

2015

Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

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Zephyrus 2015

Aging

Lisa Williams

If Death was a Gentleman caller twenty years ago,
donning my gossamer and tulle,
I would have ridden into the sunset,
coquettish, leaning Deathward in my décolleté gown
to run my fingers through His long, dark hair,
whispering scandalous things in His ear—until—

On my fortieth birthday, I go about my business,
carefully sidestepping the bones of my reckless youth
(and the newer ones—rattling behind the closet door).
Some mornings I wake hearing nothing,
but this clever little hurt imposes itself
to quiet and still my thoughts.

On this day, I see Death stooping in the garden,
peering at me through the kitchen window
as I scour the breakfast dishes.
He kneels among the foliage to care for his tender green charges.
Carefully and alone, he trims, waters, and cultivates—
raising an earthen hand to me in a casual wave.

I nod in return, seeing him for what he is
at my age—no longer alluring, but commonplace.
And on the day he sends his invitation—so dark and appealing in
my youth—
with arms linked we will quietly tour the garden,
inspecting carrots and spinach, bristling through corn,
our bare feet leaving no tracks in the soft, sun-warmed mud.

Zephyrus

2015



**A publication of the English Department
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Editors:

John Corum
Isiah Fish
Hope Hines
Kyle Marshall
Brandy Meredith
Rachel Sudbeck

Cover art:

Laura Bianco (untitled)

Title page art:

Courtney Carter (untitled)

Art coordination: Mike Nichols

Faculty advisor: David LeNoir

Printing: Print Media

Editor's note: Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

The Last Winter

Hannah Taylor

The cows have pushed their protein tub to the bottom of the hill
three days after we put it out.
They've left good hay in the ring
and are holding out for better.
There's already a new baby,
testing the frosted grass on knees
too big for his legs.
I watch and memorize.
I study the shape of the steam
coming from their square mouths.
Part of me will go with them.
Part of me will lean with them
on sharp, hairy hip bones,
hoping the trailer floor doesn't give.
Stand with them in front of men in overalls
while they wonder what a pound of me is worth.
That part won't come back.
Like selling an arm to the undertaker
before the rest of me is ready to go.

Salt and Flowers

Haley Quinton

You left flowers in my kitchen,
but I put salt water in the vase
to kill them faster.
Now the crusty brown petals drop
and leave salty kisses on the wood.
I don't remember if they were roses or sunflowers.

**The 2015 *Zephyrus* is dedicated to the memory of
two cherished English emeritus faculty:**



Dr. Charmaine A. Mosby

March 2, 1940 - October 25, 2014

“It is noble to teach oneself, but still nobler to teach
others—and less trouble.” —Mark Twain



Dr. James S. Flynn, Jr.

June 1, 1944 - December 11, 2014

“Gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”
—Geoffrey Chaucer

Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award

Hannah Taylor
“The Last Winter”

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award

Jarred Johnson
“Genealogy”

Ann Travelstead Fiction Award of the Ladies Literary Club

Brandy Meredith
“The Patient”

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award

Jade Primicias
“Bridges Made of Beads and Jack Daniels: A Guide
to Making Long-Distance Relationships Work”

Zephyrus Art Award

Laura Bianco
untitled

and look up at you
and my eyes would
tell my secrets
of how glad I am
you're with me—

But I know you'd see the beauty
ripple through
chameleon eyes.

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing
faculty of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

speak to natives,
 see Gaudi's art, the beach,
 and lightning
 from the rooftop of a seashell—
 And I know
 you'd love it, too.

I know you'd love
 the history
 the aqueducts and Roman walls
 a school that was bombed in '39
 where you can still see the scars
 the owls of Lincoln Cathedral
 the imp, steep hill
 vintage charity shops
 the music store in Cambridge
 and the bookstore where it's quiet.

The markets with
 fresh orange juice
 huge mangoes
 and the reddest meat
 with jewelry made from sterling coins
 and concert ticket art,
 clover patches of odd numbers
 where I spend too many hours

And even if you didn't—
 if you didn't love the paintings
 country houses,
 all the dance shoes,
 you would smile when you saw me
 how I'd grin

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Eye of the Beholder

Jade Primicias

Beauty lies
 in the hearts of lovers.
 It could, I guess, be in their eyes,
 but only if
 they were as crystal blue
 and miles deep
 as yours.
 Only if
 they were as clear
 and magnetic
 as the magnetite
 in the Burghley House
 Garden of Surprises.

If they drew
 people in like
 the melodies that seep
 from the strings
 of the busker’s guitar
 beside platform three
 on the Piccadilly Line
 or the Jubilee,
 at King’s Cross St. Pancras
 in London.

It could be in their eyes
 If their eyes reflect
 the sights that take away
 their breath like
 my journey across England

through Hampton Court Palacedowntown Grantham
 across la Rambla,

STEP 5: Walk Home at 4AM

Go home with the guys you met at the bar because they said you could use their internet since you shattered your phone in the street and your two lesbian friends are missing. Discover that they made it back to the hostel but be rendered unable to leave because the girls you didn't lose are taking shots on the recliner and getting friendly with the man from Bristol. Fall asleep on the couch because you can't afford a cab and can't persuade them to leave with you yet, even though it's your birthday.

STEP 6: Be an Alien for Halloween

Go to the children's party at your British host family's house and be home by nine while he goes out with a girl that he met. Don't worry about the picture he posts of a peck on the cheek and a bottle of Jack; he's just giving you a taste of your own medicine.

STEP 7: Learn Denotations of "Faithful"

Meet a cute Asian guy in line for the bus back to London after flying in from Ireland, the trip you took by yourself because your friend missed his flight, which was better off since technically he was an ex-boyfriend. Make jet-lagged small talk while you finger-comb your greasy hair, thinking nothing of appearances since you'll never see this person again. Get stranded at Liverpool Street Station when your credit card stops working. Accept a sushi dinner and surprisingly pleasant conversation from the cute guy you capriciously picture yourself with. Sleep on the airport floor instead of at his apartment when he offers you a bed on your last night in the country because even though he'd sleep on the couch, it could still be considered unfaithful.



Emilie Gill

untitled

Bannerless

Josh Arend

We live by the false things,
following mystic trails which wind
through woods away from home,
if we have one.

Strange mountains stand as gateways
to stranger lands, where we dance
with elves under strange stars
and dread the loss of such wonder.

Horizons do not mark limits,
only milestones, as we pause
to taste streams and waterfalls
chilled by winter and sweetened by spring.

Some call the wind insane, but we know
that it is speaking in foreign tongues
of strange beliefs, and as it echoes in the hills
it whispers in our ears of uncommon things.

Bridges Made of Beads and Jack Daniels: A Guide to Making Long-Distance Relationships Work Jade Primicias

STEP 1: Become Unemployed

Wash the catfish blood off your hands, adorn a push-up bra so you look enticing enough but wear the shorts that sit just above your knee to keep up a semblance of professionalism. Ask for applications at every establishment in the strip mall. Act like seeing your old high school crush behind the Radioshack counter doesn't almost make you walk into the tower of jump drives.

STEP 2: Lie to the Cops

Park in the bowling alley parking lot behind his house and help him make edibles. Sit in camping chairs on his concrete excuse for a back porch, Mike's Harder in your hand, and stare at the stars while he reads you the lyrics to his newest masterpiece. Pass him the Mike's as he runs inside to help George hide the jars and stumble through the wooded path to find black flashlights peeking through your Mustang window. Assume the innocent, sober girl persona and carefully drive Ol' Blue home with three squad cars trailing behind. Next time, don't drive the same car as the guy wanted for trafficking and park it next door to his lab.

STEP 3: Speak Quietly into the Phone, So As Not to Wake Your Sister
Kneel under your bedroom window and stare out at the field where you traced your own constellations, saw your first UFOs, and tasted each other's Blistex for the first time. Listen with bated breath to his conspiracy theories and plans to escape society. Consider running away with him, but instead rest assured that the girl he's going with will keep him safe. They've been best friends since he moved to Kentucky, after all. Keep their whereabouts secret from their families, roommates, and employers, while waiting for a phone call of your own.

STEP 4: Where His Necklace in All Your Pictures

Even though he's working in a candy shop in Colorado and sharing a room with a girl who his friends say has always had feelings for him, make sure that the grungy beaded necklace is visible in every photograph you take abroad. Spend your mornings Skyping on his smoke break instead of exploring and making friends with your fellow castle inhabitants. Turn down a trip to Denmark so you can afford to mail him a birthday gift. Worry about what he'll say when you don't have WiFi in Bath for a weekend. Steal him a piece of Stonehenge and a Cavern Club guitar pick.

Leviathans

--inspired by Jim Wayne Miller's "The Faith of Fishermen"
Shay Barlow



Laura Bianco

untitled

What they see, the scientists experimenting in their laboratories, the priests worshipping in their temples and cathedrals, the philosophers arguing in their own heads—what they see they say are the answers, through the scientific method, through faith and prayer, through the foundations of Aristotle. Everything can be explained. They say mystery has left the universe, that leviathans no longer exist, whose bellows and fanged maws once haunted our imaginations.

But these are human inventions. Attempts to understand a reality we can barely describe. Like shadows cast on a stone wall. Leviathans still exist. They live in the immense questions still unanswered, in all the knowledge still unknown, in wonder itself. I can hear the sighs of their slumber across the earth, feel them writhing in the deepest fathoms of the ocean, and see the shadows they cast drift across the stars and our thoughts. Leviathans still exist—take care in waking them lest their truths swallow you whole.

Plastic People

George Batchelder

We are plastic people.
Paper people.
Packed up, ripped up, fucked up,
thrown out Kleenex people.
Live in the past people.

With food delusion, we delight
in the warped and warbled whining
of old vinyl disks,
and pretend they still sound the same.

Steeple people, cheap people,
pennies in the basket people.
Bury the dead deep people.

We love to laud a corpse while it's fresh.
Prop it up, paint it up,
imagine they're sleeping for as long as we can,
and pretend they're still the same.

Tidal

David Anthony Price

A single grain of sand holds more atoms than
all the beaches in the world have sand

to dig our feet into, to lie in and
pull apart, to sling, to reform

into surfed, combed, kicked, tidy
castles with better views of the beach,

walls thicker and stronger than the Trojan
brick, salty and white in the baking sun

that backs away over the horizon
to let us down

our drinks in twinkling phosphorescent hours—
a cantaloupe sky blushing before the moon

tides and waves on the ruins
mystically two miles off shore

after centuries of ebbing
away at the shoreline—

after centuries of drifting,
to sink our toes, cowering,

and kicking sand
castles, collapsing

for a moment.

even more. She pressed against her temples as she turned her legs over the edge of her bed and stood up.

Erin made her way down the stairs. She did not care about the noise she made with every step. She only wanted to make it back into the basement where Ralphie would be. She knew he was hurting, and she needed to help. She walked through the kitchen, opened a drawer, and pulled out a short steak knife.

When she opened the basement door, she could hear Ralphie's moans louder than ever before. He was suffering, and, as Erin turned on the light and walked down, she could see him twisting against the chains the held him. Blood slowly streaked down his arm, and his legs were crossed to prevent the wounds from bleeding freely.

"It's ok, Ralphie," she said. She made sure to keep her voice soft, hoping that it would somehow ease the pain. "I'm here. We'll make you clean."

Erin kneeled down next to the creature and looked studied his skin. It was covered in a layer of grit, making it rough to the touch. Erin took her nail and scraped it along, trying to scrape the dirt off, but it stayed caked on the skin.

"Let's clean you."

Erin took the knife and made a small cut just below the cuff around Ralphie's wrist. She took her nail and dug into the cut, pulling the skin off. It came off in chunks, peeling like the orange she had fed him, and cracking as she pinched it between her fingers. Ralphie's blood was thick, and it oozed out slowly as Erin worked the skin off of his arm.

"We'll make you clean."

Ralphie was silent. The flesh on his left arm was completely flayed, and so Erin moved over to the right. Ralphie was silent, taking the cleaning like a child would a back. He let out a soft moan, but Erin could not tell if it was of pain or pleasure. She did not care. She was doing what was best.

"Erin?" asked a voice behind her. She ignored it.

Ralphie tapped his nails against the cuff, and it gave Erin a beat to do her work to. She was done with the arms, and now she was slowly pulling off the loose skin of his legs, which slid rather than cracked. Before long, Ralphie was bare of any skin except for his face, so Erin to her knife and began to work on that, too.

"Oh my God, Erin. Debra, call 9-1-1."

It was her father. He saw her against the middle of the wall wearing nothing but a tank top. Her eyes were beginning to swell with tears, and her toes curled to the bottom of her feet. She was alone, chewing on her palm, and there was blood spreading down her arms like rills off of a river. Next to her feet was the bloodied edge of a knife.

"I'm trying to clean," she said.

John Lennon: A Day in the Rye

Derek Ellis

"It's funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands and they'll do practically anything you want them to."

—J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

I read the news today,
Oh boy,
About the man in
the Red hat—
That damned deer
stalking cap,
with a pistol in his hand
and a paper *Rye* sandwich
in his pocket
made by *his* Salinger;
the Salinger—
recluse as he was,
moved a man to
bullets in another's back.
Bullets in back.
Paperback in jacket pocket—
He knew what he'd done
as the blood stained glasses
were taken off in one final gesture—
Laid on the sidewalk
to forever look back
towards Liverpool.
He had looked up and noticed he was late.
He had looked up and noticed.



Christina Scott

untitled

His hand was on her leg. It was sliding up. *No*. Did she say it? She wanted him to stop. *Stop*. His hand was sliding closer to her waistline. She put her hand on his and pulled it off.

“No.”

She remembered saying it. Another skip. She felt sick to her stomach. She was pressed in her back. Her legs were naked from her waist to her socks and she could feel him on her. His lips were on her neck. She turned her head sharply and bumped the bridge of her nose on his skull. It hurt but she could not reach her hand to grab it. Another skip.

She could hear the music, and the layers of plywood and insulation only let the heavy bass pound through into the room. She began to graph it. Each beat. It was forming a rhythm in her head that she could focus on to distract her from the world around her. She felt the rhythm against her skin. It was inside of her. She wanted to disrupt it but she felt to weak to move. The sound of panicked knocking was heard on the door.

“Hey. Is Erin in there?”

It was muffled by the door that stood between them and the hallway, but Erin could hear Sarah’s voice from outside. She wanted to call out for her but the words came out as a moan. Then, she heard the door bust open.

“Oh my God.”

The rhythm had stopped.

“Get the hell off of her.”

It was the sound of Sarah’s voice. It was shrill and pierced through Erin’s ears like a knife. She felt the weight lift off of her, but she still could not move. One of her legs slipped off the edge of the bed.

“Jesus Christ, man, get out.”

“Be chill, dude. We’re just having a good time.”

“I don’t think she’s conscious, Jackson.”

“What did you do to her?”

“We’re cool here. We were just talking. Relax.”

“Get her out of here, Jackson.”

Erin felt a warm embrace lift her.

* * *

2:33 A.M.

Erin woke up to a throbbing headache, staring directly into the bright red digital numbers. She panicked for a moment, not remembering where she fell asleep, only to realize she was lying in her own bed. She was home.

Her mind felt like it was in a fog, and her body felt numb. She realized she was drenched to the bone in sweat. She pulled the covers off of her body, and she was still dressed in the same clothes from earlier that night. She tried to remember the spaces between, but trying made her head hurt

bend to the weight of simultaneous hops from unified body of dancers, and the repeated bumps from other people railed against her small frame as she listened to the music. She felt bodies get closer as she was pulled closer to the center of the room, and she began to feel the weight of bodies pressing against her on all sides. She began to feel anxiety crawl up her throat like a spider.

She opened her eyes. She was in the middle of strangers. She panicked and began to work her way through the crowd. She used force, shoving people out of the way. She felt buried alive, and the bodies were the dirt that suffocated her. She felt her body begin to freeze, and sweat was pulling her sleeved shirt down tightly against her arm. Even after escaping the crowd, her was tight, so she made her way to the back to find a familiar face and fresh air.

“Hey.”

It was David’s voice. She looked to the left to see him standing there and making his way through some other guests. Erin tried to relax. She tried to keep her calm and relax. It took her a moment to admit that she was attracted to him.

“You left your drink,” he said, pointing to the table behind her.

She turned around and grabbed her drink.

“Oh. Thanks.”

“You look like you need it,” he said as he worked his way around to her. “You doing alright?”

“Yeah,” she said, stuttering. “I’m just, um, new to this, and, um...”

“Just relax,” he said. He was still smiling at her. She was starting to like it. “Want to find a place to talk?”

“What?”

“You know. Talk. Without the loud music?”

“Where?”

“Follow me.”

She took another gulp of her beer, noting that the taste was much more accommodating this time as it went down her throat. She followed him as he shifted around her and through the hall to the right. In the far corner, just before the backdoor, was another small hallway that lead to a set of stairs leading to the next floor. Erin’s head was starting to feel grog. She tried to graph the music in her head again and follow the pattern, but it wouldn’t form in her head. She took another long drink from her cup, keeping her eyes on his back as he stepped up the stairs.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

She didn’t remember his answer, only the mumblings of a room. Her world wasn’t spinning. Instead, it began skipping. She was in his room.

“So we never did get a gig, but I still play,” he said.

She laughed. Another skip.

The Boulevard

Isiah Fish

The sky was anguished in a whimsical kind of way, if you know what I mean. Swordfish-shaped clouds uppercut into gray cumulous; a black-bird was struck twice by lightning, then struck again as it dove beak first into the cracking pavement on Venice Boulevard; the Turkish babble of taxi drivers echoed off the muscular thunder; all the raindrops fell at once, as if the atmosphere was one huge tipping bucket, and then rain staggered in intervals of thirty-seven or so seconds; a burning single-pilot jet spun into IHOP and made fire. Everyone on the street was sprinting and screaming; there must’ve been enough adrenaline to power a third world country for three years.

I was under the awning of an organic apple street market. Elena Ciucurovski, a neighbor who always wore blue eye shadow and bright blush, ran down the street holding her latex raincoat closed with one hand and the leash of her bovine Saint Bernard with the other. If she stepped on a crack in her yellow heels, she’d fall and somehow kill them both.

Once Elena Ciucurovski and I got drinks at the bar in the Viridian Mort hotel. She swirled a couture cat claw nail around her glass, sporadically dipping the tip in and sucking the White Russian from her finger. She was either a magic trick or a magnet. She talked about Samina, her Saint Bernard, and her eyes lit up like everything in her life depended on that dog rising every dawn and kissing her with the mouth of morning. She said, “Get female dog, because female dog live long time.”

The sky blinked like a strobe light. The sun was lightless. The wind was strong enough to blow a little girl down the street, and it did. All the palm trees flailed like hair. A man with hip-length dreadlocks and fingerless gloves decided to take up a spot under the awning. He smelled like smegma and Cajun because he was homeless and eating a burrito. Across the street, Elena Ciucurovski was hiking up her latex raincoat so that her bare leg glistened in the soft light of Salty Salvatore’s neon sign, but the taxis didn’t stop because no one wants a Saint Bernard in their cab.

Tires screeched to a halt in the distance, adding to the punk rock of horns and other threnodies. On the roof of a Fifth Third Bank, a man screamed something unintelligible before lighting fireworks that ejaculated their chandelier cake all over the boulevard. People rushed to crowd the streets and mop the streets with each other. A mariachi band marched down the sidewalk, begging people to sing with them, “Sing, Patriots!” they said, “Muerte de un gallero!” The violins upset Samina: Elena Ciucurovski struggled to hold her down while she bit the valve off a fire hydrant.

After drinks at the hotel bar, we had gone to room 1103. Outside the window, the city slumped in the postprandial light; the sky was tender and

unblemished. Elena Ciucurovski knew how to salsa, but she didn't think highly of herself. She had an eight-year-old boy but never said his name. She confessed feeding bread to birds in parks with signs that read PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE BIRDS. Her face was the moon and the rest of her was one star that had sunk into itself. She said, "I feel slightly anxious about nothing in particular all of the time."

Amidst the mariachi trumpets blaring there was an earthquake. It opened up Venice Boulevard and swallowed Fifth Third Bank and the palm trees and Elena Ciucurovski as she was trying to hail a cab. Samina howled like a wolf howling under a full moon. Elena's mouth was wide open as she fell, but the scream was drowned out by the trumpet blare and the maracas, and the thunder, and the birds, and everything else that was on its way out.

other familiar faces, Jackson gently grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards the kitchen.

"C'mon," he said.

He handed her a cup. Erin did not know what was in the cup, but she knew she wasn't the only one drinking it. The liquid--beer, Erin guessed--was in a state between chilled and lukewarm, just enough to disguise what Erin heard was the taste of piss as it fizzed through her mouth and down her throat. They went outside and talked. Erin didn't remember exactly when she went back with Jackson for a second cup, and by this time, the knot in her stomach was smothered by the dopamine rushing to her brain. She felt liberated.

"I guess you're a bit of a lightweight," Jackson said.

Erin just smiled. She took another sip of her drink as she closed her eyes and focused again on the beat of the music. She tried to graph it again, the same spiked graph that she could focus on, but the lines were splotted, as if drawn by a cheap pen, and when she was frustrated with those results, she decided it was time for a third. She felt a hand on her wrist again. It was Jackson.

"Go easy, Erin," he said. "Hang out for a little?"

"I'll hang out in a second," she said. "Just one more."

"I'm not going to tell you no..."

Erin was already inside before Jackson finished his sentence. As she made her way to the keg, she felt a hand tap her shoulder. She turned to see David, one of the three occupants of The Nest, looking down over at her. He was blonde, almost unnaturally so, and Sarah would never shut up about his blue eyes. Now he was standing just a few inches taller than Erin wearing a beanie and a flannel shirt. He was smiling.

"Enjoying the party?" he asked. His voice sounded scratched, probably from having to raise it all night.

Erin nodded.

"Don't you dance?" he asked, glancing over to the hall towards the living room. "It's fun."

Erin smiled and shrugged. She could feel the knot slowly push through the alcohol. In an effort to keep it down, Erin filled her cup again and took a large gulp.

"Let's go," he said.

She was pulled into the living room before she could finish her drink, setting it down on a small table placed halfway in the hall. David was leading her into the mesh of bodies, but before she crossed the threshold, she pulled away, breaking David's soft grip. He looked back at her, stared for a moment, and motioned her to come.

Erin closed her eyes and let the beat pound through her ears again as she entered the mass of people. She could feel the floorboards beneath her

“Is that your new significant other?” Erin asked.

“Please,” Sarah said, donning a playful grin. “Since when did I have a significant other?”

Erin laughed with Sarah as she left, but when Sarah was out of sight, her face contorted in slight confusion. Erin let the words *significant other* settle softly against her pool of thoughts, like an autumn leaf blown gently by a breeze. Her phone buzzed, and when she pulled it out, she saw a new message from Jackson. She opened it.

You going to be there this weekend?, it said.

Yes.

* * *

It was eight when Sarah, Erin, and Jackson arrived to The Nest. Erin invited him, and Sarah seemed alright with it. And, for the first time, Erin found herself laughing with him and Sarah. She felt more open. She wasn't an open door, but she was at least unlocked. The weather had warmed up to the mid forties, what most Michiganders viewed to be shorts weather, and the sky was clear enough for people to take the party outside. Erin could see they all had plastic cups, and some were scattered along the lawn.

“Hey, girl,” Sarah said, calling to someone Erin did not recognize.

Sarah ran into the thick of the party, crawling through the crowd into the backyard of The Nest. Erin was now alone with Jackson, who's back and shoulders were beginning to slump slightly forward. His hands were tucked neatly into his pocket.

“Classic Sarah,” he said with a nervous smile. “She's always got someone else to talk to.”

“Yeah,” Erin said. “At least she's sweet about it.”

“So,” Jackson said after a moment. “Want to grab a drink?”

“I don't drink.”

“Want to try?”

The thought of Ralphie invaded her mind. He was trapped in a basement against a wall, and she was helpless to free him. There was something stagnant in him. Erin had that in common with Ralphie.

“Why not,” she said.

The inside of The Nest was swarming with drunken bodies trying to get a little too close under the dim lights. The music was louder this time, drowning out any chance for conversation with the pulsating beat of club music. The living room was cleared of any furniture, Erin noticed, to make room for a thriving dance floor of intoxicated young adults with no greater purpose than to take someone home. Erin could feel the air warm and humid from their sweat as she and Jackson crawled along the side of the room to the kitchen, where Erin assumed the beverages were. The hallway at the back of the house ended with a small screen door that led outside to a backyard full of people talking, and before Erin could look for Sarah, or even any



Laura Miller

untitled

The Moon Is a Shady Queen

Isiah Fish

The moon mistook my hair for the night sky.
I caught her snatching stars in my scalp,
Told her *girrrrl you better back up*.
She didn't know that underneath my wig
I'm all pocketknives and cornbread.
And I don't blame her,
but you can't crack this mystique
because the Gods have already bowed down
for my couture,
my contour.
Dark begins at my fingertips,
slick, loops around my muscular
thunder.
And look at Moon, cutting her eyes
at me, face void of any kind of
prayer.
Yes Moon, I can see you from here Hunty.
But wait—didn't she learn her ways
from watching me slink from a catsuit
and make a mess of the stage?
I kick high, hip-hop majorette style
and make a fool of her.
YAAAASSSSSS,
The universe gags.
I comb out the knots in the stars
with a hair-flip,
I'm giving you glam-girl,
call it Ruck The Night Realness,
My strut is an anthem,
Sing me: garden where the red fierce grows.
Sing me: fresh fish, my body the only ocean that drops.
The snap of my fingers parts weaves.
They tell me I better work—No

really had much of a time to talk. Right before Erin's second Wednesday class was over, around noon, she received a text from Sarah saying only "lunch?"

They met for lunch in the campus cafeteria around one thirty. Before going in, Erin thought about turning around and going back to the dorm, but she knew her roommate would find her eventually. When she entered the cafeteria, she could see Sarah sitting alone against the far end of the room despite the crowd of students getting food for the lunchtime rush. She seemed out of place without her usual company of men.

"So how was home?" Sarah asked. Erin sat across from her with a slice of pizza.

"It was alright," she said. She chewed on the cuff of her sleeve.

"So. Lookit. I'm going to be straight. Do you think you want me to invite you to the Nest or would you rather be left alone about it?"

Erin shrugged.

"Because you running off, not answering, and then finding out you had some episode is not O.K."

"I do appreciate the invites..."

"I'm not trying to sound mad, but I'm going to be honest. You can sit in your room on your computer by yourself, or you can come out and meet some people. I don't want to be your babysitter."

Erin stared back down at her pizza. The crowded room was elevated in volume, and the blend of voices made it hard to focus. If this had been last semester, Erin would have been offended by her roommate's remarks, but now she just chewed on them for a while, thinking of the right things to say. She realized her roommate was right.

"It won't happen again," Erin said. "It wasn't the party... something else."

"Good," Sarah said. "Well, if you're not going to flip, the boys at The Nest are doing something this weekend again, and you're more than welcome to show up. With me or without me."

"Thanks."

"If you need a ride or anything, let me know," Sarah said. "But hey, if you're not comfortable with that scene, just go home. I'm just trying to help."

"Alright, I get it," Erin said.

Sarah stared at her, studying her features and trying to get into her head. Erin just took another bite of her pizza and stared at the table as she chewed. Erin could already feel the well of anxiety building in her stomach, but she didn't want that to show through. Sarah could be annoying, but at least she was a friend.

"Good," Sarah said. "Anyway, I promised Thomas I'd meet up with him in a little bit."

the dried blood. She reached into the handwarmer on the front of her hoodie and pulled out a tan bandage. Erin supposed they made it tan to match the color of human skin, but it clashed against Ralphie's pale leg as she lifted it and began to wrap it around. She took what was leftover and wrapped the fresh cuts with the remaining bandage, hoping to at least stop the bleeding. When she was done, she placed another orange slice into Ralphie's mouth.

"I talked to Dr. Thompson today," Erin said. Ralphie stopped chewing when she said his name. "He said you'll get much better. He said it just takes some time, O.K.?"

Ralphie nodded his head slowly to Erin's words. He began to tap his long nails against the metal cuffs that held him against the wall. He continued chewing, ever so slowly, for a moment more. When he finished, Erin prepared to replace the orange slice with another, but she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. When she pulled it out, her screen was already lit, blinding her from the surroundings of her dim basement. Seven new text messages. Four from Sarah. Three from Jackson.

Ralphie began to moan again, and Erin brought her attention back to the creature. She slipped her phone back into her side pocket, then placed another slice to his lips. *They're not important right now*, she thought to herself. Erin changed from a squatting position to sitting cross-legged, and she moved in closer to Ralphie. She could not smell him anymore than she could smell herself, though his skin was still layered with crusted mud and dirt from damp conditions of the basement.

"Only you're important," she said to the creature. His head was hanging, so her eyes were fixed on the top of his bald head. There were single strands of hair beginning to grow long in patches, something Erin hadn't noticed before. "I think you're growing hair. I'm pretty sure that's a good sign."

She spent the rest of her waking night next to Ralphie, finishing to feed him the orange slices and then giving him the skin to chew on afterwards. They sat alone in silence until, finally, Erin began to make her way back to her room upstairs.

"I'll be back soon," she said to him, halfway up the stairs. "I'm going to make things right for us."

She turned off the light at the top of the stairs, and left him in darkness.

* * *

It was halfway through the first week of school before Sarah started talking to Erin again. At first she was angry, telling Erin how worried she was and scolding her for not picking up or texting her all weekend. Erin just shrugged, told her they weren't dating, and then went on to her usual business of browsing the internet and reading on occasion. That was Sunday, and when classes finally began to start on that Monday, the two roommates never

I'm about to *werk!*

Under her breath, Moon is all shade—
Why else do you think she avoids the day?
She's about to get her mug clocked.

Why must she think threat of me?

Wench. She better pose and be still,
as goddess as she is.

Somebody *please* get her an appletini so she
can stop sweatin' me.

Better yet, make it a Blue Moon
so the bitch can bask in eponymy.

I could replace her with the balls of my feet if I wanted,
pearled for pulling tides and ignoring wishes.

Mhmm, she thinks she's so slick, posted up, watching me.

All I know is, the moon better watch herself.

Jigsaw Puzzle for a Rainy Day

Lynne Hutcheson

From the rain-spattered kitchen window,
I see the once-dry creek
is now knee-high with rushing water.
Leaves bob and bustle
like pedestrians down a wet city street,
hurrying to make their subway connection
through the neighbor's culvert.
The tall hill to the west muffles the thunder clap
that warns of the next band of rain.
I sit at the table,
absently stroking the cat with one hand,
while spinning a piece of sunshine
between the fingers of the other.

dealing with, exactly. You were young. We could never have imagined..." He choked a little. "They don't tell you that kind of stuff when you sign up for foster care. They don't tell you a past. But we loved you. And we still love you. And we just want to make sure that all that stuff in the past stays there. So you can have a healthy future."

Erin loosened her shoulders. She had heard this talk so many times before, and she knew it was a talk more for their peace of mind than hers.

"Dad," she said, "what happened to me and my brother isn't what happens in any sane place." She was repeating years of Dr. Thompson's words drilled into her head. "My biological father was a bad man. He did disgusting things. But I can't let that hold me back." They were now her words. "I can't constantly live in fear."

Her dad was silent, and when Erin glanced sideways at his profile, she could see his face begin to scrunch. He was beginning to get emotional. Erin reached over to the radio and tuned it until there was something mindless and poppy playing.

"I'll be fine," she said. "I'm just trying to get out a little more. Push myself. That's healthy."

Erin looked back out to the road only to see they were turning back into their driveway and pulling up to their small, blue house. When they pulled to a stop, Erin felt a release in tension. She unbuckled and opened the door.

"Erin," her father said.

She glanced at him over her left shoulder.

"I love you."

"Love you, too, Dad."

* * *

Erin made sure that each of her steps were careful as she made her way down into the basement. The steps would often creak loudly, and she didn't want to wake up either of her parents. She could hear Ralphie, however, and his sobs and moans echoed up the stairway as she tiptoed down. In her left hand was an orange, and her right hand picked repeatedly at the skin like a scab.

"I got something for you, Ralphie," she said as she made her way to the beast. His skin hung in a way that seemed to melt into the floor below him, but the fresh cuts on the inside of his leg still managed to bleed like the skin was taut against his muscle. Erin ripped apart the orange, clearing away the stringy, white debris that clung to the slice, and she gently placed the slice into Ralphie's open mouth. He chewed it and savored it as the juice seeped onto his lips.

"I brought you a real bandage this time," Erin said. She talked as if talking to a child.

Erin removed the old piece of her sleeve that was now crusted from

pocket for her phone, scrolled through her contacts, and dialed her dad's number.

"Sweetie?"

By the time she heard the voice on the other end of her speaker, she realized her face was beginning to well up with tears. She couldn't process why they were there, but her face felt warm despite the bitter wind outside.

"Can you pick me up?" she asked. Her words were pulled choked tight with her effort to hold back.

"Are you O.K.?" her father asked.

"Can you pick me up?"

* * *

"How did your talk go?" Erin's father asked.

It was a sunny day when she went to see Dr. Thompson, her therapist, for the first time in six months. When her dad had picked her up two nights before, she couldn't find a rational word to describe her feelings, and it wasn't until Erin's father took her phone away that he could get her to finally calm down. Erin had no longer been in control. Even scarier, Erin couldn't name what *was*.

"He said I'm fine," she said. "He said that these things happen."

Dr. Thompson was the third therapist that Erin had throughout her nineteen years. Her parents always mentioned how lucky she was that her therapists were so good. There were so many *bad* therapists out there that it was good to make progress on each visit, they said. Erin never found anything lucky about therapy.

"Listen, Erin."

Her father would often start serious or parental conversations with "listen". It was as if he had to make an extra effort to make sure she was, indeed, paying attention, or as if he needed a verbal transition to go from adult friend to parental figure. These conversations would always take place in the car, which meant Erin could never really escape them. It was claustrophobic.

"I know me and your mother told you to go socialize. And I know we wanted you to make sure you were enjoying yourself," he said. He took a breath. "But maybe you shouldn't go to those kinds of parties. You know?"

Erin remained silent, staring back outside. Along the side of the road was a field, and along the side of the field were a number of saplings rising out of the ground at perfect intervals. She began to count them as she chewed on her cuff.

"I'll be straightforward," he said. "Me and your mother are afraid that contact with... young men... something might trigger your past again."

"You mean what my dad did?" Erin asked.

Her dad sighed. Erin could sense that he was uncomfortable. "When me and your mother took you in," he said, "we didn't know what we were

To the Mother of Jihadi John

Lynne Hutcheson

Do you recognize those eyes
behind the mask,
the chilling voice,
or the hand you used to hold
that grips the knife
he brandishes on the telly?
How could you not?

Was he a sweet child?
Alar boy, choir boy, cricket star?
Or was he a tormentor of pets,
a controller of victims,
a sadistic little beast
who liked to play with fire?
Did you get him help?

He clutches his knife,
slicing through skin, sinew, airway,
smelling the blood of another mother's son
as he brutally beheads the latest
to plead for life on the networks.
Do you know this man with bloody hands
is your son?

I hope not.
For your own sake,
I hope you are dead.

Genealogy

Jerrod Johnson

I was born on the border of Appalachia and Something Else,
1993 splitting my threads in two halves:

Appalachian, Not.

I exited the womb half moonshine and fiddle,
half internet and Coca-Cola,
held maple leaf helicopters in my boy palms
and watched them fall on acres of green earth.

Yes, mother grabbed God like spoons.
weaved herself a blanket of holy pages,
sang gospels lonely in her poster bed at night.
I spent Sunday mornings cross-legged on a pew
hiding love from my mother and God, who made me.

I ate burnt toast for breakfast, not grits or gravy.
Aunt Nora was the only one who knew fried chicken.
Dinners were fortune cookies and pizza.
Dad took his to his bedroom.
The rest of us ate forks full of television.

Father stuffed basketballs down my throat.
I choked on the color blue and spat out a real man.
I quit sports 8th grade when the river to my legs dried up
and built houses in books and photographs:
things Carhart boys didn't know about.

I spoke money like my teachers did.
On holidays when my family traveled east,
I told Mom to talk like me.
She agreed.
She said she sounded like tobacco and well water.
She molted her skin then in the driver's seat of a Lexus;
I called it beautiful widening in the sunlight.

was completely alone.

She had somehow found her way to the drink table. She didn't remember walking to it. In front of her was a choice of red and blue cups, and then a single keg without a label. She reached down and grabbed a cup, then eyed the keg. *Not today.* Erin went through a door frame to the kitchen and filled her blue glass with water from the sink.

"Hey."

The kitchen was empty, and the music was muffled by a wall and a hallway, leaving only the bass to pound through. It helped Erin focus on the beat. She started to graph the music in her head again.

"Erin?"

Jackson was a tall, young man, now standing just a few feet away from Erin. He looked much older, and if Erin hadn't known any better, she would have guessed that Jackson was a senior. He had black hair and green eyes, and while Erin didn't find him repulsive, she found his pursuing of her to be suspicious. She wanted to avoid him like she always did. He said something to her that she couldn't fully understand above the music, so she just gave him a smile and raised her head.

"I said how have you been," he said again.

"I'm alright," she said. She leaned against the counter slightly away from him.

"Yeah. I've just been looking to hang out and catch up with some people," Jackson said. "Three weeks feels longer than it should." He waited for a response. There was nothing, so he asked, "How was your winter break?"

Erin noticed the full cup in his hand for the first time. He could be drunk. The possibilities and directions that the conversation could go began to race through her head. He would ask her on a date. She would have to respond. People would talk. She would be stuck with him and have to entertain someone else for the night. She didn't want to explore these possibilities, though, and she needed an excuse to leave. She didn't want to be alone with him. She didn't want to have this conversation. She wanted to go home and browse the internet. "Hold on. I'll be right back."

Her stomach was beginning to squeeze again as she snaked her way to the front of the party, and she could feel the muscles in her shoulder begin to tense as she took each step towards the door. She snaked her way around, putting her hoodie up. No one could recognize her. *Why did I even come?* It was a terrible idea. For a moment, she thought she heard Sarah call her name, but part of her wanted to believe it was just her imagination. Sarah was probably occupied with some guy anyway. Erin might have the room to herself. She saw the door, and when she reached it, the tension made one last pull before releasing as she walked outside into the cold winter air. It was a long walk from her dorm room, but began to make it. She reached into her

cles. But she could feel the snarky grin of her roommate against her back. Erin kept her face straight but could not help from flushing.

“Hey. He seems good for you is all I’m saying,” Sarah said. “I’ve known him since pre-school. He’s sweet.” She took a breath. “And hey, you need to get to know that side of life. It might turn out to be something, you know?”

“If he’s so great, you date him.”

Sarah made a gagging noise. “Ew. No. I’m not going to pretend him and I are best friends, but that would be like sleeping with your brother. Do you know how sick that is?”

Erin shrugged. Sleeping with her brother. That *was* pretty sick. Erin opened another article. She read the title. “The Psychology of a Healthy Sex Life”. Erin closed the article.

* * *

Erin arrived at the front steps of The Nest at 8 o’clock on a Wednesday. It was a week before classes began, seemingly designed to allow students to get one last binge session before they had to hit the books. She had only been to this house once before, but it looked just as worn down and filthy as she remembered the last time. To Erin, The Nest was nothing more than an over glorified crack house. While there was never actually any crack, the three stoners on the lease of the house, Floyd, David, and Stephen, hardly seems to use the house for anything more than a place to sleep and a place to trash. The lawn was covered in a light dusting of snow, which covered another layer of long, dead grass. As Erin followed Sarah up the steps of the porch, she could feel the wood slump beneath their weight, and as they stepped closer to the crooked screen door, Erin could feel the same weight in her stomach. The lights inside were dim, and she could only see the silhouette of her roommate as Sarah went through the door and rested a hand on some guy’s chest. Erin was alone.

She entered the small crowd, trying not to look straight down at the floor and seem anti-social, but also trying to avoid any eye-contact. She found a delicate balance at a diagonal angle staring at everyone’s knees. Music pounded in the background, not loud enough to drown out any conversation, but just loud enough to require someone to raise their voice. She could hear the scratch of fatigue in the words of some fraternity guy’s words, and he seemed to be saying hello to everyone. Erin didn’t recognize anyone. She tucked herself away into a corner on the far end of the room.

The music. She focused first on the synthetic keyboard that played just a little under the electric guitar. It was a sound from three decades ago, but here it was, invading her mind. She focused on the two measures it repeated until her mind shifted to the bass. It was a simple beat, and Erin could feel her neck instinctively nodding along with it. She tried to let it press down the rising knot in her stomach, but it was pierced by the intensity. She

Mawmaw never told me stories.

What she knew of the mountains came in a binding.

I asked her once about her father’s father.

She said she never knew his real name, only Cash, which she scratched in his grave at nine.

I offered to find him on a website that traced Genealogy.

She said her blood wasn’t worth \$20.

Once, his throat weak like a car radio,

Pawpaw tried to tell me about a coalmine.

I didn’t put his words anywhere I’d return to.

Now he rots in a nursing home

like hog fat on a countertop,

everything Appalachian I could have been

locked up in there,

rotting with him.

Night Funeral in Harlan

Jarred Johnson

Night funeral in Harlan,
and the hill's a slip 'n slide.
The daughter pees in a porta-potty
at the cemetery,
and a bee flies up her skirt.
She has pig tails
and cheeks sunk in
and purple like raisins in the sun.

Night funeral in Harlan,
and the sheriff's lights
spark red and blue off the stone
of the Brock boy
lost at Darby.
The old mother with the hat
holds a hanky to her mouth,
and her tears fall heavy into it.

Night funeral in Harlan,
and the sister named Ette
sings "In the Sweet By and By"
as the casket closes
and the body descends
and the mud is lifted in
shovel full after sagging shovel full.

Night funeral in Harlan,
and the hillside is swollen
with the bodies of poor boys
singing back a flood
and a mountain that was
and all the years that beat
as loud as the bang
that ran them to their graves
at a night funeral in Harlan.

she was more familiar with the routine of college life, and her small social life in her hall gave her a small amount of comfort.

"Alright, then," her father said. "You have everything you need, right?"

Erin was on the sidewalk staring up to the fourth floor where her room was. She could see her roommate's golden, Oakland University flag hanging against the window. It was a bright gold and black spot among the empty windows around it. Erin wished she could get rid of it.

"I think so," she said. She gave him a reserved smile. "Thanks dad."

After a brief exchange of arms, Erin's father left her in front of the two glass doors with her suitcase and backpack. The luggage rolled against the sidewalk, bouncing up with each crack. Erin took a deep breath.

* * *

"So you ready for the party tonight?"

Erin was staring at her computer screen, skimming over some article she had found on Reddit. It was about the imagination, and to the right of the article was a picture of a young boy playing with blocks. Most of the blocks were left in a mess on the floor, scattered without rhyme or reason, while some of the blocks were stacked in a pyramid. *That's not imagination*, Erin thought.

"Hey. Erin."

Erin turned. She had to pay attention to her roommate sometime, so she turned her head over her shoulder and met eyes with Sarah. She was short but proportioned, and Erin thought her feet must have been attached to her vocal chords, because whenever Sarah let out a higher pitch, she seemed to bounce up with it. Sarah also had the terrible habit of prioritizing anything with a penis, and, whenever a guy was around, her attitude towards Erin changed from friendly to non-existent. Erin smiled at her and gave a quick nod. She felt a knot form in her stomach at the thought of a social event.

"No funny business," Sarah said. "You need to stay. I don't care if you don't drink. I don't care if you don't talk to anybody. But you need to stay until at least midnight."

Erin kept her shoulders shrugged as she turned back around. She could already feel the knot twist tighter with each unheard tick of the clock. She began to chew on the cuff of her hoodie's sleeve. Her phone on the desk buzzed, and the screen lit up to reveal a new text. It was from Jackson Branard.

"So are you guys like, official or something?" Sarah asked. Her head was looking over Erin's shoulder.

"No."

"So there is something going on, then?"

"I don't even know him."

Erin tapped the power button so her phone screen turned dark, and she went back to scrolling down the webpage and skimming the title of arti-

* * *

“How are you getting along with... Sarah, is it?” Erin’s father asked. His eyes were mostly fixed on the road, but Erin could see him glance at her in the corner of his eye. She was curled up in the passenger seat, drifting away to a light sleep with each small bump that rocked the car.

“Fine.”

“And friends?”

Erin was staring out the windshield now. Her focus was on the line dividers that they passed, nodding along with the steady, visual beat they made as they zoomed past her vision. She graphed their rhythm in her head. It made a perfect sine wave with the cruise control on.

“Erin?”

“I don’t really talk to anyone,” she said. “I guess I’m weird or something.”

Her father chuckled, then hesitated. “Everyone’s a bit weird in college, though,” he said. “It’s normal to be weird.”

The door on Erin’s side of the car was broken just enough to let a soft whistle of wind blow through. The graph in her head was now a straight line. A flat line. Dead. She dipped back further in her seat, tucking her knees just a little closer to her chest and turning her focus back to the dividers. They too were now flat. Two, perfect lines that streamed on endlessly. Erin turned on the radio.

“Are you still talking to that guy?” he asked after a brief silence. “Jackson, right? He seems nice.”

Erin ignored her father’s question. Whenever her father brought up members of the opposite gender, it usually led to a long speech about being careful. He loved her, he would say. He doesn’t want to see her get hurt. She had to be careful with how she talked to boys. It was the same talk every time.

Her father sighed. “Your mother and I just worry about you, is all. We don’t want you to feel...” He chewed on his words. “Overwhelmed.”

“We’re here, dad,” Erin said. They were pulling into the long, twisted roads of Oakland University. A large, golden bear greeted them at the end of the first three-way stop. Below it was a bare fountain, probably shut off because of the time of year. Michigan winters were usually too harsh for a fountain.

They pulled their way around to side lot of Phelps Hall. Erin remembered the last time they originally had pulled up she refused to leave the car. She had clung to the seat, refusing to make even a noise as her parents tried to talk her out. She had a panic attack. It wasn’t the first time, and, after the sidewalks were barren and the sun had already set, Erin’s mother and father eventually eased her out of the car. After that, she would only stare at the sidewalk, humming to herself as she carried box after box to her room, not even greeting the girl she would know to be her roommate.. Now

Mom Brandy Meredith

To say my mother was somewhat of a drinker would be like saying the Titanic took on a bit of water the night of its rendezvous with the iceberg. The truth is, I’m not even sure that toward the end, she hadn’t completely morphed into some sort of evolutionary vodka guzzling creature that no longer had the ability or need to swallow. It would simply open its hatch, and pour it down, just like the gas tank on my Honda Civic. Only I’m pretty sure she could hold more than twelve gallons.

When I was three years old, she left me at day care. The fact that I wasn’t enrolled in said day care didn’t seem to matter. She simply jumped the curb into the parking lot, leaned over the seat across my lap, opened the door, and pointed at the kids on the playground. She told me to go play, and I did. It wasn’t until snack time, an hour later, that a short, fat grandmotherly woman with devil’s breath asked me who I was. I was three, so I held up three fingers. We made fast friends.

At twelve, I decided to have a sleepover. My best friends, Wendy and Abby, packed up their sleeping bags, Sweet Valley High books, pajamas, and special treats that their moms had packed especially for our girls’ night and came to my house. When we arrived in the back of Wendy’s mom’s BMW, I lied and told her my mom was probably busy working in her office so she wouldn’t want to come inside. Good thing, too. We walked in the front door to find my mom, passed out sprawl-legged on the couch in nothing but a robe. We spent the majority of that night discussing how we felt about pubic hair. Mass amounts of pubic hair. When would we get it? Did everyone have it? Why was it so much darker than the hair on her head?

On my fifteenth birthday, my mom drove me and Wendy to the mall. For some reason, Wendy still wanted to hang out with me. She even still stayed the night at my house sometimes. When we were finished playing at the arcade, following cute boys around, and filling up on Auntie Anne’s pretzels, I called my mom. After repeating my name three times, she finally seemed to remember she had a daughter, and she told me she’s be on her way to pick us up. We got pulled over two miles from the mall after she took out three mailboxes and a stop sign. Wendy’s mom found out all about my mom that night, and I got to spend a lot more time at Wendy’s house after that.

When I was twenty, my mom died. She’d no doubt been drinking. She was found passed out in bed. Only she wasn’t really passed out. She had passed on. Rigor mortis had already set in, and she was frozen in a permanent protective stance with her arm thrown in front of her face. The dress I wore to her funeral was entirely too hot for June in Kentucky. I was sweating like a

pig at the graveside service, and Wendy's mom hugged me and told me I'd always be a daughter to her, and she'd be there for me if I ever needed her.

Now I'm thirty-three. I only turned thirty-three yesterday, but I'm pretty sure I've got it figured out already. It's just like thirty-two, only with one more day of regrets behind me and one less day of worries ahead. Sometimes I really miss my mom, but sometimes I feel like she wasn't real. Like she's just a person from a book I once read. In the book, she'd bake cookies and take me to dance class. We'd make crafts at the kitchen table while listening to pop music, and on Christmas, she didn't knock over the Christmas tree because she saw the cat (we didn't have a cat) climbing the branches.

Clean Troy Prater

An imaginary friend. Erin had remembered when Ralphie had appeared in her life. It was right after she and her brother were split up. Her new parents told her that Ralphie wasn't real. But at nineteen, Erin knew that Ralphie was very real. It wasn't the moist touch that told her, and it wasn't the soft, rumbling moans. But it was the slow rap of his fingers that ticked along with the beat in Erin's mind.

"Make sure you're quiet, Ralphie," she said, keeping her voice down to a whisper.

In the dim light, Ralphie looked to have dark stripes horizontally marked on its body, but Erin knew these were the shaded pits of his deep wrinkles. His skin was thin and loose except for the skin covering over and under Ralphie's arms. He was sitting on the floor, looking as if he would collapse over had his arms not been lifted a third of the way up the concrete wall by rusted, metal cuffs. The way they spread out lazily against the wall, and the way Ralphie's heavy head drooped down, always reminded Erin of Jesus. His crucifixion. His sacrifice. His long nails tapped steadily against his restraints.

"Lift your chin," Erin said.

Ralphie obeyed, first lifting his squat face, and then reaching his neck slowly towards Erin with pursed lips. She lifted a cup to his mouth, and Ralphie eagerly lapped up the liquid.

"It's beef broth," she said. "I won't be here for a while, so I thought I'd get you something more substantial."

Ralphie moaned. Erin looked back down between his legs.

"God. You're bleeding again," Erin said.

She let out a sigh and stared at the wound for a moment. Then, she lifted up the sleeve of her black hoodie, the cuffs of which were already frayed from chewing, and ripped a long strip of cloth. She tied it around Ralphie's thin leg, making sure to pull tight. Ralphie, like a model for a masterpiece, stood completely still.

Erin heard a call. It came from above her, echoing through the vents that led to the basement. Erin stood up, towering over Ralphie, and she analyzed the bandaged creature that sat on the floor. Ralphie's chin sank back down into his chest. If Erin hadn't known any better, she would have assumed Ralphie to be dead. She heard her name called again.

"I'm coming," she said under her breath. "I'm coming."

Erin turned around, leaving Ralphie to rest against the concrete. He tapped his nails against the cuff again, but this time in sync with each of Erin's steps as she ascended to the basement door.

The Patient Brandy Meredith



Amy Wetsch

untitled

Clare awoke. Painfully bright sunlight assaulted her eyes as it reflected off a quartet of solid white walls, all four of which she could see from her position on what felt like a well-worn cot—if one were to use the term cot generously. The scent of chlorine was so strong her eyes began to water, and it wasn't until she attempted to reach up and brush away the tears that she realized her wrists were bound to the sides of the cot. All of this information came very slowly to her at first. Where one would expect to find panic, surprisingly, she found calm. She felt curiosity more than alarm and wondered at this for a moment, conscious of the fact that she should be more concerned than she was.

She could barely make out muffled commotion coming from outside the room. Shifting her eyes to the left rather than turning her head, she studied the door. A small window at eye level was reinforced with wire mesh. She saw no sign of a lock switch on the inside, but she noticed a small steel circle above the doorknob. Her mind automatically began to assess the situation. The door locked from the outside, the room was about the size of a small bathroom or a large closet, and she was restrained to a cot with more springs than cushion.

Clare tried to force herself to think. The last thing she could remember was getting dressed for dinner. On the phone, Joel had told her the restaurant would be a surprise. It was their third anniversary, and he hadn't yet made it home from work. She'd been standing in front of the bathroom mirror as she smoothed her hair before reaching for her jewelry box to get the diamond solitaire earrings he'd given her for their last anniversary. That was it. She couldn't even remember putting the earrings on.

She flexed her hands and immediately wished she hadn't. This skin on her fingers was raw. If felt tight, as if they'd been sanded or scraped. More tears gathered in the corners of her eyes as she struggled to lift her head high enough to see her hands. A pain shot through her neck and traveled simultaneously to her left temple and shoulder. It was then that she realized the left side of her lower back was throbbing as well. Had they been in an accident on their way to the restaurant? If she'd hit her head, she might have short-term amnesia. That sounded like something that happened after head trauma, and it made sense because she could remember everything else. It was March 2013. Her name was Clare Thompson. She was 32 and worked for L&E Marketing. She was married to Joel Thompson. Joel. If they'd been in an accident, where was Joel?

The sense of calm left her in an instant. She struggled in her restraints but stopped when her left wrist responded with a pain so sharp her vision temporarily dimmed, almost blacking out completely. With each new

jolt of pain, another layer of fog cleared from her mind, and it occurred to her that they didn't normally strap accident victims down, and what she was laying on certainly wasn't a hospital bed.

Her eyes shot around the room, stopping on the door where a man stood, smiling at her through the window.

Tina dug through the last drawer in the kitchen. The rest of them were hanging open, their contents strewn all over the floor. Her dirty blonde hair clung to the sides of her face, and her hands shook so violently she kept banging them on the counter when she reached into the back of the drawer. A baby cried from a room down the hall, but she'd long since tuned it out.

A loud hammering on the front door made Tina jump, dropping the entire drawer and its contents onto the floor. She slowly turned her head, her thin, pale face staring in the direction of the living room, and tears rolled into the sunken areas below her fully-dilated eyes. Her entire body shook as she slowly made her way across the kitchen, jumping each time the banging on the door resumed.

She was little more than a frame of bones with clothes on, her features sharp and haunting. The sores on her face only stood out more brilliantly under the slippery film of grease that coated her skin and hair, and her mouth was constantly working—clenching, unclenching, her bottom jaw moving from side to side. She'd picked and peeled all the skin from her lips and they were swollen and scabbed. Whenever she found the occasion to smile, they would crack open painfully.

She moved quietly down the carpeted hallway to the bedroom. If they heard the baby, they would know she was inside. Swaddled inside a mildewed Pantera t-shirt, Darrell stopped crying the moment he saw his mother. He was three months old. Named after one of his father's favorite musicians, he was most commonly referred to as Little Dimebag.

Tina gently picked him up and held him to her chest, bouncing lightly. He remained quiet, but the banging on the front door continued.

"We know you're in there, bitch," a man said. His menacing tone reverberated through the tiny house and Tina shuddered. Sensing her terror, the baby began crying again. Only now, he not only emitted the low, drawn-out whines of hunger, he wailed out of fear, the fear he'd sensed in his mother's tense embrace and had immediately adopted as his own. His high pitched screams caught Tina by surprise, and she almost dropped him.

The men on the front porch had finally stopped the banging, and she prayed that they were leaving but was afraid they would break the door down at any moment. Hugging Darrell tighter and forcing herself to hum soothingly, she prayed for him to quiet. His screams, now muffled by

From Clouded Sky Steven Montgomery

The sky floats
with a dream of ennui
upon a sea of stress
and caffeine.
Pleasure rains
as God's dandruff flakes
pour on a jaded congregation,
allowing for rest,
procrastination,
and revelry.
Joy dies when boredom
becomes complacency,
and the holy fkuff
stiffens.
We are trapped.
The solar gatekeeper,
resting till the seventh,
awakens, well overdue,
and is made our liberator.
We, the people
agitated,
drudge on through lives mundane,
waiting once more
for God to scratch their head.

and I gave birth to him and have absolutely no recollection of it whatsoever? What kind of person is capable of murdering an innocent baby? What must he have been feeling as he suffocated at his mother's breast? Why should I want to be this Tina person?

These notes were found on the first page of the composition notebook the next morning by the nurse making her five a.m. rounds. On the second page was a letter to Dr. Strong.

Dear, Dr. Strong,

I think first I must thank you for having such faith in me that you would go through so much trouble in trying to help. You seem like a very kind man, and I wanted you to know that I don't feel that any of this is your fault. I don't think I would have wanted to live in a catatonic state in this hospital for the rest of my life any more than I want to live with the memories of what I've apparently done.

I don't remember the little boy you say I accidentally killed. I don't remember the color of his eyes or the pain of his birth. I have no idea even what his name was, though I'm sure it was lovely. The man you say was found dead after my incarceration must have been an evil person. I don't mourn for him at all. This life you've bestowed upon me all in one brief afternoon is as distant to me as the fake one I seem to remember so vividly.

Though I'm having a hard time feeling emotion for the real people who were lost in my life, I'm at no loss of pain for the made up ones of my memories. My husband, Joel. My dog, Darrell. My home that I loved so. My parents, Sue and Phillip. Where, I wonder, were Tina's parents?

You said that I would begin to regain Tina's memories slowly and we would work through them. However, I don't think this is something I care to do. I could no easier trade my lovely "fantasy" life for her sad and unfortunate one than you could trade yours for mine.

I hope that you will understand this and know that you have, in fact, helped me. You allowed me to feel emotion again and to feel love, though coupled with deep regret and loss, it must have been better than nothing at all.

Fortunately, I believe you were correct in suspecting that Tina wasn't completely gone. I found a stash of at least thirty small, white pills under the mattress of her cot. Apparently she'd been stashing her sedatives, and now I thank her for them.

I'm going to go back to my dream world now, Dr. Strong. Thank you for your kindness.

*Most Sincerely,
Clare Thompson*

her chest, barely made a noise and tapered off after a few minutes until he lay quietly in her arms. The men didn't knock again, and after several minutes of silence, Tina turned to lay the baby down, relieved.

Positioning him softly between two pillows on her twin mattress that lay on the floor, she tried not to wake him, but when she looked down, her own screams exploded from her cracked and bleeding lips. In a sliver of pale moonlight from the window, she could see Darrell's eyes. They were wide open, staring blankly at the ceiling, and his mouth hung slack, his little lips already beginning to turn blue.

"Well, good morning," the pie-faced man said as he opened the door and stepped into the small white room. He wore a lab coat, and though Clare couldn't quite read his name badge from across the room, it looked like it had an M.D. at the end.

She tried to speak, but her voice only croaked pitifully in her throat. Since she was lying on her back, tears had rolled back from her face and found their way into her ears, and it tickled, but she hardly noticed. She tried clearing her throat, creating nothing but a dry squeak.

"Here, let me get you a little something to drink," the man said, turning to a small sink in the corner. He was big. Not just tall and not fat either, just big all over. A close-cut reddish beard covered the lower half of his face, and behind a pair of wire-framed glasses, his eyes were kind. He cupped the back of her neck, easing her head up and helped her drink from the small Dixie cup.

"What am I doing here? Where am I?" she said as soon as the cup left her lips. His name was Ted Strong M.D. His eyebrows rose and then gathered together in the middle of his forehead.

After a moment, he said, "Clare?"

"Yes, that's my name," she said, searching his face.

"Well, well, it's good to have you back," he said, smiling. He'd taken a seat next to her bed on a small swivel stool, and he looked at her with smile creases escaping from the corners of his eyes.

"Back from where?" she asked.

"How are you feeling? A little sore?" he asked, consulting his clipboard. "I heard things got a little wild last night."

"Huh?" Clare asked. "I can't remember last night. Where am I?" she asked again.

"Right. Of course. I'm sorry," he said, setting the clipboard aside. "You're in Adolphus Hospital, and you've been visiting us for a little while now," he said. He spoke slowly and in a soft tone as if addressing a child.

"A while?"

"Yes, a little while."

"Was I in an accident? Is my husband okay?" she asked. The last of cloudiness she'd experienced upon waking was clearing, and she desperately

tried to get her bearings. She didn't notice the worried look that passed over the doctor's face.

"No, Clare. There was no accident. Not the kind you mean anyway," he said, patting her hand.

She sucked air between her teeth at the contact with the raw skin on her fingers, and he looked down, studying her hands.

"My goodness, your hands are burned. I'll get a nurse in here with some ointment for them right away. We should be able to remove the restraints now that you're," he paused, "more calm." He stood and turned to leave.

"Wait," she said. "Please tell me what's happened. I can't remember anything." She'd lifted her head off the bed, ignoring the pain, and she stared at him pleadingly.

"We'll meet in my office and talk about it later on today, if you're still feeling better," he said and disappeared through the door, closing it behind him. Something about the way he'd said, "if you're still feeling better" sounded like he wouldn't be holding his breath.

A few minutes later, a nurse appeared at the door. She smiled at Clare and went straight to work without saying anything. She unfastened the restraints and rubbed Clare's wrists gently, smiling at her.

"Excuse me," Clare said. "Can you tell me what I'm doing here please?"

The nurse only smiled apologetically. "Shush now, let's take care of your hands." When she was finished she said, "Now, you can get up and move around as long as you take it easy, alright?"

Clare nodded, saying nothing. Why ask questions when nobody seemed to want to answer them?

When the nurse left, Clare sat up on the edge of the cot and rubbed her wrists. She stretched lightly, testing her range of motion. She had to have been in an accident. Everything hurt. The nurse had left the door ajar. After a cursory glance around the empty room, Clare stood and made her way to the door. There wasn't a phone in her room, and she needed to call Joel. She had to check on him and see if he was alright.

By the time she made it to the door, she had to stop and hold on to the door frame for a minute. Her vision had begun to blur again. She closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead and willed herself to get it together.

When it passed, she straightened and looked out the door, expecting to find a hallway with a nurse's station somewhere nearby so she could make a phone call. But when she looked out into the room beyond the doorway, she could only stand silently and stare.

The room was large and open with a long row of security paned windows along the far wall. Divided into several small sections, it looked like some sort of common area. Near the windows, an old man and a younger woman slouched bonelessly in their seats and stared blankly at

"Oh," she said.

"How does that make you feel?" he asked.

"I don't really know," she replied.

"Clare— Tina, I understand that this seems insurmountable right now," Dr. Strong said. "You probably feel betrayed, and I'm very sorry about that, but I needed a way to reach you, so we could work together. I didn't want to simply lose hope in you and watch you rot away in here when I really felt like there was something in there still."

"Uh huh."

"It isn't every day that I get to actually help the people in my care, you know. Most of them will live here for the rest of their lives, but I knew you were still in there."

"Alright," she said. She'd returned to the chair in front of him and spoke quietly.

"Listen, I know this is a lot to take in," he said, standing and walking back around his desk. From one of the desk drawers, he produced a composition notebook and a pack of pencils. "Here's what I want you to do. Take some time to think about it. Don't try to force yourself to remember certain things. Just become comfortable with the idea, okay? And I want you to keep notes for me—any thoughts you're having, any questions that come up. Anything. Okay?"

"Yes," she said.

"I will come to your room first thing in the morning, and we'll go over your thoughts from the night, and then we'll have our first session and begin to slowly bring out those memories and work on them as we go. How does that sound?" He was smiling at her, despite her subdued demeanor.

"Okay," she said. He slid the notebook and a pencil across the desk, and she retrieved them before standing.

"I know we can do this, Tina," Dr. Strong said. "I really do believe in you. I never would have done this if I didn't." His reassurances reeked of guilt, and Clare felt sympathy for him.

"Thank you," she said, as the orderly came into the office and led her back to her room.

Dr. Strong picked up the phone and called Tina's parents as soon as she'd left the office. Bringing the two of them in for her session the following day might be just what Clare needed to remember Tina.

That night, Clare sat in front of the small table in the corner of her room. She stared at the blank notebook page in front of her and cried.

She tried what Dr. Strong had said and had scribbled a few of the thoughts going through her mind. How is it I can remember so vividly things that never even happened? How is it possible to love someone who doesn't exist? How is it possible that a baby grew inside of my body for nine months

wanted her to believe that she existed only inside the mind of another woman, and that all of her memories were made up of the memories and dreams of someone else. It wasn't possible.

"When you came out today, I almost couldn't believe it," he said. Then, almost as if he'd just realized the weight of what he was telling her, he said, "The memories that you've fabricated to replace what we've blocked off are an unfortunate side effect, but we can deal with those too. Clare, I know this is very tough to take in. In fact, you probably think I'm out of my mind right now, but I need you to trust me and really understand what I'm saying."

"That I don't exist?" she said, barely audible. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"No, that's not it at all," he said, quickly. "On the contrary, you do exist. You're sitting right in front of me. Your first name may not really be Clare, but you are the same person. You're Tina, and you've been through a lot of things that you don't remember."

"But, my husband. My life. My job," she said, remembering them each one by one and silently grieving for them.

"You aren't married. No. But your memories of your job are partially correct. You interned for the marketing company in college, and those memories are the ones you've used to create the faux memories of a career in marketing," he said.

"Faux memories," she said, barely audible.

He leaned forward, making eye contact with her, and said, "It is so important that you understand that each and every feeling you have is real. This person sitting in front of me is Tina Miller. You are Tina Miller. Now that you're with me, though, we can begin therapy, and once therapy is underway, bits and pieces of your real life will begin to come back to you slowly, and we can deal with them together."

"Wait," she said. The word snapped in synchronization with the stability of her demeanor. Sobs escaped her lips. "You're telling me that I had a baby, and I—" She covered her mouth with her hand.

Dr. Strong drew a deep breath in through his nose and slowly let it out. He settled back in his seat and closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes," he finally said. "Your baby was killed accidentally while you tried to protect him and yourself from the people who were after your abusive boyfriend."

Untouched by the intentionally twisted wording of his synopsis, she said nothing for a moment. Then she stood and walked over to the window, staring outside. "What happened to him? The boyfriend?" she asked.

Dr. Strong straightened in his chair and said, "Well about a week after you went into custody, he was found stabbed to death behind an abandoned house."

the Looney Tunes cartoon that played quietly on a TV screen. To the right of the TV, there were small clusters of mismatched tables where a few older men moved pieces around on checker boards.

There were several wheelchairs scattered throughout the room. Clare counted eight in all. Some of the wheelchair occupants simply stared into space, strings of drool running from their slack mouths to their laps. Others slept heavily, their heads hung low, faces resting in puddles of drool on the front of their clothing.

Everyone wore either a long white robe, white pants with a white shirt, or a white gown like the one Clare wore. One older woman sat alone at a beaten-up card table speaking animatedly to the empty space in front of her, and a young man in a wheelchair was slapping himself in the face repeatedly.

In a row of cushioned chairs right outside Clare's room, a young woman rocked back and forth in her seat, mumbling to herself. Her hair hung in clumps, obscuring her face. Two seats away from her was another young woman who sat quietly, reading a paperback novel. She looked as out of place as Clare felt.

Clare made her way to the woman with the novel.

"Goddamnit," Tina yelled as she threw her phone across the room.

She'd been trying to call Jojo for ten minutes, and his phone kept going straight to voicemail. She knew he was probably fucking around, and she didn't care. She just needed him to answer the phone.

Retrieving her phone from the stack of old pizza boxes in the corner, she dialed his number again.

"What is it?" he asked. Not expecting him to answer, she jumped.

"Jo, you have to come home. You have to come home right now," Tina said. Her sobs fought the words for the chance to escape.

"I told you I'm fucking working. I'm getting real tired of this jealousy shit, you know," he said. The statement was more of a threat than a warning.

"I am not jealous," she said. "This is a fucking emergency. Get your ass over here. Now." She hung up the phone and ran into the kitchen. All she needed was a bump. If she could just find an empty baggy, she'd be able to scrape enough out for that. She couldn't handle this shit. The empty drawers hanging from under the kitchen counters reminded her that she'd already searched the kitchen.

"Fuck." Her voice was small and soft, like a child's. She headed for the bathroom.

On reflex, she looked in the mirror as she walked in. Blood was crusted around the fresh cracks in her lips that had been left behind by her screams. Her mascara had traveled from her lashes to her jawline, leaving

behind a drunken roadmap down her cheeks. She didn't care. Hell, she hardly even noticed. She began rummaging through the bathroom drawers looking for something, anything—a baggy, an old straw she could scape, a picture frame with residue along the edges. A roach skittered across her hand as she reached into a dark drawer. This time she was able to stifle the scream.

After she'd torn the bathroom apart, she started to head to the bedroom but stopped. She couldn't go in there. Darrell was in there. Darrell was dead. Jesus Christ. Darrell.

When Jojo stomped through the door an hour later, Tina was lying in a crumpled heap on the trash-littered floor of the living room. Reaching down, he grabbed the collar of her shirt and jerked her upright. Her eyes rolled for a moment before focusing on his face.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he asked, dropping her back onto the floor where she landed hard, her breath whooshing out painfully.

"Do you have anything?" she croaked, still half out of it.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Jojo was only five foot six, but he was mean. Before she'd gotten involved with him, the worst thing Tina had ever done was skip school to go to the mall on a Friday, but that had been five long years ago, and now she thought she'd rather die than face what had become her life. She'd started using with him to have fun and to impress him, but somewhere along the way things had changed. Now she used to drown out the bullshit that was her life. To escape.

"Listen, Jojo. Please," she said, grabbing for his hand as she tried again to stand up. He pulled her roughly to her feet.

"You call me and say it's an emergency, and I get here and you're just fiending?" He laughed in her face. He did that a lot.

"I fucked up, okay?" she said. Finally, she'd found her voice, and she spoke above his mumbled criticisms.

"You fucked up?" he asked, feigning shock. "What the fuck did you do?"

She didn't know what she'd ever seen in him.

"Damon's guys came to the house, okay? And they were banging on the door," she said, looking at the floor.

"I told you not to answer the door, didn't I? I'm getting the money. At least I was, before you called me with your dope head emergency," he said.

Tina looked up, glaring at him. "I didn't answer the door," she said, "but the baby started crying."

"Shit."

"I went to the bedroom to try and you know, calm him down," she said, crying again. "I was bouncing him and humming to him." Un-

blocked off approximately ten years of her memories, and we believe she was having trouble accepting the complete loss of that time, so when she awoke, she believed she'd been living the past ten years in Hawaii with a husband she never had and four children that didn't exist."

Sue gasped, and Phillip cleared his throat as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Dr. Strong spoke up. "We have no reason to believe this would happen with Tina since we are only blocking off five years of her memories, and the circumstances with her case are much more manageable than in the case of the other patient."

"Yes," Dr. Knolls agreed. "That is true. My patient's case was much more difficult to handle, and I believe the biggest factor was the span of time lost."

"So, let me get this straight," Phillip said after a long moment of silence. "You're going to wipe away the memories of the past five years. She's going to wake up with no clue as to why she's here, but you'll work with her and bring the memories out slowly and help her deal with them bit by bit?"

Dr. Strong smiled broadly, "Yes, Mr. Miller. With your permission and Dr. Knoll's assistance with the hypnosis portion of the treatment, that's precisely what I hope to do."

Clare stared at Dr. Strong with wide, unbelieving eyes as he explained how they'd hypnotized Tina and coerced sections of her mind to form together, blocking off the bad memories, guilt, and grief. Dr. Strong left out the part about consulting her parents.

When he told her that Tina had quietly whispered the name "Clare" when they'd asked her what her name was while under hypnosis, tears slipped down her cheeks, but she continued to listen.

"When Dr. Knolls brought her out of hypnosis, she was still Tina," Dr. Strong explained. "But twice now, I've been able to reach that other part of her during our therapy sessions but only for a moment at a time and only after working at it. We were a bit concerned about the name Clare, but since it's your middle name, we thought—"

"My middle name?" she asked.

"Christina Clare Miller," he said.

Clare listened quietly, not sure how to respond to the news. It all seemed so surreal, like something she'd see in a movie. How could she have imagined an entire marriage? It was impossible.

"Of course Dr. Knolls warned me that it might take a while for your mind to adjust, but it had been weeks. I had just about given up hope," he said.

She understood what he was telling her, but it couldn't be true. He

Knolls was leaning forward in his chair with his hands clasped together in front of him. His eyebrows were drawn together, but his voice was very steady and soothing.

“What about the people you’ve tested it on,” Phillip asked. He too was now leaning forward in his seat.

“Well, in two of the cases, everything worked wonderfully,” Dr. Knolls said after a long sigh. “They awoke from the hypnosis much like they were before going under, but within a couple days, their minds had constructed a wall, in a manner of speaking. The wall completely blocked off the bad memories, but that’s only the beginning of the treatment process.”

“It sounds dangerous,” Sue said, looking at Phillip.

“It is very delicate,” Dr. Knolls admitted. “Once the memories are blocked off, we work very closely with them to slowly bring those memories out and work through them together so that they can better deal with it. In two of the cases, the men were both able to accept the memories as they returned, and when the treatment was over, they were able to go back to their lives. The memories were there, and the guilt remained, but they had dealt with them healthily, in a controlled environment, and under the supervision of a professional, and the outcome was great.”

“You said that was two of the trials,” Phillip said. “What about the others?”

“There was one other,” Dr. Knolls said. “It was a woman, but it just so happened that this woman was more disturbed than we originally thought.”

“What happened?” Phillip asked.

“Now Phillip, give the man a minute,” Sue said. “I’m sure he’s getting to that part.”

Phillip ignored her and continued looking at Dr. Knolls expectantly.

“That’s alright,” Dr. Knolls said. “It’s perfectly natural to be concerned. I understand.” He stood from his chair and moved to the front of the desk and sat on the edge. “The patient got through hypnosis perfectly and awoke unchanged just like the men. A few days later, there were no changes. We first believed it simply hadn’t taken, but about a week later she woke up one day and demanded to know why she was in a hospital. This part is expected. When they first awake with the partition in place, the patient is a bit confused.”

“Yes, that’s understandable,” Sue said, nodding first at her husband and then toward Dr. Knolls.

“What was different about her situation was that in order to deal with the time lapse of the displaced memories, her mind had formed somewhat of a—” he paused, searching, “fantasy world. You see, we had

consciously, she mimicked the motions of bouncing a baby.

“Yeah, so? Did they hear him or what?” Jojo asked, gesturing for her to go on. He strode to the front window and peeked around the heavy blanket that hung in place of a curtain.

“I did something wrong, Jo. When I put Darrell back down, he wasn’t—” She stopped. “He wasn’t—”

“Wasn’t what? He wasn’t what? Jesus Christ, would you spit it out already,” he said, turning back from the window.

Tina shuffled over a few steps and sat down hard on the arm of the couch, covering her face with her hands.

“He was dead,” she said.

“Excuse me? Hi,” Clare said to the young woman behind the cover of the Harlequin romance novel.

The novel didn’t budge.

“Ma’am?” Clare cleared her throat politely.

“Oh don’t come at me with that ma’am shit,” a rough voice said, but the book stayed in place.

Clare looked around the room more confused than ever. She briefly wondered if she was just having a really horrible nightmare. These people were crazy. In every sense of the word. Taking the seat beside the woman with gravel in her throat, Clare attempted to establish some form of eye contact. The woman obviously had mistaken her for someone else.

“My name is Clare Thompson. I think you must have thought I was someone else,” Clare said, laughing as if the whole misunderstanding was silly.

This time the book came down. A small set of black-brown eyes narrowed, focusing on Clare. The bridge of the woman’s nose was swollen to the size of a golf ball, and Clare struggled not to stare at it as if she was afraid it might pop, even though she didn’t think it was entirely out of the realm of possibility.

“Clare Thompson?” the woman asked, laughing.

“Uhm, yes. And what’s your name?” she asked, tentatively.

“Clare fucking Thompson?” The rumbling in the woman’s throat that passed as her voice turned into a long, wheezing laugh, which turned into the phlegmy type of cough only a long relationship with a couple packs of Marlboros a day can get you.

“Yes.” Clare was almost whispering now and staring at the Marlboro woman, thinking she must have been wrong to assume she was the one person in the room who was closest to normal.

“Hey, I got an idea, Clare Thompson,” the woman said through her coughing fit. “Why don’t you go back in your room, close the door, and come out again. Maybe this time when you come out, you’ll be Bill Gates or

something, and then we'll all be rich." She fanned herself with the paperback and sounded as if she might be coming dangerously close to hacking up a potentially important organ.

"What?" Clare was beginning to think she might actually belong here after all. She must have lost her mind because absolutely nothing that was happening was even remotely logical.

"Look, Tina, quit trying to pretend you're somebody else. I'm not that damn crazy," the Marlboro woman said after she'd finally calmed down. "You're Tina Miller, not no Clare Danes or whatever."

"Thompson," Clare said in two slow syllables.

"Yeah, whatever," the woman said. "Don't make me kick your ass like I did last night. Get the fuck out of here." The novel made its way back to the woman's face, but Clare could hear her chuckling.

Clare stood slowly, and began heading back to her room.

"Fucking baby killer," the woman said under her breath.

Clare froze, but before she could respond, a nurse came around the corner with a food cart and instructed everyone to return to their rooms for dinner.

"Rehab and a yet to be determined amount of time at Adolphus Mental Facility," Tina's court-appointed lawyer said, straightening his tie and stretching his neck out. "Not bad. Not bad, if I do say so myself."

"Mental facility?" Tina asked, only half conscious of his smugness.

"Well, yeah," he said as if he'd just realized she was in the room. "I mean, you killed— Sorry. You participated in illegal activities that led to the death of your child. Usually that's a one-way ticket to prison. The DA was going for manslaughter. You're lucky I got it reduced to negligent homicide, or you'd be serving a few years." He was young, Tina guessed only a year or so out of law school. She paled.

"Trust me," he said. "You're lucky. You can thank me later." He patted her on the back with two brisk whacks that jarred her entire body before grabbing his briefcase on his way out the door.

Tina sat in the holding room for another hour before she was taken back to a cell. The stone-faced guard who swung the cell door shut told her not to get too comfortable because she'd be moving again within the hour, but she hadn't been comfortable in a very long time.

Six hours later, another guard appeared and opened her cell door and told her to get moving. She was on her way to rehab.

The rehab campus was located on the same property as Adolphus Mental Facility, but it was partitioned off by several feet of razor wire and a tree line thick enough to get lost in. Calm Waters Rehabilitation Clinic

fished a balled up piece of tissue paper from her purse, and Phillip laid a hand on her arm.

"Yes, I'm afraid addiction can certainly change people for the worse," Dr. Strong said softly.

"We had no idea any of this had even happened until we got your call. She never even contacted us about the baby or the trial," Phillip said.

Sue nodded and sniffled. "I never knew I had a grandson."

Phillip patted her hand.

"Well, I hope to be able to reconnect you with your daughter," Dr. Strong said, "The reason I contacted you is that I've taken quite an interest in your daughter's case over the past several months. In light of the circumstances, she is remanded to our custody until I see fit for her release, but every step I've taken toward working with her on her guilt issues has only pushed her further and further away."

"Which is common in these cases," Dr. Knolls said, reassuringly.

"However," Dr. Strong said, "what isn't common is for someone to slip into such a deep catatonic depression over guilt alone. Generally, when someone shuts down like this, it's due to the presence of a more serious personality disorder."

Sue let a quiet gasp escape her lips and reached for Phillip's hand.

"I don't think that is the case here though. What I have to say is actually good news, I believe," Dr. Strong said quickly. "I actually don't believe she's so deeply gone that she can't be reached. I believe she is actively refusing to be reached. The guilt she's feeling is so intense that she's constructed this catatonic state to keep me out because she doesn't feel like she deserves to be helped."

"In most of these cases, hypnosis can be helpful," Dr. Knolls said.

"Then try that," Sue said, immediately. Phillip remained silent and listened.

"I have tried some mild hypnosis, but she fights it and rejects the treatment," Dr. Strong said. "Which is one of the reasons I have to believe that she's still in there and able to be reached. If she were truly shut down inside, she wouldn't be strong enough to fight hypnosis."

"Alright, so what can we do?" Sue asked, looking back and forth from the doctors to her husband.

"That's where I come in," said Dr. Knolls. "My colleagues and I have been working on a treatment method called memory partitioning. Basically, we use deep hypnosis to partition off a part of the mind—the memories that cause the patient pain. Once we've blocked that region off, we take them back to a time when they were most rational. Now, I'm not going to mislead you here. This is an experimental procedure. It's only viable in cases in which the patient is intentionally blocking themselves off from reality, and we've only been able to test the methods a handful of times so far." Dr.

Usually, in cases like that, there's a window of time where, with the help of medication and therapy, we can get in there and reach them before they're too far gone, but after the time she'd spent awaiting trial and then at the rehabilitation clinic, she was just gone."

Clare covered her mouth with one hand and shook her head in disbelief. "That's horrible."

"Yes, it was," he said, nodding. "So, I consulted a colleague of mine who works at a facility in California and he'd been studying a technique called memory partitioning. It's very new, and it hasn't technically been approved as a form of treatment, but a small group of doctors out West have been testing its effects on people similar to Tina with mostly positive results."

"What is it?" Clare asked, interested.

"I'll tell you," Dr. Strong began.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, for coming," Dr. Strong said as he opened his office door and motioned for the two to come inside.

"Please, you can call me Phillip, and my wife is Sue," Phillip said as he shook hands with the doctor.

Phillip wore a tailored suit and tie, and his black hair was well kept and shining. Sue wore a black pea coat over a three-piece skirt suit in gray that went down to her knees. Her hair was pulled tightly back into a severe bun that Dr. Strong couldn't help but associate with a massive headache.

"Please, have a seat," Dr. Strong motioned to two chairs opposite his desk. "This is Dr. Knolls," he said, nodding toward a tall, blonde doctor who stood beside the desk. He was younger than Dr. Strong, but his face was just as kind. "He's flown in from California. He's the doctor I told you about over the phone, the one I've been consulting with about your daughter's case."

"Ah, yes," Phillip said, rising to shake hands with Dr. Knolls. "We appreciate you being able to make the trip, Doctor."

"It was no trouble at all," Dr. Knolls responded, shaking hands with Sue.

Both doctors took a seat across from the Millers, and Dr. Strong cleared his throat and reached for a manila envelope on his desk.

"As I understand it, you two have not been in contact with Tina for a few years now?" he asked.

"That's right," Phillip said. "We tried for two years to get her away from that boy. Believe me, but finally she pushed us away and stopped taking our calls, and then she moved two states away."

Dr. Strong nodded.

"When she did come around," Sue said, "she stole from us." She

looked like a miniature college campus with a dormitory style building flanked by smaller buildings, including a cafeteria, the Chapel of Serenity, a recreation building, and a few clinical buildings.

Tina spent her first forty-eight hours in detox, even though she'd come from jail and had been forced to detox the hard way. It was policy. By the time she was moved to her room in the dormitory, she had adopted the mannerisms of a deaf mute with only one setting left on her emotional dial—apathy.

"Okay, Ms. Miller, right this way." She was directed to her room by an overly-pleasant addiction counselor. She was one of many overly-pleasant people Tina would meet in the coming days.

Tina shuffled into a small dorm room with two twin beds on opposite sides of the room. Each bed had a night stand that featured a framed print of the Serenity Prayer. The bed clothes on the bed to her right were folded at the foot of the bed, so she walked quietly in that direction. There was a life-sized wad of covers in the middle of the bed to her left. She ignored it.

"Now, the bathroom is at the end of the hall," the counselor said. "If you need anything, you can ask your floor supervisor. Her office is at the other end of the hall. There is a small kitchen beside her office where you can find crackers, cookies, and stuff to drink. Help yourself to anything you'd like. Your roommate's name is Maureen. Maureen, your new bunkmate is here." Now the woman addressed the wad of blankets. It didn't move. She didn't seem to notice. "Okay! It seems like everything is good to go. Remember you have a group meeting tonight at five o'clock, and dinner is at seven."

The woman disappeared down the hall, and Tina sat down on the edge of her bed, letting her bag of clothes fall to the floor.

"Is she gone?" the heap of blankets asked.

Tina looked at the other bed with a blank expression and said nothing. A small boyish face appeared from a crease in the blankets and looked toward the door.

"Oh thank God. I can't stand those chipper bitches," the roommate said.

She sat up on the edge of her bed and studied Tina. Tina noticed the roommate's hair was cut short and stood up in spikes, and she wore a white tank top and grey sweat pants. She had the body of a young boy. She was tiny.

"So, let me guess," the roommate said. "Pain Pills?"

Tina didn't respond.

"Wait, don't tell me. You don't look like much of a drinker." She seemed to consider Tina for a moment. "Meth," she declared.

"No," Tina said. Her voice was barely audible.

“Alright, well what then?”

“Coke. Pills,” Tina said in two clipped syllables.

“Right on, right on. My name’s Mo,” the tiny woman said, stretching her arm across the room to shake. After a moment of hesitation, Tina reciprocated.

“Tina,” she said.

“So, did you check yourself in or did you get the whole family intervention scene,” Mo asked, rolling her eyes.

“Court.”

“Oh, shit. What’d you do? Get busted selling? Buying?” The roommate was now leaning back on her own bunk. She’d pulled a box of crackers from the drawer in the nightstand, and she ate one while she looked expectantly at Tina.

“Uhm,” Tina said. She could feel her eyes beginning to burn, and she blinked rapidly.

“Hey,” the roommate said. “It’s cool, man. Whatever happened. There’s a girl who just left who was in here because she got in an accident while she was drunk and put some old lady in the hospital. She almost died. People fuck up, man.”

“I killed my baby.” Tina’s voice was hardly more than a whisper. She looked at her new roommate in shock as soon as the words had left her mouth.

“Oh, shit,” the roommate said. She held a cracker inches from her mouth for a few moments before saying, “Yeah. That’s some fucked up shit right there.”

When Tina finally made her way to her group meeting, she was five minutes late. Since it was her first day, the counselor let it slide, but she reminded Tina that she was expected to be punctual from then on. Tina only nodded and took a seat.

The chairs were arranged in a circle. The counselor picked up where she had left off recapping last week’s meeting—Laura (a middle-aged woman with big hair and a too-skinny face) had confessed that alcoholism had cost her her marriage. Laura’s eyes dropped to the floor, and she nodded while other members of the group offered words of sympathy.

“We have a new member to group tonight, ladies,” the counselor said, motioning toward Tina. “This is Tina.”

“Hi, Tina,” the nine other women said in unison.

“Hello,” Tina whispered.

“Tina, why don’t you tell us something about yourself,” the counselor said. “Anything you’d like to share with us today to help us get to know you a little bit.”

“I don’t really think I—”

“Now there’s something you have to understand about our group

minute he heard her come into the room. He had an expression of apprehension on his face that disappeared as soon as she spoke.

“Dr. Strong,” she said in a greeting.

“Clare,” he said, smiling. “Hello.”

“Hi.” Her voice was small and unsure, but her curiosity was apparent.

“How are your hands?” he asked.

“Oh,” she said, raising them in front of her. “They’re feeling much better. Thank you. Um, could you tell me what happened to them?”

“Ah, well.” He leaned back in his office chair. “There’s another woman in your section who suffers from delusions and paranoia, and she sometimes imagines that people are plotting against her. From what the nurses tell me, she came into your room last night and accused you of trying to poison her tea. The nurses and orderlies showed up to restrain her right away, but she’d already poured a cup of hot tea on your hands and hit you with the mug several times. They said you got a good shot in too though—busted her nose.”

“Oh.” After a moment, she said, “Why can’t I remember that?”

“Well that’s what we need to talk about, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I really have no idea what’s going on here. I’m starting to feel like I’m crazy,” she said. And then, realizing what she’d said, “I’m sorry.”

Dr. Strong laughed loudly. “No. Don’t be sorry. I can imagine you’re feeling very confused, but I can assure you, everything is fine. You aren’t crazy. There are just some things we need to talk about, and they might not all be easy to take in, so I’m going to need you to really listen and work with me, okay?”

Clare’s heart pounded in her chest, and she nodded her head.

“Does the name Tina Miller sound familiar to you at all?” he asked.

“The woman, the one with the swollen nose, called me by that name earlier, but other than that, no.” After a pause, she said, “Miller is my maiden name.”

“Okay, good.” Dr. Strong came around the table and sat in a chair across from Clare. “First, I’m going to tell you about Tina, but I promise I will get around to answering your questions soon. Alright?”

She nodded.

“Tina came to us around six months ago,” he began. Clare listened closely. He explained to Clare the specifics of Tina’s case and that she had slipped into a non-responsive state. “She let the grief and guilt consume her completely until there wasn’t enough of her left for me to reach. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Clare said. “That’s terrible, about her baby and all that. What happened to her?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I didn’t know what else I could do for her.

Dr. Strong came around his desk and knelt in front of her. He tried to take her hand, but she pulled away from him violently, avoiding eye contact. If the door behind her hadn't been locked, she would have ran. All the pain and anger welled inside her. The anxiety she'd been experiencing since that night built up and grew until she felt like she was going to explode. With her feet in the chair, she hugged her knees tightly and tried to focus on her breathing.

"I'm not giving you a pass here, Tina," Dr. Strong said, softly. "I just want you to understand that this wasn't a path that you purposefully chose. Addiction is a very powerful disease. Given your circumstances, I think you were trying to do the best—"

Before he could finish, Tina's feet shot out from their position on the chair in front of her. They struck him in the center of his chest with all the force she could muster, and he fell, sprawling back against a wall-length bookshelf. She'd knocked the breath out of him, and his face paled. For a moment, he remained on the floor looking at her. She'd moved faster than he could track to the corner of the room and was huddled there, her back facing him.

He stood and calmly said, "Alright. I think that's enough for today. Get some rest. We'll talk again tomorrow." He pushed a button on his desk and an orderly appeared to take her back to her room.

But the next day she wouldn't speak. Dr. Strong, deciding to remain on his side of the desk, tried a few different approaches to reach her, but she wouldn't budge. After an hour of the one-sided conversation, he'd sent her back to her room. This went on for weeks.

During her third week, the nurses had begun complaining that Tina wasn't eating, and one night, after Dr. Strong spoke to her about it, she'd been caught trying to fashion a noose out of her bed sheets.

After that, she was put on a daily sedative and was restrained at night. She never fought the nurses when they strapped her wrists or refused to take the medication. She'd slipped seamlessly into a catatonic depression.

One night, as he walked past her room before going home for the night, Dr. Strong heard Tina softly humming a lullaby as she lay trying to go to sleep. The next morning, he made an appointment to meet with an associate from another mental facility to discuss her case.

Clare awoke from her nap when an orderly appeared in the doorway of her room to usher her to Dr. Strong's office. She sprang from the bed immediately and followed him through a maze of brightly-lit hallways to a row of office doors several corridors away from the common area.

The door was open. She walked in, and the orderly closed the door behind her. Dr. Strong was on the computer, but he looked up the

circle, Tina," the perky counselor said, cutting Tina off. "In this circle, nobody judges, and nobody is your enemy. We're all in this together, and we trust each other. The circle is your safe place. Okay?"

Tina looked up at the counselor who was smiling at her like she was a three week old puppy. She scanned the rest of the women. Two were sitting with their legs pulled close to their chests, obviously closing themselves off from the "safety circle", but the other seven women looked on sympathetically and waited.

"Well, I—," Tina began, but she couldn't finish. Her face burned and tears began running down her cheeks. Everyone waited patiently. "Look. I don't want to talk today. Is that alright?" she asked.

"In order for this experience to help you, Tina, you're going to have to open up to us." The counselor was now sitting on the edge of her seat, her body turned to face Tina.

Tina sat quietly for several minutes. As she tried to think of something to say, she began to feel the guilt and shame swell. She couldn't sit around and talk about what she'd done like it was something bad that had happened to her. Like she was a victim. She didn't want the sympathy of these women or anybody else.

"I killed my baby while I was on coke and pain killers," she finally said, in a loud and clear voice. Her eyes remained on the floor between her feet, and none of the women offered sympathy.

Clare was starving. She felt like she hadn't eaten in weeks. Dinner for the night had been a grilled pork chop, green beans, sweet carrots, and a small piece of cornbread. There was also a rubbery block of red Jello for dessert, but she'd never really cared for Jello. She'd devoured the rest of her meal though.

When the nurse returned for her tray, she stared at the empty plate for a moment and looked at Clare.

"Goodness, honey. I haven't seen you eat that much since you got here," she said. "I'm glad you're finally getting your appetite back, among other things."

"How long have I been here?" Clare asked. She'd been trying to pry information out of people all day, but she figured it couldn't hurt to try again.

"Oh, well I guess it's been about six month now, hasn't it?" the older woman said as she gathered the dinner tray in her hands.

"Six months?" Clare asked. It wasn't even shock she felt. By this point, it was clear that something was going on. She must have lost her mind and was just now gaining it back, but that didn't make the realization that she'd lost six months of her life any easier to handle. "Do you know when I'll be able to see Dr. Strong? He said we could talk later today."

The nurse stopped at the door to Clare's room. "Let's see. He usually makes his rounds over on this wing about an hour after dinner, so it shouldn't be too long now."

"Thank you," Clare said, laying back on her cot.

The other women at the rehab clinic, including Mo, settled into a peaceful habit of ignoring Tina. Some of the women were dealing with the pain of being away from their own children while they were in treatment, and the shock of Tina's emotionless declaration and her unwillingness to offer further explanation had put a bad taste in their mouths. Needless to say, judgment had found its way into the safety circle that day.

The counselors continued trying to work with her on her guilt issues though. Having access to her case files, they understood that there was more to Tina's story than she'd been willing to share. But, in the end, the counselors at the rehab facility were nothing more than past addicts who had taken training in addiction counseling. Tina's level of guilt and self-loathing was out of their range of expertise, and most of them knew it.

With the help of a few of the counselors, she quietly and half-heartedly worked the twelve steps at least to the degree that it looked good enough on paper to get her through the program and out of the rehab clinic after her twenty-eight days. Though they hadn't been able to reach her, the counselors who stuck by her side knew Tina needed the help the Adolphus Facility would provide more than anything they could do for her.

On the evening of her coin-out ceremony, there was no big celebration. Everyone was there because it was expected of them, but when Tina was awarded her sobriety coin and asked to participate in one last reading of the Serenity Prayer, none of the other women congratulated her. The next morning, she left the rehab clinic as quietly as she had come.

She first met Dr. Strong on her second day at Adolphus Mental Facility, and she knew within their first meeting that he wasn't going to be as easy on her as the counselors at the rehab clinic had been. In fact within the first five minutes of their meeting, he'd reminded her that she was under court order to remain at the mental hospital until he decided she was ready to be released.

"Well then I guess it's a good thing that I don't really care whether I'm here or somewhere else," she'd said. "Actually, come to think of it, I don't have anywhere else to go, so—"

"Alright. If that's how you want to approach this, I'll play along," Dr. Strong said, cutting her off. "I get it. You know? Those degrees hanging on the wall didn't come from a Cracker Jack box or the University of Phoenix." He abandoned the manila folder he'd been scanning and made a large, sweeping gesture toward the smattering of framed certificates on the wall. He clasped his large hands together on his desk and looked at her

squarely. "Tina, you feel guilty, you feel like you deserve to be here, or better yet, somewhere worse, and you don't want my sympathy. Am I on the right track?"

She didn't respond. She only stared at the clutter on his desk with dry eyes.

"Look, everything that's happened up to this point is over with. It's in the past," he said, as if this piece of obvious truth had escaped her. She knew it was over with and there was no going back. That was the point. "We can't change it. People make choices in life, Tina—all different kinds of choices. Some people make really bad ones that shape the courses of their lives forever. The thing is, though, everybody makes bad choices at some point. It doesn't always make them a bad person."

Tina's head snapped up. "And what if your bad choice kills somebody?" she asked. Her voice wasn't loud or soft. It was steady and calm. She looked at Dr. Strong directly for the first time. "What if someone who is completely innocent dies because you made nothing but bad decisions?"

"Tina, let me ask you a question," Dr. Strong said, leaning toward her. "Did you love your son?"

"Of course. Of course I loved him," she sobbed.

"Did you ever sing to him while you were putting him to sleep?"

"Yes."

"What did you sing?"

"I don't know, just a song my mom used to sing to me," she said as if the line of questioning was ridiculous.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you sing that song to him?"

"Because I knew it used to soothe me and make me feel safe," she said.

"Okay. So you loved him, you cared about him, you sang to him to make him feel safe, but you had an addiction. Did you use drugs while you were pregnant?" Dr. Strong asked.

"No," Tina said. "I quit when I found out, but I was already three months along. They would have taken him from me if I'd been using. What does this have to do with anything?"

"The point I'm trying to make is that you loved your boy. You provided love and comfort to him. Against all odds, you quit using drugs when you were heavily addicted in order to ensure a safe pregnancy. Out of all the bad decisions you made, you also made some good ones."

"And look what good it did him," she said, shaking violently. "I'm sure he was really comforted while I was suffocating him so he would shut up while the drug dealers beat on my door." She was screaming. Tears ran freely down her face which had turned red with anger.