oh sweety, is it safe?

DOUG: Then she got sick off the fancy snacks she brought. Some fucking egg thing … All day in the sun. Jesus Christ. Yep.

WILLIAM: I think she did know.

DOUG: ’Bout the eggs?

WILLIAM: No, c’mon. About Dad, er, your dad. Whatever. That he wasn’t really my dad.

DOUG: Bullshit!

WILLIAM: No, I’m serious. I think that’s why she was so wishy-washy about the kidney test thing. She really didn’t want me to go in because she didn’t want me to find out. I think she knew the match would be all out of sorts.
DOUG: Nah, bullshit. She just didn’t want her baby boy handing over his precious organs to an old man she hates.

WILLIAM: I don’t know.

DOUG: Listen, think about it. If she knew you weren’t really his, why did she stick with him for as long as she did? Why’d she let you hang around us so much? She sure as shit didn’t like us.

WILLIAM: Wait. You think she just wanted to deny him a kidney . . . To stick it to him? Like, if I didn’t get the tests, then I don’t donate a kidney, and she gets some long-sought revenge?

DOUG: That’s what I think.

WILLIAM: Wow, you really don’t like her.

DOUG: Well what’s the other option? She did know you wasn’t his, but she just stuck with him to keep up appearances?

WILLIAM: Yeah. I mean, that sounds like her to me.Appearances.

DOUG: A-ha! But no! Because sticking with us didn’t do shit for appearances, see? That’s a, what do you call it, a paradox. She would not stick with us to keep up appearances because she thought we were just hillbillies or some shit, so appearances would not be kept up by sticking around. Not one bit, from her position.

WILLIAM: So, it’s a paradox because she would lose face just by virtue of, like being with him –

DOUG: By virtue of, shut your fucking mouth.

(They both laugh.)

WILLIAM: So she was just being cruel to her dying ex-husband?

DOUG: That’s what I think.

WILLIAM: But she must have suspected that Dad wasn’t my dad, because like, the timing, y’know? Biology.

DOUG: I don’t know, man. That woman’s a nut. Does it bother you that I talk like this about her?

WILLIAM: It might, I guess. Except I know her. (He laughs.)

DOUG: You son of a bitch . . . Ha, son of a bitch, you get it?
WILLIAM: (Flatly.) Yes Doug, I get it.

DOUG: So what I was gonna say earlier, uh, the parking. You make me come all the way into town to hang out and you know what the parking’s like around here?

WILLIAM: Oh, I wasn’t thinking of that.

DOUG: Whered you park?

WILLIAM: Oh, no, I just walked. I’m like ten blocks from here.

DOUG: Asshole. Well, hey, we should get a beer after this. You probably know somewhere.

WILLIAM: Yeah. I guess we could do that. Y’know, I was thinking the other day about bucket arena. You remember that?

DOUG: What?

WILLIAM: With the bugs we’d collect, we let’em fight in a bucket?


WILLIAM: So that came up the other day. I was telling, Laura, who is this girl I’m seeing. So I’m explaining about how we’d go into the woods and collect whatever insects, right? Put ’em all in a bucket and see who wins. She was horrified.

DOUG: Why? They’re just bugs. They’re fighting under rocks anyway. They can’t feel anything, they’re bugs. Who cares?

WILLIAM: She did! It was crazy, like, she really, in a meaningful way, she thought it meant something about our character. Like it was menacing. We were, menacing, morally. At our core.

DOUG: You told her about the time with the mouse?

WILLIAM: Hell no! No, I was explaining just the bug part. I could see she was getting . . . She was getting kind of uncomfortable about it. I just thought I was teasing, but she got really upset.

DOUG: I thought mice ate bugs. Figured for sure the little sucker would win.

WILLIAM: Nope.

DOUG: What, it was the centipede that got him? Just snap, snap, snap. With those little pincers. Damn.

WILLIAM: You think you’d let Johnny play bucket arena?
DOUG: Shit no. That was probably kind of dangerous. Most of those little crawlers were poison. Anyway, John’s a . . . he does the video game thing.

(The docent passes and leans on the wall.)

WILLIAM: Well, yeah. Video games are a thing.

DOUG: That’s actually what I was saying about the race car. That you should get him one. With the little remote control, y’know? Take the video game into the real world.

WILLIAM: Huh. That’s a . . . that’s a funny comparison actually. You think it’s better for some reason for him to play with a race car in the yard than, say, a race car on the screen. Are those things that different?

DOUG: Oh, Jesus Christ. I don’t know. Yeah, I guess so. If he’s in the yard, then he’s getting fresh air, right?

WILLIAM: Open a fucking window and let him play the video game, who cares.

DOUG: I don’t know. That’s just what they say on the TV, that they play too many video games. I don’t know what I’m doing.

WILLIAM: Well, you take care of that. Johnny’ll be fine. I’m going to use the, uh, lavatory.

DOUG: The bathroom?

WILLIAM: The facilities, the restroom. (He exists.)

DOUG: The craphouse, the can, the John. Jesus! Named my kid after the shitter.

DOCENT: Excuse me?

DOUG: Hell, I’m sorry. Nothing. Nothing. Actually, ma’am, excuse me. You know anything about this painting? (Pointing off-stage.)

DOCENT: It’s a de Kooning.

DOUG: What’s a Kooning?


DOUG: Ah, shit. That’s why he likes it, my brother. Guess what his name is. C’mon . . . William!

DOCENT: (She laughs.) Well, um, it’s not important, but, um, the artist is Willem. Will-Em.

DOUG: What’s the difference?
DOCENT: Um, well, I guess I don’t know. Maybe a regional thing?

DOUG: We used to call my brother Willy. You saw ‘im, he’s a Willy.

DOCENT: So, de Kooning. He was painting mid-century –

DOUG: Right, right.

DOCENT: This is an example of Abstract Expressionism –

DOUG: That’s why it’s all screwed up looking?

DOCENT: (Laughing.) Exactly.

DOUG: Oh, that’s good. Give me some shit to say about this to my brother. He really likes it, he’d get a kick out of me knowing what from what all of a sudden.

DOCENT: All right, so you wanna say Abstract Expressionism, which is like a post-war thing.

DOUG: This about a war?

DOCENT: Well, no. The idea is, kind of that nobody wanted to paint beautiful things after World War II. Because it was so horrible, right?

DOUG: Okay, gotcha.

DOCENT: Abstract Expressionism. Post-war. Say that, like, the violence on the canvas was symbolic of the violence on, um, the map of the world.

DOUG: I like that. Oh, okay, go away. I mean, thank you, but here he comes.

(The docent moves away. William enters.)

WILLIAM: Doug. You’re behaving?

DOUG: Shut up. But yeah, I was actually thinking about this painting some more.

WILLIAM: Oh yeah?

DOUG: Yeah, I noticed the date, ’52. And I realized, um, that makes sense, because of World War II. Around that time, right? I was kind of harsh with it earlier, but y’know, but then I remembered how people at that time didn’t learn to paint beautiful things because of the war. They just had different priorities, right? On account of the war. So, I guess, in a way, it makes this abstract stuff kind of cool, because it was this time in history where nobody knew how to paint good, you know?

(William pauses.)
WILLIAM: You know Doug, that’s a point. I guess you have a . . . a point there. Never thought of it that way.

DOUG: Right? And you’ve got the same name too!

WILLIAM: Yep. You’ve, um, you know the darnedest things.

DOUG: Did I get everything right?

WILLIAM: Close enough.

DOUG: Because I asked the lady. She told me everything, thought you’d get a kick out of it.

WILLIAM: A-ha. So. How was Dad’s thing, the service?

DOUG: Oh, you missed a hell of a party! We did it the way he would have wanted. Chili dogs.

WILLIAM: A party?


WILLIAM: Oh.

DOUG: Yeah, they call’em celebrations of life now. Or something like that. I don’t think you’re supposed to cry too much anymore.

WILLIAM: What do you mean?

DOUG: I dunno. It’s just the fad now. You don’t know this? It’s like, with funerals now you’re supposed to pretend it’s a birthday.

WILLIAM: It probably makes it easier not to feel it.

DOUG: We all felt it.

WILLIAM: Well yeah, but doesn’t it kind of let you . . . I don’t know. You don’t have to feel it as deeply.

DOUG: You know, you’re being a real asshole right now. Everybody was sad. It’s just a little bit easier to be down when you got spilled potato salad on your shirt and you’re pretending like he’s there with you celebrating. You didn’t even show up. People asked about you.

WILLIAM: I was out of town.

DOUG: No you weren’t. But that’s what I told people.
WILLIAM: Thank you.
DOUG: It wasn’t for you.
WILLIAM: Okay.
DOUG: All right then.
WILLIAM: Um, I should come out sometime. I should see you guys again.
DOUG: Yeah?
WILLIAM: You’re still in that house by the school?
DOUG: Yep. It’s real nice. Johnny gets to walk to school. Him and his friends go screw around on the playground at night sometimes. After the security guard goes home. They got a security guard. Keep kids from spray painting the place or some shit.
WILLIAM: John get into any of that?
DOUG: Nah, he’s too young.
WILLIAM: Third grade, you said?
DOUG: Right! But I think we’ll let him get into trouble if he wants. Just regular trouble, though.
WILLIAM: Why?
DOUG: Kids don’t do that anymore. They dick around on the computer and don’t do shit, or you got the the ones that are just real bad. Nothing in between. Johnny should get in a scrap or something. Actually though, you remember what I told you about the neighbor?
WILLIAM: No. I don’t think so. When . . . Uh –
DOUG: I told you about this. Last time we talked. The guy comes over yelling about his mail about his mail going missing? I told you about this.
WILLIAM: Maybe. I don’t know why I would remember, but go ahead.
DOUG: Goddamn you. Well, anyway. Turns out it was John. They were stealing mail on their way home from school, him and his friends. I guess he does get into trouble sometimes.
WILLIAM: That’s funny. It’s the kind of thing, though . . . Can’t you get in real trouble for that?
DOUG: Not a kid, I don’t think.
WILLIAM: What’d the neighbor say?
DOUG: Well I didn’t tell him. Guy’s an asshole. Not going to tell him shit.
WILLIAM: I think my upstairs neighbor, the building owner, I think he breeds dogs.
DOUG: What? In the building?
WILLIAM: Small dogs. Chihuahuas. Every couple of months he has people start showing up and they leave with puppies. And his hallway stinks. I guess . . . It’s weird. I know he’s breeding them.
DOUG: How the hell you think he’s doing that?
WILLIAM: They’re small dogs. So maybe just lines of cages. Or maybe they run around. I hear the tap-tap-tap thing on the ceiling sometimes. But I only ever see him walking one dog on the street.
DOUG: You should get a chicken.
WILLIAM: Why?
DOUG: Screw with him. See what he says. Tell him, well you’ve got dogs.
WILLIAM: But I don’t want a chicken.
DOUG: I don’t know. Whatever. Hell of a thing, though, with the dogs.
WILLIAM: Right. Anyway.
DOUG: So. Art.
WILLIAM: Yeah, you had enough?
DOUG: (Doug laughs.) Yeah. Beer time. Where we headed?
WILLIAM: Shit! Right –
DOUG: We walking? I can drive.
WILLIAM: I forgot you wanted to do that . . . Um, I have a thing with Laura, who I mentioned. Like a dinner thing.
DOUG: Well can I come? Love to meet her.
WILLIAM: Uh, that could be okay. I think. It’s not like we’re dating-dating. It might be weird . . . I was texting her in the restroom, and I spaced –
DOUG: You don’t want me to go.
WILLIAM: You can come. If you want.

DOUG: Jesus Christ. I drive all the way out here . . . You know what, it’s fine. It’s a long drive home.

WILLIAM: And you were going to drink and do that?

DOUG: Don’t – Just. Go do your thing. Tell your mom I said hello. We missed her at the funeral too.

WILLIAM: Don’t be that way.

DOUG: It’s fine. Whatever, man. Go do your thing.

WILLIAM: Well, um, are we good here?

DOUG: It’s fine. Either way, it was good to see you.

WILLIAM: You too, always. *(William reaches out for a handshake.)*

DOUG: *(Doug reluctantly shakes Williams hand.)* Right.

WILLIAM: Okay. I’m gonna go. I will call you about coming out sometime.

DOUG: Right.

*(William exits through audience. Doug sits on the bench.)*

DOUG: *(Mumbling.)* Hate this goddamn place.

***
Not a wasted word. This has been a main point to my literary thinking all my life.

Hunter S. Thompson
LITERARY JUDGES

SEAN NEVIN
POETRY
Sean is the author of Oblivio Gate (Southern Illinois University Press) and A House that Falls (Slapering Hol Press). His honors include a Literature Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry, and two fellowships from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. His poetry and interviews have recently been featured on NPR’s nationally syndicated shows “The Story with Dick Gordon’ and ‘Speaking of Faith’ with Krista Tippett. He directs the MFA Program in Poetry and Poetry in Translation at Drew University where he is an Associate Professor. He was named an honoree in The Irish Education 100 in 2016.

TIFFANY MIDGE
FICTION
Tiffany Midge is an enrolled citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and was raised in the Pacific Northwest. Midge’s poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction has appeared most recently in McSweeney’s, The Toast Butter Blog, Waxwing, Moss, Okey-Pankey, Mud City, Apex, The Rumpus and World Literature Today. Her most recent poetry collection “The Woman Who Married a Bear” (University of New Mexico Press) won the Kenyon Review’s Earthworks Prize for Indigenous Poetry, and a Western Heritage Award.
BONNIE NADZAM

ESSAY

Bonnie Nadzam has published fiction and essays in many journals and magazines, including *Granta*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *Orion Magazine*, *A Public Space*, *The Iowa Review*, *Epoch*, the *Kenyon Review*, and others. Her first novel, *Lamb*, was recipient of the Center for Fiction’s Flaherty Dunnan First Novel Award in 2011, and was longlisted for the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction. It has been translated into several languages and made into an award-winning independent film (*Orchard 2016*) starring Ross Partridge and Oona Laurence. Her second novel, *Lions*, was released by Grove Press in 2016 and was a USA PEN Finalist for Literary Fiction. She is the co-author, with Dale Jamieson, of *Love in the Anthropocene* (OR Books 2015). She holds a BA from Carleton College, an MFA from Arizona State University, and an MA and PhD from the University of Southern California.

WIND DELL WOODS

ONE-ACT PLAYS/SCRIPTS

Wind is a playwright, theatre artist, and scholar. He is originally from southern Oregon, where he was actively involved in the local theatre community. Along with completing his MFA in Playwriting from Arizona State University (ASU), he has also been the recipient of several writing fellowships and has had productions of a handful of ten-minute, one-act, and full-length plays. Woods’ ten-minute play, *The Black & White Minstrel Show*, has been produced in Chicago, San Diego, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City. His full-length plays include *Jonny May’s Soul Kitchen*, which premiered at ASU in 2007, *Skylark Dreams*, *A Bronzian Tale*, *(Re) Working Wilson*, and *Harold and I*. Currently, Woods is a doctoral candidate in the Joint PhD program in Drama and Theatre at UC Irvine and UC San Diego. His research focuses on Hip Hop Theater and aesthetics.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

BILL ALEWYN
HONORABLE MENTION, POETRY: TITLE JESUS OF JUAREZ
Bill lives in the Arizona desert with his courageous partner and has been denied Canadian citizenship twelve times in the last fifteen months. Quotes Bill: “Words are little snowballs in the enraged orange face of psychotic oppression. Little snowballs are fun but sometimes what we really need are big rocks.” Bill expects to reapply for Canadian citizenship – and be denied again – very soon.

MORGAN BUTTERS
HONORABLE MENTION, ESSAY: HOW TO KILL A WRITER
Morgan is a former English major who wrote about her personal struggles as a writer in her essay. She is in her second semester of prerequisites for Nursing School at Mesa Community College. When she isn’t studying or writing, Morgan can be found swimming, doing yoga, or spending time with her high school sweetheart and two English bulldogs.

ADAM CADENA
FIRST PLACE, ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT: A GLITCH IN THE TURING TEST
Returning alumnus Adam has been honing his skills as a multimedia artist for the past ten years. He has written and directed a number of short plays, films, and documentaries. Adam strives to bring his visions to life with a bit of humor, poignancy, inspiration, but above all, sincerity.

AMBRIEL COOLEY
HONORABLE MENTION, FICTION: ORTHODONTIST’S ARMAGEDDON
Ambriel has lived in Arizona her whole life. Right now she’s going to Chandler Gilbert Community College to finish her associate’s degree, and hopefully transfer to a university in state.

MALKA DASKAL
SECOND PLACE, FICTION: CHARITABLE PEOPLE
Malka is honored to be featured for the second time in Passages and is grateful for the opportunity to share her stories. She lives in Phoenix with her husband and two beautiful sons.
SERENITY DAVIS
HONORABLE MENTION, FICTION: THORNS TO A ROSE
Serenity wanted to be a writer from a very young age. At seventeen years old she realized hard work is the best way to make her dreams come true. She is originally from California but she enjoys living in Arizona very much.

KRYSTA EVANS
SECOND PLACE, POETRY: 1994 TOYOTA PICK-UP
Krysta is an accounting major with a massively unrelated passion for creative writing. She is excited to be able follow all of her desires, no matter the direction, and is grateful for the opportunity to submit her writing to such a competitive group of Arizona writers. Krysta is fortunate to be married to her best friend Ryan, who is the subject of her poem and the forever love of her life.

DAVID GARN
THIRD PLACE, POETRY: MOON WATCH
David is studying for a degree in history as he also travels working as a flight attendant. He is a world currency collector and hopes to utilize his education and writing to expand on and improve his collection.

ROBIN HARTWELL
THIRD PLACE, ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT: HELL FOR THE COMPANY
Robin is a student studying theatre and writing at Scottsdale Community College.

BREE HOFFMAN
FIRST PLACE, ESSAY: RAGE
Bree is an aspiring writer who spent most of her childhood either swept up in elaborate daydreams or with her nose in a book – only to realize later on that she had a knack for putting words on paper. She dedicates this first place award to her mom, whose support and encouragement she would not be here without. She also dedicates this piece to her best friends: Kristina, Savannah, and Steph for kindling and nurturing her creativity when she needed it most.

BEN HOGBERG
HONORABLE MENTION, ESSAY: NOWHERE TO BE FOUND
Ben is currently trapped in a corporate blacksite prison with nothing to eat but a paycheck and a headache. Despite his proficiency at slinging “Upgrades” to his clients he still struggles to bring home the important food, the kind that’s messy and sketchy and best described as adventure. These words are the true story of the pursuit of such adventure, but it seems you never find what you’re looking for.
CASSANDRA KELLOGG
HONORABLE MENTION, ESSAY: MEMOIR
Cassandra is a freshman at South Mountain Community college. She moved to Arizona in hopes of being admitted into the Bilingual Nursing Program the following semester. She enjoys writing in her English classes, and was recommended to enter the contest.

LAURA MANNA
SECOND PLACE, ESSAY: RAIN, DIRT, AND SKY
Laura is a skilled writer and artist, who enjoys journal writing and drawing in her free time. She is a member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and is currently studying at Rio Salado College to obtain an associate’s degree in computer technology. Laura resides in Surprise, Arizona, with her husband Chris and 5-year-old son Derek and believes in enjoying the creative self.

EMILY MCNEILL
THIRD PLACE, FICTION: DARCY
Emily is an SCC student studying anthropology with an obsession of history and the stories of humans throughout time. She has a penchant for cats, tea, fountain pens, and blatantly ignoring Do Not Enter signs. In her spare time, she enjoys daydreaming, but mostly accomplishes nothing besides burning ramen noodles and avoiding writing until deadlines are impossible to neglect.

LIESL MEADOR
THIRD PLACE, ESSAY: THE DEVIL IN OCTOBER
Originally from Illinois, Liesl currently resides in Surprise, Arizona. She is attending Glendale Community College to pursue a degree in psychology and creative writing to help raise awareness of mental illness.

COLLEEN MURRY
HONORABLE MENTION, FICTION: SCAVENGERS
Colleen is an aspiring novelist. She mostly keeps the company of her characters and her cats, and enjoys the scent of creosote after rain and quality coffee.
ALEX OZERS
HONORABLE MENTION, ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT: POOR WILLIAM, POOR DOUG
Alex lives in the desert and complains about the heat. His home thermostat is programmed very carefully. As an artist, he works humorlessly in metal, fiber, and paint. As a writer, he mostly just writes jokes, but he's very serious about it.

JACOBO PEREZ
FIRST PLACE, POETRY:
HOW TO CROSS THE BORDER ILLEGALLY OR HOW TO MAKE TAMALES DE RAJAS
(in the form of an Edward Lear Limerick)
There was a young boy from Juarez,
Who sat by himself in recess;
When they asked “Are you low?” He said simply “No”,
That inscrutable boy from Juarez

ANTHA PERKINS
HONORABLE MENTION, FICTION: IGNES
Antha is a programmer who loves writing horror stories. When she isn't behind a computer, she also enjoys calligraphy, biking, and cats.

GAVIN RICCOBENE
HONORABLE MENTION, ESSAY: TEARING OFF A VEST
Gavin is a student currently taking various courses at Scottsdale Community College. His plan for a major is to delve into computer science and/or programming. He was born and diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, but as he mentions in his essay, he has managed to overcome many of the disorder's more severe symptoms.

MORGAN RIFFLE
HONORABLE MENTION, POETRY: WHITE DRESS
Morgan has enjoyed writing poems since first introduced to it in fifth grade. Her favorite poets include Adrienne Rich, Mary Oliver, Gloria Anzaldua, Louise Gluck, Margaret Atwood, and Sherman Alexie. She is grateful for the chance to be exposed to many more poems and poets while at Mesa Community College.

JAIME ROBINSON
SECOND PLACE, ONE-ACT PLAY/SCRIPT: WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Jaime has been immersed in the performing arts since she was a toddler, exploring the realms of dance, music, and theatre. She has been in over two hundred theatrical and dance productions. She is currently in her last semester at Mesa Community College and will receive her AFA in Theater in May of 2018.
TAYLOR SHEPARD
HONORABLE MENTION, POETRY: IN MY DREAM
Taylor has been a student at MCC for one and a half years. She loves to write poetry and be around the people she loves. She is so humbled to be rewarded alongside her formidable classmates.

SARA STEVEN
FIRST PLACE, FICTION: MERRY-GO-ROUND
Sara decided to get back into furthering her education after enrolling in a creative writing class at Chandler-Gilbert Community College, reigniting a passion for storytelling. She is a recipient of the 2017 Academic Excellence award for creative writing, and her short fiction can be found in The Hungry Chimera. She currently resides in Queen Creek, Arizona.

ANDIE VIDALES
HONORABLE MENTION, POETRY: FATHER
Andie was born in Globe, Arizona. At a young age she protested a beauty pageant and decided to become a poet. She currently lives in Mesa with her partner.
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