

*2022 Southern Literary Festival
Anthology*

April 21–23, 2022

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Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

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2022 Southern Literary Festival Judges

Poetry

Emily Rose Cole

Fiction

Tryphena Treboah

One-Act Plays

Blair Cadden

Creative Nonfiction

Kasey Peters

Formal Essays:

Leah Claire Kaminski

Print Journals

Rob Davidson

2022 Southern Literary Festival

Hosted by Mississippi University for Women,
Columbus, Mississippi

Keynote Speaker Ashley M. Jones

Ashley M. Jones is Poet Laureate of the state of Alabama (2022–2026). She received an MFA in Poetry from Florida International University (FIU), where she was a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Fellow. She served as Official Poet for the City of Sunrise, Florida's Little Free Libraries Initiative from 2013–2015, and her work was recognized in the 2014 Poets and Writers Maureen Egen Writer's Exchange Contest and the 2015 Academy of American Poets Contest at FIU. She was also a finalist in the 2015 Hub City Press New Southern Voices Contest, the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award Contest, and the National Poetry Series. Her poems and essays appear or are forthcoming in many journals and anthologies, including *CNN*, the Academy of American Poets, *POETRY*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Prelude*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Fjords Review*, *Quiet Lunch*, *Poets Respond to Race Anthology*, *Night Owl*, *The Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, *pluck!*, *Valley Voices: New York School Edition*, *Fjords Review: Black American Edition*, *PMSPoemMemoirStory* (where her work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2016), *Kinfolks Quarterly*, *Tough Times in America Anthology*, and Lucid Moose Press' *Like a Girl: Perspectives on Femininity Anthology*.



See Jones' full biography at thesouthernliteraryfestival.org.

Poetry

FIRST PLACE

Lauren Carlisle

University of North Georgia

Paperweight

when you're
a girl with paper skin
you always let the light peek in
there's no protest
no punishment
just blank page and filament
when you're a
girl who's made of glass,
product of fire and sand,
delicate strong artifact
a sharpened blade in hand,
chances are you'll come undone
turn back to fire and grain
glass, the fragile thing that
beams with color when it's stained
glass grazing your lips at breakfast,
glasses resting on your face
priceless crystal glass in pieces,
perfect porcelain drops of rain
made of glass the thing that
shatters when you toss it on the floor
a glass that overflowed because somebody
overpoured
glass that crumbles when you don't
protect it anymore

sometimes I was made of water,
a soft and rapid wave
a girl drenched in sunburnt fury,
a girl anyone could change
I tried to tell all of the stories like I was

a blank slate but instead I turned to dust
and settled on a paperweight

woman made of flesh not stone,
a woman made of blood and bone,
stole the shape of each container I held on
to everything
cursed the night in hopes that dawn
would steal a favor from the sun
and stretch me out into the morning
amber gold or rosy pink
everything I hoped to be was
something light and something free
nomadic bird or whistling breeze
honeysuckle, honeybee
cashmere kiss of autumn
or soft pastel of the spring
ruby of cranberry syrupy sweet
grenadine
something you can wrap your hands around
and rest upon your cheek
a woman made of something strong

something wild
something sweet

Judge's Comments: "*Paperweight*" is a delight to the senses, especially when read aloud. This poem stands out not just for its well-crafted, multisensory images, but also for its keen attention to sound. The clever slant rhymes and lovely texture created by lines like "nomadic bird or whistling breeze / honeysuckle, honeybee / cashmere kiss of autumn" contribute a sense of playfulness and buoyancy that suggest the impending transformation of the speaker.

SECOND PLACE

*Sydney Boone
Hendrix College*

Anthrōpophagos

Fat and blood pouring from our lips,
the flesh and sinews slip through your teeth,
wine-dark.

In the maddening grasp of famine,
we slake ourselves on one another,
nourishment offered and demanded in measure,
passing morsels of lust from tongue to tongue
between entangled bodies.

The taste of iron hangs,
thick and cloying,
clogging our sinuses and dripping down
our throats,
our chins,
our chests,
to pool beneath ouroboros spines
in a tar-black halo.

Language slips from our grasp
like tendons sliding between teeth.
Lust murders literacy:
we converse in the manner of beasts,
tongue of reciprocated violence:
rasp of teeth through flesh,
the whisper of your nails through my hair.

Judge's comments: *A poem of a striking imagination, "Anthrōpophagos" draws on the mythical race of "human-eaters" to illustrate the interplay between hunger, passion, and violence. The poem memorably imagines an intimate encounter in terms of a cannibalistic feast in which "lust murders literacy," and leaves the question of whether there are any survivors tantalizingly ambiguous.*

THIRD PLACE

Jude Keef

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

I'm Not as Dead as Y'all Think

"I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time."

—William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

I wasn't gone until y'all finally buried me, half decayed,
two weeks later than anyone with any kind of dignity
could expect, and in a state worse than death. I wasn't gone
when I watched him slave upon the sawhorse,
modern Vulcan, doing the work that no one
could afford me in life. I wasn't gone when y'all
laid me in that pine box, upside down, as if orientation
does not matter. As if we could lay our crucifixes in reverse.
As if it doesn't matter that I'll have my back turned
on that last day, when Jesus raises us up from our graves.
I wasn't gone when y'all drilled holes through my lid and face
so I could breathe, and so that I could drown when y'all
dropped me into that river. I wasn't gone when y'all used me
as a bed, or as a table, or as a set piece in that wagon.
You'd think I'd care still, but death is a long time to hold on.

Judge's Comments: "*I'm Not as Dead As Y'all Think*" is a poem that tips its hand to us in the title, implicating the reader within in the collective "y'all" that the poem addresses. The poem is marked by careful imagery and precise control over the speaker's overall tone. Though the speaker proclaims that "death is long time to hold on" and seems to forgive the implicated "y'all" by the end, the righteous indignation that laces the poem together reverberates long after the poem's last line.

HONORABLE MENTION
Michaela Crawford
Tennessee Technological University

pronouns

if i could be something,
i would be nothing
because nothing
is better than something
for nothing's
not anything
and anything
is still something
even though nothing
isn't something
it still has something:
an ending
of choosing
and deciding
to be something
if i could be nothing
that would be something
not something
but something
surprising
yet comforting
i was told to be something
i could be anything
i want to be nothing
“that isn't something”
nothing
is the first stage of everything
something

is the last stage of anything
is something
worth anything?
then i'd be something:
passing
missing
not nothing

Judge's Comments: *Using very few words and almost no imagery, "pronouns" creates space for its reader to consider the constructs of gender in broad, philosophical terms. The poem challenges its readers through an impressive series of rhetorical maneuvers. Is gender really "something," the poem asks us. And, if so, "is something worth anything?"*

FICTION

FIRST PLACE

Michael Lewis

Tennessee Technological University

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes

When I was young, around the age of nine or ten, my aunt and cousins came to visit from out of town. This wasn't out of the ordinary exactly, but it was still a unique enough occurrence to excite me. I was an only child with just a few friends and my over-protective parents' paranoia at the thought of me going to a "stranger's" house ensured that I didn't socialize with anyone my age much outside of school. My daily summer routine consisted of cartoons and video games with brief trips to our fenced in back yard where the dogs were housed in an even smaller pen. Sometimes I would ride my bike on the dead-end street our house faced when I saw the familiar faces of neighborhood kids out playing tag on their bikes, but I was forbidden from going to any of their homes when they would inevitably retire to one of their respective abodes to escape the oppressive heat. On more than one occasion I led a group of friends back to the gate that separated my family from the outside world, assuring them with the naiveté of my childhood confidence that they'd be welcome in this time, only for them to immediately be refused entry. A driveway split the chain-link fence that encircled our front yard and led from the road to the small overhang that offered the family car little protection from the elements. White siding, cracked in places but mostly well maintained, enveloped the exterior of the house and the front porch, placed squarely in the middle of the façade, was at the top of a set of concrete stairs leading up on either side. The porch, stairs, and walkway were covered with a green outdoor carpet that I always thought served no purpose aside from looking tacky.

The sound of crunching gravel in the driveway around noon heralded my aunt's arrival. Her maroon car with peeling paint and balding tires was, as always, accompanied by the characteristic

smell of stale cigarettes mingling with the faux-ocean scent of her favorite car air freshener. With her were two of her three children, my cousins and the only kids other than myself who had ever been allowed to come inside our house while we lived in it. I don't remember where Kaylee, the oldest of the four of us and the only girl, was. She was probably off visiting her estranged father or visiting our grandmother whom she'd eventually live with, but that was fine by me. Connor and Benji were more than enough company to be the highlight of my month.

"Howdy!" my aunt exclaimed as my mom and I came out onto our front porch after hearing the thud of car doors shutting.

"Bonnie! You made it alright," my mom replied with the smile she reserved for teachers, doctors, and other public figures she was forced to interact with. She then gave me a shove and whispered, "Go give your Aunt B a hug" in my ear.

Despite having visited with them several times throughout the years, our interactions were usually limited to a few trips every summer and were spread out enough for there to be an initial awkwardness to overcome every time we got together. I hugged my aunt, who always seemed far more enthusiastic than I did, and greeted my cousins with our typical brief hellos accompanied with a halfhearted wave. I always thought Aunt B and her children looked emaciated when I was young and I sometimes questioned whether they were related to us at all. My parents and I, as well as all our family that lived nearby, had dark brown hair and were all of middling height and weight, if not a little on the stout side. Blonde hair with a tinge of red adorned my Aunt B and her children's heads, which were perched atop their lanky bodies that towered over me. To my adolescent eyes, they appeared as though someone took a normal sized person and stretched them six inches or so.

Though still considerably taller than I was, Benji was the shorter of my two cousins. He often declared that this was due to his age and that once he hit his growth spurt when he turned thirteen, the same age Connor grew almost a foot taller over the course of a few months, he'd catch up to his big brother. Benji also tended to have shaggy hair since he made it a point to avoid the barber as much as possible ever since he went to one in Dayton while visiting family a few years back. The old man that ran the

place cut off about a half inch off the top of Benji's left ear and he had to go to the emergency room to get it sewn back on. It never healed right, and his ear always bent down at an odd angle where the scar tissue hardened. This stood in stark contrast to Connor, whose hair was shaved into a perpetual flattop that never appeared to grow. Aside from this, the only way there would be to tell Connor and Benji apart, aside from their personalities, would be the expressions that flowed across their faces. Benji, with a youthful innocence he never grew out of, always seemed to be in a state of wonder or, if not wonder, an ignorant bliss. He was possessed by a persistent optimism that, for better or worse, never burdened him with the worries or cynicisms that would wrinkle Connor's face. Connor, meanwhile, appeared to be perpetually contemplating some decision he had made that led to unintended consequences he wasn't sure he approved of. To an outside observer, I imagine he seemed stoic, like a stalwart cowboy in one of those spaghetti westerns he and his father adored so much, but I knew him better than that. Connor was always the one to point out the worst-case scenario in any given situation and his grave visage was indicative of his pessimistic personality.

After the customary greetings, my mom and aunt took to the front porch where they would remain for the remainder of the day, catching up with each other and gossiping with a zeal that wasn't possible over the phone. During these conversations was the only time I ever saw my mom smoke before she openly took up the habit a couple months later. She'd always wait until I was out of eyeshot to take a Camel Light from one of the many packs Aunt B always seemed to have on her person, but the smell permeated our house and wafted into the backyard where the dogs were confined in their meager dwellings.

"Go on and show your cousins your new game," my Mom said, ushering me away. "Your Aunt B and I got plenty to talk about."

While my mom practiced her future habit, I showed my cousins to my room with an excitement that bordered on mania. I ecstatically bragged about my favorite action figures, my achievements in video games, and the myriad posters adorning my wall. Their visit was in the middle of summer and the only relief from the heat was an air conditioner hanging from the window in

our living room. This kept the bulk of the house cold enough to shock anyone coming in from the muggy Floridian heat, but at the cost of blocking off all other rooms, including mine. My parents would hang comforters over doorways to insulate the living room where they spent the majority of their time and they did their job well. My room became even hotter than the suffocating humidity outside.

Despite my apparent excitement, Connor and Benji seemed loathe to show any interest in my hobbies. Connor, being several years older than me, had outgrown playing with toys and Benji, regardless of being only a year older than me, tended to emulate his big brother and feigned disinterest in activities other children his age enjoyed. Benji was the one who, during my last visit to Aunt B's house about a year before, told me that Santa didn't exist. At first I didn't believe him.

"I swear, Connor told me just last year," he said as we walked through the woods behind his home. "I didn't believe him either, but then we stayed up late the night before Christmas and snuck out of our rooms once we heard someone moving in the living room. It started right after Ma peeked her head in to make sure we was asleep and there she was, plain as day, puttin' the presents under the tree. Next day I checked em and sure enough, they said they were from Santa."

I started crying and spent the rest of the day contemplating this information. Benji had no reason to lie to me and Connor was off at his dad's when he told me. Benji was always different when Connor wasn't around. He didn't feel the need to conform to Connor's personality and was more himself. We always got along better whenever it was just the two of us spending time together, but we never had many opportunities to. Most of the time he and Connor were inseparable and Benji's desire to be accepted by his big brother led to his death a few years later when Connor brought him along to a party with some older friends. Connor downed a whole bottle of whisky over the course of the evening and Benji, who had also been drinking and didn't know how to drive, tried to drive them home since he was the soberest of the two.

The insufferable heat in my room, along with my cousins' boredom, soon led us to seek refuge in the living room. It was cooler in there, but our tv, the only means of entertainment outside

of my room, only had access to three channels and none of them were showing anything that would interest Connor. I browsed the dust-covered board games haphazardly arranged on a nearby bookshelf in an attempt to find some respite from the persistent awkwardness, but to no avail. The clock on the wall ticked on as we lazed on the torn maroon cushions of the couch. Connor propped his feet up on the worn wooden coffee table with a doily and several drink coasters scattered about it and yawned as a family of hillbillies on the tv found themselves in a misunderstanding with their affluent neighbors in California. After an interminable time spent switching between the scant channels afforded our small tv housed in its wooden cabinet with cloth covered speakers on either side, we joined my mom and Aunt B on the front porch. We clearly interrupted them while they were discussing something important. They stopped talking abruptly and my mom averted her face, wiping her face with her cigarette-free hand.

"Now what are you all doing out here?" Aunt B asked with an obvious touch of annoyance in her tone. "Go back on inside and let us talk."

We began to protest, citing the heat in my room and lack of variety on tv. Having collected herself, my mom said, "Why don't you show them your new basketball hoop in the back?" while trying to hide her hand holding a lit cigarette.

Out of options, we wandered around the house and into the backyard, but we were in no mood to play basketball with the sun shining down out of a cloudless sky. There was little else to occupy our interest aside from the freshly erected hoop that stood in the middle of the lawn and whose unpaved earthen court caused the ball to bounce at half the height and at odd angles. We instead opted to move the picnic table that sat in the yard near the dog pen where a tree offered the dogs, and now us, some shade. After some time passed, Connor spoke up.

"So what do you do for fun around here?" he asked, looking around the mostly empty yard. His dispassionate face unmoved by the overbearing sun shining down.

"Well when it's too hot out, I usually stay inside and play games. Sometimes I'll ride my bike or play basketball once the sun starts to go down," I said.

Connor laughed a bit and shook his head. "I don't know how you don't die of boredom. We got the woods round our place to go hunting in and Uncle John lives just down the road. He gives us a beer whenever we come over and lets us go fishing in the pond behind his house."

"There's also the gas station a ways nearby," Benji added. "we walk down there sometimes and grab a coke and some jerky. Couple of times we saw this girl from school that Connor's sweet on."

"Course, who knows what kind of place you'll be living in here in a couple of months," Connor said, ignoring Benji's comments. "Maybe you'll come live near us and the rest of the family. What with everything that's going on."

I looked at him confused and took a moment to attempt to glean some sense from what he said. Dozens of possibilities ran through my mind, but all of them were equally farfetched. The most logical idea I could think of, the only one that made some semblance of sense, was that my parents were thinking of moving closer to my mom's side of the family near Aunt B and Uncle John's houses up in Georgia. My face must have betrayed my confusion, because Benji soon spoke up.

"I don't think he knows what you're talking about."

"Do you reckon?" Connor said and brought a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He pulled one out and put it between his lips before offering another to me. "Here, you may want to take one of these. Don't worry about getting caught. Ma and Aunt Claire will be on that porch till after sundown and Ma can't ever smell it on us since she's always smoking one." The cigarette bounced up and down in his mouth as he spoke. "I've been swiping a few smokes from the packs Ma leaves laying around the house. She can't ever keep up with them all so she don't notice."

I hesitated, but eventually took the cigarette from him. I had no desire to smoke. The smell that clung to Aunt B always made me a little sick whenever I had to ride in the car with her and dad always told me that smoking was terrible for people. Nevertheless, taking the cigarette seemed like the quickest way to continue the conversation with Connor and I was champing at the bit to hear what they knew that I didn't. Connor took out a cheap lighter, the

see-through kind that you see at gas stations, and lit his. Maybe he got this one from the gas station Benji mentioned. Or maybe it was one that Aunt B had left out and lost. He shielded the flame from the light breeze wafting through with his other hand.

"You ain't noticed that your Pa's been gone for more'n a few days now?" he asked, smoke drifting out of his mouth like a dragon and shrouding his face as he talked.

"He's visiting Nanna in Alabama. He does that from time to time to check on her," I said. It didn't strike me as odd that Dad went off on a visit on short notice. Nanna was a bit of a hypochondriac and was suffering from a new imagined affliction every other week. Dad could sometimes tell she was making a big deal out of nothing, but oftentimes made the drive up to Geneva to check on her. I assumed this was one such case and didn't strike me as anything out of the ordinary.

"Like as not he is, but not to check on her," Connor said. He flicked the lighter, again protecting the fire, and brought it toward me. I'd forgotten I even had a cigarette in my offhand and brought it to my mouth without thinking. He held the flame to the cigarette, pulled away, and then brought it back.

"You have to breathe in to light it," he said.

I did as he said, unsure of how much force to put behind it, and sucked in a lungful of cancerous smoke. I immediately began choking and coughing.

"Quiet down now or your mom'll hear!"

I regained my composure, albeit with tears in my eyes and my chest feeling as though it was on fire. I was lightheaded, but not in an entirely bad way. I took another hesitant drag on the cigarette, with more care this time, and almost gagged at the taste of ash in my mouth. Still, I was determined to maintain some semblance of poise in front of Connor. Benji's attitude when he was around his older brother began to make more sense to me. Connor seemed cool and collected and I wanted to mimic that aura hovering about him if only because he was withholding information that was pertinent to my future.

"There you go," he said. He looked down at the ember on the tip of his smoke for several seconds before continuing. "Remember how, a couple years back, we came down and stayed the weekend

while Ma went back home? I'm sure Aunt Claire told you about my Pa moving away not too long after that. I ain't seen him since."

"I go see my dad every now and then," Benji brought up.
"Same with Kaylee. Matter of fact, she's at her dad's right now. I'm sure your pa won't be like Connor's."

Connor furrowed his brow for a moment before responding. He didn't mince words this time. "Your folks are splitting up. We overheard Ma talking to Aunt Claire on the phone last night. We could only catch some of what Ma was saying, so we don't know for sure what happened, but she called your dad a 'lowlife piece of shit' not long after they started talking. Heard a little more like, 'what are you going to do' and 'you're welcome to stay here for as long as you need to' and Benji swears he heard her say 'at least this new fella can support you'n your kid,' but I didn't hear nothing like that."

"She said it," Benji said. "Clear as day she did."

"Either way, your parents are divorcing. That's a fact," Connor said.

They both stared at me, maybe expecting some kind of dramatic emotional response. I didn't break down into tears though like I had when Benji told me about Aunt B putting the presents that were supposed to be from Santa under the tree. I didn't argue with them or debate other possibilities. I didn't get angry and storm off. I just sat there, unable to feel one way or another about anything they'd just told me. My dizziness from the tobacco was slowly increasing, as was the need to vomit. Many irregularities over the past few months began to make sense. The increasing amount of nights Dad spent at Papa's house on the other side of town with Uncle Gary, Dad "camping out" in the living room with me instead of sleeping in the master bedroom with Mom when he was at home, the night Mom stormed out of the house after an argument and Dad left me alone for the first time while he drove around the neighborhood looking for her, and the feebly veiled contempt under a thin veneer of cordiality all became terrifyingly apparent.

"You alright?" Connor asked after a minute or two with a confused look on his face. Benji seemed equally bewildered.

"Yeah," I said at length. "Let's go inside. I feel like I can't breathe out here in this heat." The half-smoked cigarette dropped from between my fingers as I stood up. Connor told me that I may

want to hide the butts since my mom didn't smoke, but I wasn't listening. We went back inside and watched one of the three available tv channels until the sun went down. As the reality of the situation began to dawn on me, and the initial shock started to wear off, I couldn't help but begin to cry. I tried to hide it, but I'm sure Connor and Benji both knew what was happening. I was just glad that they chose to ignore the tears I endeavored to wipe away before they fell too far from my eyes and the sniffles I hoped would be construed as the result of some newfound allergies.

I found myself remembering a poignant conversation my dad had with me a week prior. It was the morning after one of the nights where he slept in a sleeping bag on the floor of the living room while I was on the couch watching tv past my bedtime. We were in his truck driving to the center where I stayed during the summer so my parents could go to work without hiring a babysitter. I wasn't sure what the purpose of it was at the time, but, in retrospect, I fully understood the weight of his words.

"You know son, there may come a time when I can't see you every day," he said, eyes fixated firmly on the road. "Just know that no matter what happens, I'll always be your father. Me and your mother don't always see eye to eye, but I'm sure she wants what's best for you." Here his calm demeanor began to break, and his face reddened to the same color as the cans of pop he stocked for a living. "Even if her plans don't involve me," he continued. He took a shaky breath while looking out the driver side window and I could hear him mumble not so quietly "thinks she's going to replace me." Turning his face forward again, I could see his eyes were shining in the morning light. "Just remember, you're my son. No one else's." I dealt with this serious conversation I didn't understand the same way I did any other and stared out the window, nodding or grunting in acknowledgement whenever I felt the situation demanded it.

After a couple of hours, my despondency was alleviated enough for me to regain my composure, at least in front of my cousins. The sun set and soon after Aunt B came into the house to grab a couple cokes from the icebox.

"Y'all about ready to skedaddle?" she asked her kids before turning to me. "I'm sorry we didn't get much time to visit, but Aunt B loves you. You'n your mom'll have to come up soon and stay for a while." She gave me a hug and we all went outside.

Although the sun had been replaced by the moon for a while at this point, it was still uncomfortably warm out. A cacophony of insect calls pervaded the night as lightning bugs glowed intermittently in the dark. The bug zapper hanging from the porch roof lulled the occasional straggler to their death with its dull blue light that served as the only artificial illumination aside from the subdued light emanating through the curtain-covered windows. Aunt B, Connor, and Benji were soon off on their way, smoke issuing from both the exhaust and the driver side window. My prior nicotine buzz had long since faded, but I still felt sick to my stomach. Connor was right though. My mom couldn't smell the smoke on me over her own stench.

Judge's Comments: *"Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"* strikes me for its familial tension and childlike innocence in grappling with loss and separation. The characters are memorable, and it is very easy for readers to start rooting for them because we're made to see them as they are—their lingering frustrations, desires, and even the unspoken fear for what's to come. These emotions are experienced with both care and abandon, and Michael Lewis skillfully offers us an enriched and complex portrait of a family in a challenging season of their lives.

SECOND PLACE

Angel Filyaw

Tennessee Technological University

Welcome Home

Greg signed the letter in cursive as he did every other letter: with Love, Dad. This letter, though, had more importance than the others, so he added a P.S. underneath: I'll see you soon.

The young guard with the awful goatee collected the letter as he had the seven others, with a grunt and a tug at his belt. Usually, Greg met the guard's gaze and considered challenging him. Today, Greg sat on his twin-sized mattress feeling relieved. The white walls of his cell were a clean slate. In a week he was leaving, and, as he had requested in the letter, his son would be picking him up from prison and bringing him home.

None of the letters mentioned the reason for Greg's incarceration. For fear of reliving the moment when he killed his wife, Greg continued on as if it did not happen. It was difficult to avoid his mistakes in prison with a sentence that served as a constant reminder, but not impossible. Every Sunday, Greg attended the sermon, believing if God could forgive him, then so could his son. God only needed one prayer, but he had nine years to forgive.

When the next week finally arrived and he was released, Greg laughed at the guard with the goatee. He wouldn't see the guard again, he promised. Also, he was getting his ten dollars back. He would offer the money to his son as gas money. His laughter dissolved into a sigh when he was greeted by the humid Tennessee air. Sweat trickled down his neck, over the striking viper tattooed on the back, into the fangs that hid between his wrinkles, and onto the coarse brown hairs that peeked out of his shirt collar. The droplets tickled him, but Greg felt no amusement as he waited for his son to arrive. The car that appeared on the gravel lot was a 2005 red Acura TL, a car that Greg knew well. It was his father's. The thought that his son had borrowed the car for the trip crossed his mind. After all, Greg wouldn't want those kinds of miles on his car, if he had

one, and Father loved to talk about how the Acura was reliable, dependable, and “good to look at too.”

Greg gave up on the hope that his son was the one driving the car when Father stepped out and waved. Father’s skin was tanner and more wrinkled from working outside in the vegetable garden this summer. His eyes drooped and his back curved forward a little more. He patted Greg on the back. Greg was met with the scents of tobacco and spearmint, same as always. They caused his stomach to turn.

Father pushed the mint to the side of his mouth and said, “Good to see you, son.”

Greg didn’t point out the fact that Father was taking the long way through town. They passed poplar trees and dilapidated railroad tracks instead of gas stations and water-damaged liquor stores. Greg had learned that addiction—overt addiction, like alcohol and drugs, the kind that had a man reeling on the sidewalk outside a house at three in the morning, bags of boxers and socks tossed out the window with one generous heave—made people spazz. Right now, Father tightened his hands on the wheel. Then, feeling Greg staring, he loosened them. Greg didn’t feel like dynamite until he noticed his own father keeping a good distance away and speaking in that gentle, nursing tone, afraid to be the spark to the fuse.

Before prison, Greg didn’t go a day without alcohol. One experience blurred into the next, seemingly of little consequence, until the one experience that changed everything happened. Greg had lost his job and was spending every wintry day at home, drinking and sleeping. His wife asked him to seek help, and they decided to leave their son with his grandparents. Greg remembered Father’s incessant yelling to get clean and start acting like a man when they arrived, the sting from the minty spit hitting his face, his sixteen-year-old son staring blankly as he walked into his grandfather’s arms. He remembered slamming the door of his rundown silver Honda Accord and hitting the gas without checking to see if his wife was buckled, or if she was there at all.

Greg turned his attention to the passenger window and looked outside. Squirrels scrambled about under the poplar trees that lined the road, their bushy tails flattening against thick grass and then disappearing in the tree branches. The sun filtered through the trees’

green leaves while a bluejay took flight. Greg wanted to climb one of the trees, just because he could, and he kept staring at the sun, even though the rays were burning his eyes. Quickly, before Father could notice them, Greg shut his eyes against the tears forming in them. He didn't want Father to think something was wrong, or, worse, to ask what was wrong when it went against his character as a man. How would Greg have explained? That he looked directly at the sun, like a child who didn't know better? That he didn't care if he lost his sight then and there because the thief was the sun and not the LED lights of a jail? Finally, he had the chance to repair the relationship between him and his son. The feeling was too intense to process. He would begin by visiting his house and asking him to talk over dinner at the local diner.

The car slowed to a stop. They were parked in front of his son's house. The house was painted a light gray. A bright white door was its center. White shutters encased the windows and a wooden porch with a swing overlooked a tiny patch of grass. Potted plants, mostly summer flowers in pinks and oranges, lined the bottom of the porch. On the right side of the house sat a garage. Greg could only picture the car that his son kept in there. He had done well.

"Do you want me to walk you up?" Father asked.

The question Father hadn't asked, if he was capable of behaving, filled the small space between them. It irritated Greg, but he tried not to let it show.

"Thank you. I've got it from here," Greg said.

Greg offered the ten dollars to Father, which he politely refused.

As Father drove off, the car moving forward at a snail's pace, Greg pulled down his shirt and pulled up his pants. He cupped his calloused hands in front of his mouth and blew out a long, hot breath, hoping to catch a whiff of something good and smelling nothing at all. He should have asked Father for a mint. He shook out his arms. Then, he took the first step forward and then the next and then he paused. Maybe Father dropped him off at the wrong address. No, Father had been here many times before, he thought.

Probably, Greg's father had helped Greg's son make the down payment for this house. Greg's father had supplied the kitchen table and comfortable sofa, wood polishing for the porch. If there

was an old Ford truck in the garage, Greg's father had helped fix it. Probably.

Greg's father had played that role twice now. He understood the burden of being called a father, of being a father, while Greg had never fully introduced himself to the title. Briefly, his stomach fluttered like butterfly wings, but instead of calling the sensation butterflies, as that word applied to girls experiencing their first crush, he called it gratitude for Father. Despite the years of fighting, Father remained by his side. It was more than Greg expected, and it was all he was hoping to receive from his son.

The white front door of his son's house remained shut when he reached it. He knocked twice before he saw the doorbell on the right. A twenty-something-year-old woman opened the door with a smile. She had shoulder length dark brown hair that she parted to the side. She wore a white t-shirt with small holes poking through the bottom and fleece pajama pants with polar bears on them.

"Oh, hi," she said.

"Hi," Greg said. "I'm Greg Robertson."

At the name, the woman's face transformed from a confused expression into one of recognition.

Her brown eyes shone as she said, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. He's not home yet, but come on in. I'll get you a glass of water."

The door opened wide enough for him to walk in, and he reminded himself to shut it gently. The inside of the house mirrored the outside's meticulousness, the stuff he'd seen in home decor magazines at emergency rooms. A beige sectional sofa sat across from a flat screen TV in the living room, a granite island stood in the middle of the kitchen, and a brown-and-white Australian shepherd pranced around the rooms. His wife would have pinched his arm in excitement at the place. The thought caused Greg to stand awkwardly in the kitchen. The woman approached him with a full glass of water.

"Here you go," she said, handing him the glass and then reaching down to pet the dog. "Oh, I completely forgot to introduce myself. I'm Addy, Ben's fiancé."

Greg sipped his water silently, as if the news of his son's engagement wasn't a surprise.

He said, "It's nice to meet you, Addy. It's a good home you've got here," and congratulated himself silently for speaking with Father's confidence.

"Thank you," she said. With a wave of her hand, she directed him to sit down on the sofa, but he needed to use the restroom.

"You'll have to use the one upstairs. We're renovating the one down here, which is an absolute mess," she said. "It's on your left."

Greg nodded his thanks and ascended the stairs. He relieved his bladder and exited the bathroom. He didn't intend to snoop through the house, but a large mattress caught his eye. He remembered the twin-sized mattress in jail, the springs that attacked his back every night like an angry masseuse. This bed was spacious, a king. Not even Greg and his wife had possessed a bed that large. Greg, of course, had wasted their money on whiskey and beer. Without thinking, Greg walked into his son's room and glanced around, at the barren gray walls and melatonin tablets on the wooden nightstand. The room wasn't what Greg had imagined. He had imagined video game posters collaged on the wall and candy bar wrappers squished into the carpet, the chaos of young adulthood. Further, he had pictured his son's chubby bare face and thick brown hair. A framed picture on the nightstand corrected him; his son was muscular, his arms pulling the sleeves of his flannel taut, his hair was cut short and styled to one side, and his chin was covered in a beard. His right arm was wrapped around Addy, and he was smiling.

Only the trash can hinted at chaos. Papers, some folded, some crushed, some straight, overflowed from the rim. A couple of the papers were actually envelopes. On the front of one of the envelopes was an address written delicately in Greg's hand. The trash can held Greg's latest letter, crumbled into a ball, along with chewed gum and bits of plastic. He reached in and took it out, opened it with a gentleness he was not known for, as if he was receiving the letter finally, instead of revisiting the letter he had written weeks ago.

He read, "My son, I can't wait to see you and find out what you've been up to. I miss you every day. They're releasing me next week. It's been nine years, more if you consider the fact that I was never really present before, so if you can pick me up, it would mean

the world to me. I should be cleared in the afternoon. We can go to the old diner and have your favorite chocolate chip pancakes, talk things over. I know we've never had the chance to do that before. I'm sorry. Just know that Dad loves you."

Deeper in the basket was a blank envelope. Greg grabbed it as well. A half-written letter from his son appeared before him. His son's words were unlike his father's; they were not gentle or kind. At least he was honest, Greg thought.

Underneath a harshly erased "Dear Greg," his son wrote, "In case you forgot, you killed my mother and abandoned me. I do not care that you've found God, or that you're reading books. I care that I have met the love of my life, built the house of my dreams, and found a good job. You will always be the selfish drunk who taught me anger. You are not my father, and I am not your son."

The illusion that his son could forgive him after all this time disappeared from his mind. He had no intention of picking Greg up and taking him home. He had no intention of talking to Greg at all. Greg had memorized the contents of each letter, the updates on what he was eating and how he was feeling, how much he missed his son and how he would do better. He never questioned why the guard always took the letters but never returned any. What mattered was that he was writing to someone, that he was trying for someone, while his son, while Ben, was doing well.

The old car he drove on the night of the accident invaded his thoughts. He remembered speeding away from Father's house, clutching the wheel tightly with one hand. The other he banged on the dash. His wife sat beside him, coaxing him. Ben looked more like her with his dark hair and blue eyes.

She said, "Honey, it's okay. We care about you, and we're going to help you get better. Let's go home. I'll pick Ben up when things are better."

They held hands and Greg said between sobs, "I-I shouldn't need help, Father never needed help with anything, but I don't k-know what to do. I don't know w-what's wrong w-with me."

She shushed him and patted his rough hand. He turned to look at her and didn't notice the patch of ice on the road. He hit it and cut the wheel, the car sliding off the pavement and its front end crashing into a tree. Greg gripped the steering wheel, but his wife

didn't have anything to brace her against impact. She died instantly. He stayed there until the police and ambulance came, too stunned to move.

Greg heard the front door open. In a daze, he descended the stairs. Addy sat on the sofa, wearing a worried expression. Ben stood in the center of the living room, his hands in his pockets. He didn't say a word.

Greg had years to plan this meeting and master his facade. He made himself promise to broach the topic with Ben upon his release. He needed to tell Ben that the car wreck was from ice, not drunk driving, though he was undeniably drunk. He needed to say that he thought of his dead wife every day. Each time the memory threatened to consume him, he penned a letter. His emotions became unbearable during the winter, and he used writing to cope. Most of the letters he chose not to send, fearing they painted him as weak. Charles, the pastor at the prison, was the only person to whom he admitted the truth.

Charles told him, "It's okay to need help. We all need it, believe me. It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman, an adult or a child. Don't let people convince you otherwise. Your son might not understand. He might not want to speak to you ever again, but you can't give up hope. Greg, you've suffered from addiction for years. It's time to lay down that burden. Call on the Lord. Ask for help and He shall give it to you."

Greg said a silent prayer and began, "I, uh, I wanted to see you."

Ben did not move. He seemed taller and wider than Greg. Even though Greg lifted weights in prison, Ben's presence occupied the large space. He longed for Ben to speak, to hear the changes in his voice.

Slowly, Greg realized he should've called first, but he didn't have a phone. He thought about ways to contact Father to come and pick him up, but then he realized how childish that sounded. He felt the need to try once more for Ben, not to give up hope, but he could not find the words to speak. Instead, he told Addy how nice it was to meet her and that he hoped she and Ben were happy. Then, he walked out of the house. The painted porch had cracks in it, and the white shutters weren't all that bright. The pink and orange flowers

were browning at the edges and drooping over the sides of their pots.

Greg decided to take the long way back to Father's house. Gray clouds masked the sun and cast shadows on the poplars. The squirrels felt the change in weather and disappeared. At first tentative, just a dark dot on the cement here and there, and then definitive, rain hit the ground hard in waves. Greg turned right at a stop sign. He decided to take the shortcut instead. He remembered the ten dollars in his pocket and the drink he had originally planned to buy with it. Father's voice to hide his feelings and be a man and Charles' voice to confess his mistake and seek help competed in his ears, but he knew how to quiet them. The liquor store was not far now. In this heat, and after so long, the alcohol would settle fast.

Judge's Comments:

[Name of writer] is brave to write a short story about addiction, and one that is structured around difficult subjects of imprisonment, guilt, and abandonment. An important element in "Welcome Home" is the real portrayal of a father's relationship with his son and the lack of sentimentality that one might be tempted to incorporate in work of this kind. There are a few surprises as the story unfolds, but the ending is incredibly satisfying and compelling and speaks a lot to Angel Filyaw's fair treatment of triggers and the compulsive condition that is addiction.

THIRD PLACE

Chelsea Panameno
Christian Brothers University

The Water Rebirths

Two days before my sister's graduation, my mother called me for the first time in three years to tell me she was dead.

They'd found Savannah's body the night before, floating in a swimming pool like an oil spill, her waist-length hair splayed out on the surface of the water. The strings of her top that were supposed to wrap around her neck had come undone, the yellow darkening from sunshine to mustard from soaking for however long she'd been there. She still had the rest of her clothes on—washed-out denim shorts and underwear intact, though ruffled enough to make me nauseous at the thought of what it might imply—save for her shoes, discarded at the edge of the pool as if she'd stepped in for a swim, and the red thread ankle bracelet she always wore. They never found it, not that they tried.

The police called it an accident. A house party that got out of hand. Kids being kids. It was hard to tell reality after enough shots and college students weren't well known for their self-control. It didn't matter that Sav couldn't hold her alcohol for shit, or that her friend who'd been with her for most of the night told the police countless times that Sav wasn't drunk, just tipsy. It was as if they'd made their minds up before they saw the body, and nothing presented to them could have changed it.

"I'll text you the funeral updates," my mother said. Her voice sounded distant, almost robotic, her connection slipping in and out. "Be there early." She hung up without another word.

I stared at the phone in my hand for what felt like hours before I forced myself to put it down. I was about to eat when she called, and the food had gone cold. It felt like someone had scraped my insides out with the carving tools kids used on pumpkins, leaving a gaping hole where everything was supposed to go. I couldn't even make myself put the plate in the microwave. I couldn't do anything at all.

I ended up lying down on the wooden floor of my apartment until my roommate came home. If I closed my eyes, I could see my younger sister floating, eyes open, the red in her hair pooling out like blood, the water in her lungs making her still. It made me want to step in after her.

"Are you okay?" my roommate asked.

"I need a fucking drink," I said, not taking my eyes off the ceiling.

She tossed a water bottle at me without a word.

"Fuck you."

"We don't have alcohol," she called back.

We tried not to make a habit of drinking. Neither did Sav, from what I remembered. But that didn't stop her from dying, and it didn't stop me from wanting something to distract me.

Savannah was younger than me by exactly five years and six months, down to the date and time. By the time she came around, my parents had figured out how to be better parents, having used me as something of a trial run. It was the little things that mattered. Going to school events. Keeping snacks in the house, not just buying fast food whenever they were too tired to cook and forgetting to pay for school lunches. They were stable for Savannah. They were prepared.

I wasn't jealous of Sav. I told myself I was too good for that, that I was better for having gone through the ups and downs of our parents' relationship and coming out fine. It didn't stop people from loving her, though.

She liked princesses and mermaids and shared her Halloween candy. She liked talking to people. I didn't look much different from her. Same eyes, same hair, same face shape. We looked like sisters. But my hair was blunt and short, the bangs a little uneven no matter how many times I tried to trim them. The bags under my eyes were always prominent. I sat in the corner at family events and didn't like people touching me.

I wasn't jealous. But it would be a lot easier if I was like her, and my parents had a habit of commenting on it.

It was the beach that changed things for us.

Sav wanted to go swimming. Our mom told her no, but after enough pleading she sighed and said she could go as long as I was

with her. I scowled, but I didn't fight her on it. I put my book down and followed my sister, keeping one hand in hers so she wouldn't go too far, because if anything happened to her, it would be my fault.

I didn't like swimming. The cold, sharp sting of the water at first contact drove me back, and the feeling of fabric clinging to my body made my skin crawl. But Sav always wanted to. She talked about it the entire trip there, bouncing in her car seat and gripping the rim of her plastic bucket. She kept talking about it the entire walk over, her fingers gripping mine as she pulled me along.

It only took a few seconds. She slipped. That was the only explanation I could ever come up with. I felt her fingers slip out of mine as the tide came in hard, and before I could turn around, she was gone. I scrambled further, almost slipping myself as I reached out for her.

When my hand found hers, tiny and fragile, I yanked her out of the water and back to the shore. She wasn't breathing.

For a long, silent moment, she was still. I was still, too. I couldn't yell. I couldn't move. I could still hear children laughing, some calling out to a friend, the cry of seagulls in the distance.

She sputtered once, and I turned her onto her side as she started heaving. The water flooded out of her, far more than she should have been able to handle. I held her as she threw it all out, staring at her face as her lips turned back to their normal coloring.

She died. I knew that. She knew that. But the water had let her go. Just this once.

I waited until she could breathe without sounding like she was going to cough her lungs back up before taking her hand and walking back to our parents.

We never spoke about it, not on the way home or anytime afterwards. We stopped going to that beach for other reasons – the drive was too long, there were too many people, there were better options for trips like this, so on and so forth. But I don't think Sav ever forgot it. Every time she went in the water, she hesitated, taking baby steps until it reached her waist, then her chest, but never further than that. She'd lean her head back in the water to wet her hair, but the moment it touched her scalp she'd shoot back up, almost slipping on the tile of the bottom of the pool. She never went back into the deep end.

It made sense that the water wouldn't let her go a second time.

The last time I saw Savannah was during her spring break. I didn't live far from her; we just had different schedules, her in college studying film and me working my ass off in an office that I hated, anyways. But I made a point to try to spend time with her every now and again, outside of stilted family dinners and holidays. My mother was still upset with me after I came out as bisexual and said I didn't want children, and my father was upset that I went into a so-called "useless" career field. Sav didn't care. It was nice.

"We should go somewhere together," she said, taking a long sip of her coffee. Iced caramel macchiato with so much whip cream it could have spilled out of the plastic cover. "A sisters trip."

"What kind of trip?" I asked. I drank tea instead of coffee; it was much less elaborate than hers. "We could do something this summer. I can get time off work."

Her voice was softer this time. "I want to go to the beach."

I paused. "Like when we were kids?"

"Yeah, that one." She stared at her cup instead of me. "It's been a long time. I miss it."

I wasn't going to be the one to bring up the drowning incident. Enough time had passed. Maybe she'd forgotten. She was younger, after all.

"Sure," I said. "Call it your graduation gift."

She grinned. "It'll be a sisters' trip."

I smiled back, smaller. "It'll be great."

The funeral was quieter than I imagined it to be. Solemn, but somehow, I hadn't expected the silence. Sav wasn't a quiet person. I had braced myself for pitied looks and hearing empty words such as, "I'm sorry for your loss," and "She was so young," for the next few hours. But it wasn't directed at me. My mother's eyes were red and lined with dark shadows despite the makeup. My father was quiet, standing behind her and letting her do all the talking. He didn't look at me much, giving me a once over when I said hello and nothing else.

I said all of about five words to my mother.

"She would've wanted something natural," I said, and walked away before I could get a response. I filtered out the speeches people gave about her, her life, her memory. They all sounded stilted and rehearsed, as awkward as the way people stared at me then

averted their gaze to try to hide that they were staring at me. No one asked me to speak.

"Wren looks ready to stab someone," I heard someone mutter.
"She can't cry like a normal person at her own sister's funeral."

"She could at least be comforting her mother," one of my aunts said. "Or her father. They just lost their youngest daughter, for God's sake. It's like she doesn't even care."

I said nothing. I kept thinking about the ocean, about where she almost drowned the first time. I thought about how she might have died that time, and how she came back. Nothing could stop her from coming back a second time. Maybe I just needed the right way to do it.

By afternoon, I was at my parents' house, where they'd brought most of Sav's personal things to sort. My parents were allowed to go clean out her apartment, since she'd moved out of the dorms the year before that. I grabbed a few things when they weren't looking, shoving them into my own bag along with a few things of mine she'd borrowed and forgotten to give back over the years. A sweater. An old bracelet. They were too busy arguing over whether to give the rest of her clothes to Goodwill or the local church donation box to notice me. They wouldn't understand what I had to do. For Sav. For them, too, to an extent, but I only thought about her. I was gone before they could decide on what to do.

By evening, I left a note on the fridge for my roommate letting her know where I would be.

By the next morning, I was gone.

Three days after my sister's funeral, I made the three-hour drive to the beach where she died the first time.

By the time I arrived, the soft pinks of the sky matched the shade of Sav's favorite lipstick, and the stars were all gone, as if they'd never been there in the first place. The receptionist fumbled with my card, but before long I was swiping the keycard on the mechanism and stepping through the door. The room was small and smelled like mildew underneath the lavender air freshener. There was a bed, bedside table, lamps, a desk of sorts. A mini-fridge and a small TV. A bible in one of the drawers, as customary. I didn't plan on sleeping much, but it was nicer than sleeping in my car.

I dropped my bags and grabbed two items from the pile: a photo album and a small box at the bottom of my suitcase. The box was simpler: it was Sav's old jewelry box, although she kept all sorts of things in it. Ticket stubs from movies and concerts, dried-out black mascara that could've been mine and never returned, other things. Little things that made up the whole that was my sister. The photo album was a mixture of memories, some hers and some mine, and some not shared between either of us but told of often enough that we could imagine it happening. I doubted my parents would notice it missing, considering the number of photos of my sister left over from the vigil and the funeral. I figured it was enough. It had to be.

I made sure to get my phone and the hotel card, dumped it all into a drawstring bag, and shut the door behind me to make my way down to the shore.

It was quiet, though not surprising, considering how early it still was. Still, I kept walking until I was far out of sight from anyone who could witness this. I didn't remember the exact spot, but I figured it didn't matter too much.

When I reached a good spot, I put my bag down far enough away from the tide that it wouldn't get caught in the tide.

I tossed the box into the water first. I nudged it until the water first washed over it, then began to pull it back in.

"Take it," I said. There was no reaction.

I grabbed the photo album next, dropping it in the same way I did the box.

"Goddamnit, just take it. Take it and give her back. You did it before and you can do it again. There's nothing stopping you. Why can't you just bring her back?"

Nothing happened.

It was stupid to think this would work. It was stupid of me to think that this trip would make anything better. I started walking into the sea after the box and the album.

I didn't think that Sav drowned in the pool. I figured someone else would have had to lead her along, either into the water or somewhere else and then placing the body in the pool. Someone else reached out to her, and she said yes. Or she said no, and they went too far and dragged her down.

Was it possible to stop a death from over a hundred miles away? It wasn't, and I wasn't sure if I wanted it to be. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know that I could have stopped it and still failed.

I had to try one last thing.

I held my breath and submerged myself beneath the waves.

The world was still.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but all I could see was the scattered remnants of dying daylight piercing through the surface. I imagined Sav in the water like she used to be, waist-length hair flowing around her, not tainted by the red.

Something began forming in the water. My lungs were burning. I watched as the light refracted and shifted until I could make out a head, a neck, a torso. There were no details, but there was only one person it could be in that moment.

I broke the surface of the water, gasping for air.

Out of the sea, the shape of her began to emerge. Slim fingers, still dripping wet, reached out to me. I reached out back. The water formed bone and muscle and tissue, layering brown skin that looked just like mine over it all. Brown eyes stared back at me, confused, but no longer still.

"Wren?" she asked. Her lips were chapped., her voice hoarse from disuse. She coughed before continuing. "Where are we?"

"We're at the beach," I responded. It was all I could think of. "Like we said."

She opened her mouth, but all that came out was seawater. She coughed and retched as the water that rebirthed her poured back out of her body, leaving her only flesh and blood, cold and confused and tired.

"It's late," I said. "Come on. You can borrow some of my stuff. I have a hotel room, let's go."

I held her hand, and I dragged my sister back to the shore.

Judge's Comments: "*The Water Rebirths*" had me from its opening lines and with its strong sense of mystery, successfully carried me all the way without my curiosity waning. More than an account of sisterhood, this is a story that explores a deep bond and plunges the reader into the depths of such connection. Love is at work, but

there's also hope and desperation, and how far one is willing to go to restore what has been lost.

ONE-ACT PLAY

FIRST PLACE

V. Taylor Davis

Middle Tennessee State University

A Very Normal Bear Family Evening

Cast of Characters

PAPA “CHARLES” BEAR: Adult male grizzly bear.

MAMA “MARLENE” BEAR: Adult female grizzly bear. Papa Bear’s wife.

BABY “JUNIOR” BEAR: Juvenile grizzly bear. Their child. Any gender.

Place

The dining room of the Bear Family cottage. There is a windowed wall with shrubs outside and a kitchen counter inside, as well as a dining room table with three chairs.

Time

Evening

Setting

The dining room has been infiltrated. A chair is broken, a bowl of porridge is overturned on the floor, and beside the mess lies the body of Goldilocks.

(Note: Goldilocks is not to be depicted by an actor. For maximum comedic effect, a life-sized fabric dummy is suggested.)

At Rise

PAPA BEAR is leading the family back into the house after a dinner out.

PAPA BEAR

And John said, "Grizzly bear? I thought you said drizzly bear!" So cue me combing syrup out of his fur for hours. And the stench!

PAPA drops his keys on the counter and sees Goldilocks.

PAPA BEAR

Honey, take Junior outside.

MAMA BEAR

What? What's the matter?

BABY BEAR

But I left my game inside. You said I could get my game.

MAMA sees it too.

MAMA BEAR

Charles, what is that? Is that a girl? Tell me that's not a girl.

PAPA BEAR

Outside!

BABY BEAR

Can I get my game first?

MAMA BEAR

I think I'm going to be sick.

PAPA BEAR

Now!

MAMA drags BABY outside. They mill about near the window while PAPA investigates.

BABY BEAR

Is there a girl inside the house, Mama?

MAMA BEAR

No, honey. Your father is dealing with it.

PAPA BEAR

Hello? Hello?

(he crouches next to the body)

Tell me you're not dead. Is it scarier if you're dead or not dead? I'm going to just...and do not jumpscare me!

(he nudges the body; a fly is heard buzzing away)

Oh. Well, that's just. Oh.

From this point on, PAPA will attempt to remove the body in various ways to little avail, sometimes clutching at his back in pain.

BABY BEAR

If there's no girl, why can't I get my game?

MAMA BEAR

Well, maybe now you'll remember to bring it the first time.
Get away from the window.

BABY BEAR

Do you think it touched it?

MAMA BEAR

Don't say that. Don't even think that; that is disgusting.

BABY BEAR

Robert H.? From class? He said, that his mom? He said that they had a girl in their chimney, and it got stuck, and that they had to replace the whole chimney.

MAMA BEAR

Well, that's because Robert H.'s mom doesn't mop every other day like I do. A dirty home attracts dirty creatures. We do not have a girl in our chimney or anywhere else.

BABY BEAR

If there's no girl, why is Papa bent over like that?

MAMA BEAR

Get away from that window, I said! Charles!

PAPA BEAR

I'm handling it, Marlene! Agh—

(he doubles over)

My stupid back—son of a bear-tch...Just stay outside!

MAMA BEAR

Jesus, Beary, and Joseph.

(she begins to smoke)

If the neighbors see any of this tomfoolery, I am simply going to scream. Let me know if you see Susan; she's always sniffing around. I swear she pretends to take her trash out to the curb so she can spy.

BABY BEAR

How come some smoke smells different than other smoke?

MAMA BEAR

What?

BABY BEAR

Because chimney smoke smells different than when you smoke. But when Ava B. came back from camping, on our fall break, she smelled like sweet smoke.

MAMA BEAR

I don't know. It's something to do with what's burning.

(to herself)

Susan across the lane just can't keep her beartrap shut, so if she's seen it, then that's Audrey and Mina and the rest of the PTA that's seen it, too.

BABY BEAR

So there is a girl in our house.

MAMA BEAR

If there's a girl in our house. Which there isn't, is there, Charles?

PAPA's methods remain unsuccessful; he growls.

BABY BEAR

He sounds mad.

MAMA BEAR

Well, I'm sure he is. This is not how he wanted to spend his night, and it's certainly not how I wanted to spend mine. Don't you wish you were upstairs getting ready for bed? Aren't you getting sleepy?

BABY BEAR

I'm not sleepy. I just want my game.

MAMA BEAR

Well.

BABY BEAR

Do I still have to brush my teeth tonight?

MAMA BEAR

Yes.

A pause.

BABY BEAR

Sometimes Uncle Brian smells like skunk smoke.

MAMA BEAR

He what? Charles, when is the last time you let your brother watch Junior?

PAPA BEAR

What? --Oof!

Distracted, PAPA trips over the broken chair and roars in pain. A realistic bear roar should be dubbed over this.

BABY BEAR

Daddy?

MAMA BEAR

Charlie!

MAMA and BABY rush inside.

MAMA BEAR

Darling, are you alright?

(she starts to help him but shies back)

Oh, I can't even look at it. Oh, is that my chair? Oh, Charles, how could you?

PAPA BEAR

It wasn't me! It was like this; it must have been the girl!

MAMA BEAR

How very convenient. I know you hated that chair. Well, I'll have you know that was designer, and after I bought it, Ursula Majors wouldn't speak to me for a week!

PAPA BEAR

Agh—so?

MAMA BEAR

So it means it was a good chair!

BABY is poking and sniffing the body.

PAPA BEAR

I'm telling you, it wasn't me. Junior, get away from that thing and help your Pop up.

(BABY runs over and helps PAPA up)

Why do I care what Ursula thinks about a chair? Why do you care? Look, you've got two more just like it. I need to sit down.

PAPA slumps into one of the intact seats.

BABY BEAR

Is it dead?

PAPA BEAR

Yes, Junior. It's dead.

MAMA BEAR

Christ on a cracker. How have you not gotten it out of here already?

PAPA BEAR

It's my back, Marlene. Did I tell you Dr. Kodiak thinks I should get disc surgery? Because I think I need disc surgery. But feel free to try and lift it yourself; it's heavier than you'd think.

MAMA BEAR

I am not touching that thing.

BABY BEAR

Papa, what's dead mean?

PAPA BEAR

We'll talk about it later. Why don't you run on upstairs? Isn't it your bedtime?

MAMA BEAR

How did it even get in here?

PAPA BEAR

When you leave food out, you get vermin.

PAPA gestures towards the bowl. MAMA flurries over to clean the mess.

MAMA BEAR

Oh, no-no-no-no-no. No, I was so careful not to—

(she puts the dishes on the counter and scrubs at the floor)

Junior, go draw the curtains. That's not Susan out there, is it?

BABY closes the curtains.

BABY BEAR

No, Mama.

MAMA BEAR

This is not my fault. I tried to rinse everything out, but it's really not my fault if somebody doesn't close and lock the windows! Someone's just got to have a summer breeze to go with their evening jazz.

PAPA BEAR

It's culture, Marlene!

MAMA BEAR

It's pedantry. If we hadn't been in such a hurry to leave—you asked for porridge! You know Junior does not eat porridge!

BABY BEAR

Cause it's like throw up.

PAPA BEAR

It's a traditional dish! Junior needs to acquire the taste sometime! You know, that's your problem, Marlene. You bend too easy. "Where's my game?" You hand it right over. "I'm not eating this!" You push us all out to the steakhouse. You could have just made the kid a PB&H.

(aside)

Peanut butter and honey.

MAMA BEAR

For the nicest dinner this family has had in ages!

PAPA BEAR

What you made was nice! Junior needs to appreciate that! Try and get the legs.

MAMA BEAR

I told you, I am not touching it!

BABY BEAR

Robert H.? Said that, um, when they had a girl in their chimney?
That his brother threwed up. And then that his mom had to clean up
the girl and the throw up.

PAPA BEAR

Kid has the palate of a caterpillar.

MAMA BEAR

Junior is a super-taster, Charles. The doctor said.

PAPA BEAR

Right.

MAMA BEAR

Junior is a gifted child, and would you stop trying to get the hair?
You're going to tear the head off! Oh, I will be sick...

BABY BEAR

Mama, are you going to throw up?

PAPA BEAR

Well, what do you want me to do here, Marlene? I've been
trying for the better half of...

(he checks his watch, confers with a stagehand)

Six? Seven? Wow, that long?

(returns his attention to MAMA)

Seven minutes here to try and move this girl, but obviously, I'm not
capable of doing so by myself! So either you'll have to help me or
alert one of the neighbors and blow your precious cover.

MAMA BEAR

Out of the question! Junior, stop trying to help him!
Everyone, just stop!

PAPA BEAR

Oh, so she's just going to stay here?

BABY BEAR

Mama, what's dead mean?

MAMA BEAR

Stop! Stop!

PAPA BEAR

What do you want, Marlene?

BABY BEAR

Mama, where's my game? Mama—

MAMA BEAR

I want a normal family, is what I want!

Beat. Everyone stares at each other for a moment. PAPA and MAMA collapse into the remaining chairs, and BABY sits on the floor.

PAPA BEAR

Well, what do you mean?

MAMA BEAR

I just mean—

(she dabs at her eyes)

Oh, I don't know! These other mothers, they're just waiting for me to slip up. I bring the berry juice to the school meetings and hope that I got the right brand. I try to remember which kids have the salmon allergies. And I stand by while Susan and Mina and Ursa maul whatever mom stepped out of line that week, and I can't say anything, because I might be next! Because I might forget to mop one day, or I won't rinse my porridge out well enough, and then I might be a disgusting, unclean freak who has a girl-infested home!

She cries in earnest.

PAPA and BABY scoot closer to her, putting their paws on each of her knees.

PAPA BEAR

Sweetheart. I had no idea.

BABY BEAR

I'm sorry, Mama.

MAMA BEAR

Oh. It's not your fault, baby. Sometimes bears can just be so cruel. Especially that Susan. She's so...aggravating? Irritating? What's the word I'm looking for?

PAPA BEAR

Unbearable?

MAMA BEAR

No, a—

Whatever MAMA says here is censored out by a bleep. PAPA claps his paws over BABY's ears.

PAPA BEAR

Language, Marlene! The child!

MAMA BEAR

Sorry.

PAPA BEAR

Just stick to the puns next time, Jesus.

(he uncovers BABY's ears)

For what it's worth, I think it's normal to get a dead girl in your house every now and then. I mean—what's that Robert H. kid, his mom.

MAMA BEAR

Beryl?

PAPA BEAR

See? Doesn't that feel better? Easy jokes. Yes, Beryl. She's not abnormal, is she?

MAMA BEAR

No, she's not.

PAPA BEAR

It sounds to me like she's just a mom trying her best. Maybe a normal family does disgusting things sometimes. Maybe our kid talks a little too much about vomit. Maybe it's jazz at night and metatext and...corpses.

MAMA BEAR

How did it die, anyways?

PAPA BEAR

Girls can't eat bear food? Don't think about it too hard. Now. We can either call the exterminators, or you can help me lift it out to the dumpsters.

MAMA BEAR

Maybe I should get my hands dirty for once.

BABY BEAR has been poking around the body as they've been talking. They lift an oozing game console out from under the corpse.

BABY BEAR

I found my game!

PAPA BEAR

Oh, for the love of God!

MAMA BEAR

No, I lied! I—oh!

MAMA rushes off-stage to be violently sick.

MAMA BEAR

(off-stage)

Oh, hello, Susan...

Judge's Comments: “*A Very Normal Bear Family Evening*” manages to squeeze quite a lot into the deceptively simple package of a fractured fairy tale. It is a gleefully meta-theatrical reversal of a well-known story, set in a universe where humans are neither the top of the evolutionary chart nor the ones in charge of the folktales. But amidst the cheeky humor and delightful bear puns, this tightly written play also manages to work in an insightful examination of the cost of the pressure placed on women (or, in this case, Mama Bears) to maintain the facade of the perfect family and the perfect home life.

SECOND PLACE

Lillian Reid

Middle Tennessee State University

Loose Ends

CHARACTERS

AARON

MAY

Male, late 20s. Any race. May's ex-boyfriend.

Female, late 20s. Any race.

SETTING

Aaron's living room: A couch and a coffee table.

At rise. MAY is sitting on the couch. AARON enters with two cups of coffee; he sets one in front of May and holds the other as he sits on the couch.

MAY

Cream with a bit of honey?

AARON

Yes... I haven't forgotten.

Pause.

MAY

They stare at each other.

You said you had a few things for me?

AARON

Ah, yeah. I was cleaning out some drawers, and I found some of your stuff.

AARON sets down his coffee and pulls a box out from under the coffee table.

I thought you should have it all back.

MAY

Oh. Thanks.

MAY puts the box in her lap. She pulls out a hair clip, a painted rock, an old sports bra, and a box of opened pregnancy tests.

Huh. You could have just thrown it all out.

AARON

I thought you would say that, but I couldn't bring myself to dump it

in the trash. It felt important.

MAY

I understand. I still have that old beanie you used to wear constantly!

AARON chuckles.

Sometimes I think I'll just toss it in the bin. One day I did. I even took it to the curb for the truck to pick up. Halfway through the day I looked out and felt guilty. Like maybe someday you would find out what I had done, so I went out and rummaged through the trash to find it. My neighbors must have thought I was crazy, but I couldn't let it go. I should have brought it to you today.

AARON

You can throw it out if you want, but if you wanted to keep it, or wear it, I wouldn't mind. I guess it's kinda nice we have held onto this stuff for so long.

MAY

I guess. Maybe it was easier to keep small reminders of one another rather than the entirety of each other.

AARON

We weren't a success, were we?

MAY

We were young.

AARON

I was careless.

Pause.

MAY

Why did you ask me to come here today? I mean, what's the real reason? This is just junk.

MAY gestures to the box.

AARON

It's not junk! It's important. It's what I have left of us.

MAY

Then why don't you keep it? We haven't talked in years, and now, out of the blue, you find some stuff in a drawer you think I should have?

AARON

Well... I wanted to see you. I wanted to know if... um....if you were...

MAY

Pregnant? Are you stalking my Facebook?

AARON

Yeah..No!.... I just didn't realize you were even in a relationship.

MAY

MAY laughs.

Well, it's not like we stayed in touch. Besides, it's new. When I found out I was pregnant, I was worried he wouldn't want to stick around, but he has. He's been great actually. It's a process trying to figure each other out, but I think we are making the best of it.

AARON

You were worried? That he would leave.

MAY

I haven't exactly had the greatest experience with this sort of thing in the past.

AARON

AARON fidgets.

Right. Um...

MAY

MAY stares at him.

You know, I was never angry at you...for leaving.

AARON

Don't lie to me. You must have hated me.

MAY

Maybe...Maybe there was a part of me that did hate you. But everything felt so bad at the time. So unbelievably horrible. I just don't think I had the energy to feel that hate. My emotional capacity was filled to its brim, and I couldn't pile on anymore pain or anger.

MAY stares at him.

I understood, you know. I wanted to run away too... You should have taken me with you.

MAY laughs and then comes back to the seriousness.

We were seventeen, Aaron. I know it wasn't what we wanted, but it was the first time in my life I felt connected to more than my own self. I guess I was naïve for thinking it would last.

AARON

You were hopeful.

AARON leans back onto the couch and lets out a sigh.

MAY

Do you remember that little yellow onesie with the small grey ducks embroidered on it? We found it at Cracker Barrel the morning we

had that last ultrasound.

AARON

Mhm.

MAY

And you remember how you were going to buy it, but I talked you out of it because it was too expensive.

AARON

Yeah.

MAY

At the time, I think I tricked myself into believing the cost was a good reason not to buy it. But I look back on it now, and I think I knew. Maybe I didn't know I knew, but deep in my heart, I knew.

AARON

I'm sorry, May.

MAY

It's not your fault.

AARON

But I wasn't there, was I?

AARON stands up and paces.

God, I hate myself! What an absolutely idiotic fucking thing to do. I knew, May. I knew leaving you was wrong, but when you told me you had lost it, I was angry and scared and confused and I wanted to kill something. I wanted everyone in the world to feel just as bad as I did. I'll tell you, May, I didn't want it at first. I didn't want any part of it. But when that doctor pointed out its little head, and its

little legs, and its little arms, it all became real.

AARON cries.

I didn't feel so damn scared because I knew that if life could continue, everything would be fine. If all three of us always had each other, we would all be just fine.

Pause

But life didn't continue, and when you called me and told me, I didn't know what to say. So, I hung up the phone, and I left you. Left you alone to deal with the weight of the world. God May, please.

AARON gets on his knees beside her and grabs her hand.

Please! Please, please, please. Forgive me!

Pause.

MAY

I forgive you.

AARON

AARON pulls himself onto the couch still holding her hand.

What was it like?

Pause.

MAY

Falling. I could feel her falling inside me and I couldn't catch her.

AARON

It's a girl?

AARON reaches for her belly, catches himself, and pulls his hand back into his lap.

Ah, sorry. I don't know what I'm doing.

MAY

MAY grabs his hand, moves closer to him, places his hand on her belly, closes her eyes, and leans against him.

She's beautiful.

AARON

AARON closes his eyes and lays his head on hers.

Tell me what she looks like.

MAY

She's pink, a pale, pretty pink. She is so so tiny. I hold her in the palm of my hand, like this.

MAY holds out one hand cupped while the other remains on his hand. BOTH look at May's cupped hand.

Her little nose rests perfectly on her sweet face. Her eyes are closed, peacefully. Her mouth is as two ocean waves in perfect unison. She has a soft smile in the corner. Her hands lie lightly on her chest, and her feet and legs are tucked up on her tiny belly. She rests tenderly and she is such a good baby. Such a good, sweet baby. She doesn't cry or scream. She knows she is so loved, so she sleeps gently, without fear or pain. She knows I'll hold her and admire her and love her forever and ever.

AARON

AARON places his free hand under May's.

May, she's beautiful. Our Lilah.

Pause.

MAY

Lilah.

AARON

Had you named her?

MAY

I never knew how. I could never make sense of it. I felt like she was

too perfect for a name. Like maybe she didn't really belong to this world, but...

Pause.

Lilah. Lilah. Lilah. My baby, Lilah.

MAY looks at Aaron.

We have to let her go now?

AARON

We'll never let her go.

AARON pulls her cupped hand into his chest and holds it there.

END OF PLAY

Judge's Comments: *Loose Ends* is a delicate and, at times, poetic look at a reunion between exes. The heavy parts of their shared past are handled with empathy and grace, and it's refreshing to see a story of former lovers characterized not by animosity or bitterness, but rather by the warmth and care they still have for each other... and their unique ability to help one another find closure for their past relationship and their shared loss.

THIRD PLACE

Steve Marlow

Mississippi University for Women

For Heaven's Sake

Cast of Characters

JOHN.....	Fortyish, cocky, confident he's part of "The Boy's Club."
MISS G.....	Attractive, black woman, looks 25. She may be God.
PEDRO.....	Smallish, Mexican man. He may be Saint Peter.
CHARLOTTE.....	Looks exactly like MISS G to everyone except John.

Setting:

A large, nearly empty office. It might be the Pearly Gates

Time:

Sometime in the modern area. It might be Monday. It could be 9 AM

Synopsis:

John, an overly content, union worker and minor official, wakes in a world he no longer understands. He is told that he has not only died, but that he was murdered by his wife after he caught her with his best friend and confronted them. Here, in what may be the afterlife, he is challenged with being responsible for the biggest mistakes of his life. John begs for another chance, but will he get it?

Stage right has three or four straight back chairs. In the middle of the stage is a desk with a straight back chair on the side. The name plate on the desk says, "Pedro Nacarado." Stage left has a desk with a straight back chairs on both sides. The name plate on this desk says, "Miss G." Both desks have a dial telephone on them.

PEDRO

Number 42.

Lights come on over the waiting chairs and the center desk. JOHN is sitting in one of the chairs and has a red ticket in his hand. PEDRO is seated at the desk.

JOHN

Oh, OK, I guess that's me.

JOHN walks over to the desk and sits down. He throws the ticket on the desk.

OK. Now what? So, where the holy Hell am I.

PEDRO

Keep yo pants on, man. I gotta check something.

PEDRO takes the ticket, walks to the back of the room, and pulls a sheathed katana from a box. He returns to the desk and sets the katana on the desk with a thump.

Here. This goes with your ticket. Look familiar?

JOHN

Yeah, I gave it to my wife for her birthday last year. She loves that kinda shit. So, where in God's green, gravy are we right now?

PEDRO

Do you know where this was found?

JOHN

No, I don't. What's that gotta do with...

PEDRO

(Interrupting)

This was in your back. When you caught your wife in bed with your buddy, Mike, she stuck this in your back. Brother you're dead. Stone cold dead. No longer alive. Comprende vous.

JOHN

stands)

Are you fucking nuts? I'm here ain't I?

JOHN

PEDRO

Sit down. You don't even know where here is.

JOHN looks around the room floor to ceiling then back at PEDRO.

JOHN

Well, I....I....I....

(Breathe)

JOHN(Continued)

OK. So, where are we?

PEDRO

Hey, man. Look. This the Pearly Gates. I am San Pedro. You are here to be judged. We gotta decide what to do wit chu. You did a lot of stuff we gotta judge.

JOHN gets up and starts pacing in front of the desk. He continues pacing as he talks.

JOHN

What do you mean? I'm the victim here. I never killed anybody. I went to church pretty regular.

PEDRO picks up a piece of paper from his desk.

PEDRO

Sit down, man. Hey, says here you had a holta your buddy's throat when your ol' lady rammed in the sword. She coulda got self defense if they hadn't dumped your body in the river.

JOHN stands up suddenly and screams his next line.

JOHN

WHAT? They dumped me in the river? I'm dead and I don't get a decent burial?

PEDRO

Well, a funeral is not all it's cracked up to be. That's the least of your worries. Will you please sit you ass down? You're gonna hafta see my boss.

PEDRO hands JOHN a form and points to the other desk across the stage.

PEDRO(Continued)

Go have a seat by that desk.

The light above the other desk come on as JOHN walks over. The lights dim over PEDRO and the waiting area. JOHN sits nervously drumming his fingers on the desk for a few seconds until MISS G comes in and sits behind the desk.

JOHN

So, what's the G stand for, "God?"

MISS G

We'll not get into that right now. What we need to talk about is whether or not you understand the position you're in. You are on the edge of a precipice right now and you are teetering. I need some straight answers to some significant questions.

JOHN

Sure. Let's start the answers with, I'd be delighted. What time do you get off?

MISS G pulls a wooden gavel out of a desk drawer and slams it to the desktop. JOHN is startled and rapidly stands up.

MISS G

Are you ready to be serious?

(JOHN sits down and nods his head meekly.)

Five years ago, in April, you caused a secretary to lose her job by agreeing with a coworker that she had been stealing from the office. In reality, your pal, Mike, was the thief and made up the story about the secretary to cover himself. You just took his word for it. You didn't know? Correct?

JOHN

Well, yeah. But Mike never lied to me before...at least I didn't think so then.

MISS G bangs the gavel again. JOHN starts but manages to stay seated. She glares at JOHN.

MISS G

Wrong again, Moron. He told elaborate lies to cover his stealing. You just assumed he was telling the truth because he was a lazy, white guy like you, who wanted to feel important. You lied because he did.

JOHN

Well, that really shouldn't matter. I'm sure she came out alright. She musta got another job. She probably even got a better job.

MISS G slams the gavel down again and as JOHN flinches and turns toward her, she glares at him.

MISS G

Again, wrong. After she was fired, she could not get another decent job. She spent three years working in a fast-food restaurant until she was shot and killed by a meth-head in a holdup.

She did not come out all right!

JOHN

What? I didn't know. How could I know? I couldn't know.

MISS G

You could've guessed. Getting fired for stealing ruins a reputation. Some people never recover from that. She did not.

JOHN

Does that mean I gotta spend time in Purgatory or some damn thing? How do I go about making up for it?

As MISS G raises the gavel again, JOHN pulls his head toward his shoulders and squints. She holds the gavel up until he starts to relax, then slams it down.

MISS G

Why in my name would you say that? Do you really think you can make up for that? She suffered and died because of it. You didn't. Mike didn't. Only Charlotte died.

JOHN

Can't I be forgiven for one mistake? I was pretty good other than that, right?

MISS G pulls a piece of white cloth about two feet long out of a drawer. It has writing on one side and appears to be a list.

MISS G

How many times do you think you can be wrong? I have dozens of other instances like that where you blindly hurt people with your thoughtlessness.

JOHN

Aw, come on. That can't all be my shit on there. And where's my nice list? My good deeds have got to make up for what I did wrong.

MISS G bangs the gavel loudly again causing JOHN to start again. He jumps up, looks at her and sits down again.

MISS G

Wrong again. You hurt someone this way, you have to pay for it with a part of your soul. You can't make up for it by walking a little old lady across the street like a boy scout.

JOHN

What else did I do that was so bad? I tried to be good to other people. I have friends of other colors and orientations

and ethnic groups. I care about people. They care about me.

MISS G

You think you care about people and they, in reality, tolerate you. And you categorize them in your head that way. Your black friend Bill rather than your friend Bill who is six feet tall, likes 12-year-old scotch and happens to be black.

JOHN

I could learn.

MISS G bangs the

gavel again.

MISS G

No, you can't. You died. It's too late. You wasted your entire life.

JOHN Stands up and spreads his arm to plead with MISS G.

JOHN

But I belonged to a union. I voted for Al Gore. I cared about other people. That's what it was all about.

MISS G

Is that honestly what you believe? You, by yourself, have to look at everyone else as a human being and judge them by nothing but actions. You have to be fair to everyone. As MISS G continues this speech, JOHN slumps down and stares at his shoes.

You get no points by joining a club that really only looks out for itself.

MISS G gets up and quietly walks off stage left. The actress playing her changes to a different color toga and walks back on stage to the other side of the desk as CHARLOTTE and sits in a second chair to the left side of the desk. JOHN looks up and then stares at the floor again.

JOHN

Hey.

CHARLOTTE

Hey, what?

JOHN

What? It's fine.

CHARLOTTE

No, it is not!

JOHN

Are they waiting for you?

CHARLOTTE

You don't know who I am, do you?
JOHN looks up and suddenly is aware of who she is.

JOHN

Oh God, you're Charlotte. She said you were dead.
CHARLOTTE

I am dead and so are you. Honestly, both our deaths
are on your head.

JOHN

Oh God, that's right.

JOHN (Continued)

(Breath)

No wait, I didn't kill anybody.

CHARLOTTE

You could have prevented both deaths if you just
cared about someone besides yourself. At least once in a while.

JOHN

I know what they said about you, but I
was murdered.

CHARLOTTE

If you'd cared about your wife, she might not
have cheated and you wouldn't have caught her, causing her to kill
you.

JOHN

Dear God! I didn't want you to die. There's
no way to fix this, is there? I'm going to Hell! I shoulda known! I
shoulda cared!

CHARLOTTE

I don't know. I really don't know. I just don't
know. I'm done here. I gotta leave.

CHARLOTTE walks off stage quietly and changes into the MISS G
toga as JOHN stares at the floor and taps the side of the chair while
he speaks

JOHN

I'm just fucked. That's all there is to it. I thought
I'd have years to get my shit together. I didn't think I would die this
early.

MISS G quietly walks back and sits at her desk.

I thought maybe they would allow for that. Oh, God!

MISS G

Yes? What can I help you with?

JOHN looks up and notices

MISS G.

JOHN

Now I see where you were coming from. I saw Charlotte.
I am really, truly sorry. What can I do to fix it?

MISS G

You honestly think that you can fix this? If
you were right there when it happened, could you just fix it? Really,
could you?

JOHN

No, you're right. I couldn't just fix it. Is there a way
that I could make up for it? Is there a way I could help someone else
to make up for what I did to Charlotte? Maybe pass it on?

MISS G

Ok, now you're thinking. There may be a chance for
you to go back to Earth and help other people from being cheated
out of their share of life. I'm not sure that that you're truly sincere in
your remorse just yet. Have a seat in the waiting area. We'll let you
know when we have a decision.

JOHN walks to the waiting chairs and sits. MISS G dials a twelve-digit number on her phone and PEDRO's phone rings. PEDRO answers his. Lights come back on in the waiting area and PEDRO's desk.

PEDRO

What up, G?

MISS G

Your perfect heartbeat plays a warm, bashful tone.

PEDRO

Ok. I'll start it going.

PEDRO hangs up the phone and lift the receiver and dial a two-digit number. He looks at a card on his desk.

Hey, man. Pull file EB23 4362 9733 6986. We need a determination of eligibility for a possible reinc.

(Breath)

Really, Ok. Thanks.

PEDRO hang up the phone and writes something on the card. He puts it in an envelope and seals it. He motions to JOHN and gives it to him.

PEDRO

Take this to the boss.

JOHN start walking and PEDRO pulls out a light bulb and throws it

at the floor behind JOHN. JOHN jumps at the noise and takes two quick steps before resuming his normal pace.

MISS G

Are you alert now, John?

John nods as he sits down and watches MISS G closely

MISS G (continues)

You may be going back, and if you do, you will be placed in another body at another time. The rules will be different. You will have to learn them, while still adhering to my rules. You have to be fair to everyone even if you end up in a time where certain types of people are looked down on or abused. Or...

(Breath)

Maybe you will find out whether or not Hell is real, firsthand.

JOHN

That sounds tough.

MISS G

It was tough on Charlotte. Very tough.

MISS G tears off the end of the envelope.

BLACKOUT

Judge's Comments: *With its darkly humorous picture of the afterlife, "For Heaven's Sake" explores the unintended consequences of human actions—and inaction—and asks to what extent we should be held accountable not just for the evils we caused, but also for the evils and injustices we allowed to happen through willful ignorance, bias, or self-centeredness. In a moment when accountability culture is often conflated with "cancel culture," these questions feel timely and important.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

FIRST PLACE

Khristine Arnold

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Recipe for Filipino Eggrolls Lumpia

Prep time: Depends on how much eggroll stuffing is made.

Cook time: Five minutes when my mother makes it, an hour when I make it.

Ingredients:

-ground beef

-carrots

-potato

-onion

-salt

-pepper

-cabbage

-egg

-egg roll wrapper (The one that is hard to find at most stores. The one where the package shows a platter of egg rolls and spring rolls with a wrapper folded like a fish in the middle.)

Instructions:

Gather all the ingredients. To avoid confusion, I asked my mother once again the recipe for eggrolls, because I realized that the ingredient list she gave me is missing the egg. It's likely some other ingredients are missing in this recipe. I gathered everything despite knowing the final product would probably not taste right.

"What did I do wrong?" I asked my mom on the phone.

"Well it's because you are missing this and this," my mother said.

Measure the ingredients to their appropriate amounts. Except I can't measure anything since my mother had not provided any measurements.

"How many carrots do I put in?" I asked, staring at the paper.

"Just enough," my mother simply said and laughed.

Chop and combine all ingredients. Just mash everything together until it looks like a colorful mush with pink dominating the bowl.

Place an eggroll wrapper on a plate and prepare a saucer plate with an egg white. Ah, another missing ingredient. The eggroll wrapper. Although I knew it was needed, my mother still left it out of the ingredient list. The egg white is used to seal the eggrolls in place. For a long time I thought she only used water.

Put a spoonful of the meat stuffing toward the end of the wrapper. Just a small spoonful, and it can be placed toward the corner of the wrapper or toward the length of the wrapper. Does it matter? No. But it won't look the same as I remembered once it is folded.

Fold the end of the eggroll wrapper over the meat, then begin to roll it to the other end. Or fold the corner of the eggroll wrapper over the meat, roll, then tuck the other corners in, then roll toward the corner. I grew up watching my mother do the latter method, but over time she switched to simply rolling the eggroll to the shape of a thin cigar. It was quicker but it doesn't look as nice.

Dip a finger into the egg white and run the finger along the end or corner of the eggroll wrapper, then roll the eggroll over it. It will seal the egg roll together.

Now repeat steps 4-7 until there are no more eggroll wrappers or stuffing. This recipe should make about a hundred or more eggrolls if the measurements are right.

Decide on how many eggrolls to eat. Then store the rest in large Ziploc bags and place flat in the freezer. The eggrolls won't expire.

Fill a pot with enough oil to cover half an eggroll, then set the stove top to a low-medium. Wait until the oil heats up. But I cannot tell how long it takes to heat up as the oil sits stagnant in the pot.

"Put a drop of water" my mother advised on the phone.

I did and then the oil exploded all over the stove, microwave, and counters. The sound of crackling oil and girls screaming filled the dorm room.

Immediately turn down the heat.

Turn up the heat again and add a few eggrolls into the now hot oil. Then watch the damn pot to make sure nothing explodes again.

At a safe distance, use tongs to flip the eggrolls onto the other side to fry. Occasionally flip on all sides until the eggroll is brown.

"It's not brown," my mother said.

Keep cooking until it's brown then remove and place it on a plate covered with a paper towel.

Serve with a side of rice and sweet chili sauce. Don't think about the ketchup that served as a dipping sauce for most of my life.

Enjoy the fact that I ignored steps 1-10 because I asked my mother to make my roommates and I a bunch of eggrolls which are now stored in my freezer. All I did was take them out and thaw them.

Enjoy the food while it lasts. I have accepted that I will likely not be able to cook Filipino food because my mother never taught me how. My mother never taught my brothers and I the actual Tagalog name of any of her dishes. I've accepted that these meals that I took for granted will never taste like my mother makes them, no matter how many attempts I try to recreate them. Even when I simply fried eggrolls she had made for me, it still did not taste the same. Even the rice did not taste the same. I have accepted that I may never be able to really appreciate my mother's culture when I have only seen glimpses of it at children's parties. I have accepted that my mother has willingly done her best to assimilate so she may enjoy the American dreams and promises in peace. I have accepted that my mother has failed to preserve her own culture through her American children and her white, American husband.

Judge's Comments: With deceptively instructive prose, "Recipe for Filipino Eggrolls Lumpia" deconstructs cultural inheritance, family, and identity, pulling the pieces into their constituent parts, mixing and re-mixing them. The inherent warmth and intimacy of the recipe form, alongside a deft punch of comedic flavor, work together to achieve that perfect combination of inevitability and surprise, devastation and heart.

SECOND PLACE

Alicia Gladman

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Vienna

Inspired by Lorrie Moore's "How to Be an Other Woman"

You don't remember him before that night at the bar, although you worked together for years. You would split a rotisserie chicken on Wednesdays at the shop, and he shared a plate of root beer ribs with you, the first time you tasted one. He had worked there for too long, even he knew. You liked his style, but you thought he complained too much.

Somewhat, he only came into focus that night. You were having a drink with a friend, who convinced you to go dancing at the Astoria. He was there, drunk, spilling his beer and moving his lips against your ear, bobbing his head and closing his eyes whenever the beat picked back up. He had a childlike smile.

That night, you got so drunk you were asking strangers for money, begging drugs off the girls in hats in the bathroom. You were one-upping yourself, acting stupid. Of course you ended up going home with him, surprised even as it happened at the strength of your attraction to one another. Your room was barely bigger than a closet. You slept on a loft bed, to save space, and he scrambled up the ladder, clumsy and excited, almost breaking the railing. You had to duck your head while you were fucking or it would bump against the ceiling.

In the morning, he stole out the side door, bashful and apologetic, hoping not to interact with your many roommates. You kissed him goodbye, bit his lip, he made you feel salty. Later that day, he sent you a text that made your stomach kick, something about how you tasted. You thought carefully about everything you said back to him, composed messages to find the right balance of candid, sordid, and unconcerned. He did not play hard to get.

He loved to eat, he brought you to the Polish deli on

Commercial, the Trinidadian diner in Port Moody. He would bring home sweets from the Persian grocery and hand them to you reverentially, watching your mouth move and waiting for your inevitable sounds of delight. He was a hedonist.

He was obsessed with the city, angry at how it had given in to the rich. He raved, told you all he ever wanted to do was paint, because he could be alone, because he didn't have to watch as the show spaces on Hastings closed, as the condos on Main Street went up, and the city filled with creeps riding fixed-gears. Those assholes who would rather look good than feel anything, he said.

You were conscious of his age, conscious of acting like an adult, your posture improved around him, you were careful with your words. It made you feel curated, like everything was a choice, and that made you feel powerful. You went to 1067 for a jazz show, sat on the dirty couches with your knees barely touching, looking at other people. You rode your bikes to Burnaby, taking turns watching each other's legs pump, stuffing your faces with goat roti at the end of the trail. You rode the 253 back along the water, hanging from the hand grips and lurching into each other at every stop, the smell of his sweat setting off sirens in your body.

At work, behind the counter, he would slide his hand up your skirt while you were ringing up customers. You would stay late, not looking at each other, telling everyone you were just going to finish this repair. You would end up in the back, pressed up against a pile of broken bike wheels, your hands unbuttoning his Dickies. You drank expensive beers together and met his friends, without explaining who you were.

He kept changing his mind about leaving the country. His girlfriend was there, but you were here, and his studio, his favourite restaurants, the mountains. He talked about biking home from the bars in Austria, the diesel smoke making him gag. Here he had things to paint, but there he had people to buy them.

You listened carefully when she came up. She had an old cat, she was his age. To you, she sounded boring, mean. You were his hot young girlfriend. You knew you kept him up at night. You wore tight skirts and matched him drink for drink. You liked to disagree with him. You kept his secrets.

You went out for dinner with your aunt, in the restaurant under

the YWCA hotel. Every story you told included him, the bike rides in Stanley Park, the night his friend snuck you in to see Ghostface, the fundraiser for the bike shop. She asked if you were seeing anyone, and answered herself when you smiled. You told her about his girlfriend, told her you were staying out of it. You were relieved to talk, after smiling to yourself about it for so long. She wondered out loud if his girlfriend knew yet. She said these things are more obvious than we think.

He didn't like having you at his house. He lived in a woman's basement, and she had a young child, he said, and stupid rules. Once, he stole you inside, rushing you through the shared kitchen and down the narrow stairs. You stayed for an hour, uncomfortable in the temporary space, the teenage boy's bedroom. He only kissed you, quickly, and then ushered you back out into the rain, and took you to the Lido for a beer.

Your coworker dropped by unannounced at 8:30 one morning. When she knocked, he had been sitting next to the kitchen window, and he ducked and ran into your room. She asked if that was who she thought it was, and you told her he had come over for coffee, although you missed a beat. She raised an eyebrow and left quickly, though any other morning she would have stayed, and you would have ridden to work together.

There was never a routine between you, you were always grasping for the moment in front of you. He explained why he was leaving when you didn't ask, and you explained why he should stay when he didn't offer. You were careful not to beg. One night, while you were coming, you felt a paralyzing stab in your head, and you refused to stop until you were finished, although it was the most blinding pain you had ever felt.

After he left, you only talked over the phone while his girlfriend was at work. You started seeing someone, and he talked about it as if you were some kind of superhero, incapable of jealousy, sure of yourself. You were jealous, and you were unsure.

On New Year's you sent him a message that read "Happy New Year. I wish you were undressing me." He didn't answer for three days.

He came back to the city in the spring, came back to work, you steered clear of each other until one night after a fundraiser, you met under the awning of the Dollar Grocer, and he told you he was already in the doghouse anyway, and put his hand up your dress. He spent the weekend in your bed. He left again shortly after.

He sent you messages about eating rabbit paella, riding his bike to Lisbon, drinking Romanian liquor, he reminded you not to call him during the evening. You told him about the blood sausage borscht your roommate made, that you played pinball at the Cobalt over the weekend, and even though you stopped talking dirty, you always checked the time in Vienna before you called.

Judge's Comments: *Through a series of precisely and gorgeously executed textual movements, "Vienna" gradually constructs the state of pliable halfway-ness that is a side romance. Subtly haunting, the writing wends its way toward some decisive closure, arriving instead in the middle distance of uncertainty.*

THIRD PLACE

Youbin Park

Columbus State University

Freedom From Speech

The first time I stood in front of my fourth grade class, I forgot my own name. To be precise, I forgot my English name that was so carefully assigned by my parents. There were too many letters to remember, so many sounds to round out and combine; my mouth was wired-shut, and I stood for an embarrassingly long time before being silently dismissed.

What I thought I knew from my forty-five minute lessons from Korean public schools proved to be useless, and my ABC's and miscellaneous thematic vocabulary stood no chance against real American children. While I mechanically ironed out my "h" sound in "white" and struggled to distinguish "word" and "world," children around me bent English around their tongue like mounds of clay forming into whatever shape it desired to be on a potter's wheel.

My English was too stiff, too separated like the hardened sounds of Hangul, and I hated the way English felt in my mouth. It was like putty; syllables slipped and the wrong parts of my vowels were rounded. I could not wash the flashing sign of my foreginess embedded so deeply within my tongue.

I carried around a dictionary everyday. Oftentimes, I eavesdropped in conversations to pin vocabulary words I did not understand, and the rare times I was spoken to, no one was patient enough to wait for me to shuffle through to the first letter of their sentence in my dictionary. So I did not speak, and I did not want to be spoken to. This sentiment was shared among my classmates, and I spent my time enclosed in a glass cage. My struggles were apparent for everyone around me, and they were on display; I, in the cage, had no choice but to pretend that I could not see beyond.

My first essay I turned in was translated entirely from Google. I wrote my essay in Korean, and paragraph by paragraph, I copied

and pasted until I frankensteinied a traditional five paragraph format argumentative essay. My teacher gave me full marks, not because I had a perfect essay, but because my English was so hopeless that she did not want to kick an already dead horse.

Even after my accent was masked and I no longer walked with a dictionary, writing haunted me for years. My essays did remain mechanically translated for a few years, because I had no self-esteem to spare for the sake of improvement. I cried thinking about the muffled snickers and narrowing of eyes whenever anyone read my paper; peer-grading, in particular, made me want to run out into a busy intersection.

Judge's Comments: *Detailing a journey between languages, every sentence in "Freedom from Speech" reveals itself to be an achievement, renders miraculous its own idioms and metaphors. Reading this essay is a metatextual experience of reading in translation that, perhaps, approaches living in translation.*

FORMAL ESSAY

FIRST PLACE

Abigail Wells

Middle Tennessee State University

“Desensitization, Dystopia, and Ballet Dancing: Varied Interpretations and the Influence of Kurt Vonnegut’s ‘Harrison Bergeron’”

In the year 2081, a husband and wife watch their son get murdered on the television... and then they forget. As obscure as these events sound, the central message of Kurt Vonnegut’s 1961 short story, “Harrison Bergeron,” is just as convoluted. In fact, Vonnegut’s dystopian world building, passive characters, trademark satire, and black humor in this seven-page story has created a controversy not just in the classroom, but in courtrooms across the United States. According to conventional understandings of the text, Bergeron’s attempted coup and ultimate demise is explicated as the downfalls of total equality, as it has the power to strip us of our individuality; however, my own interpretation of Vonnegut’s story gleans insight from the author’s political beliefs, as well as academics, such as Benjamin Reed and Darryl Hattenhauer, who give more nuanced readings of the story by relating it to previous works in the Vonnegut canon, as well as rooting their claims in historical contextualization. While Reed argues that Vonnegut’s target criticism is the role of mass media and consumerism in the devolution of the American population’s intelligence, Hattenhauer claims the true intention of “Harrison Bergeron” is to parody the country’s vast misconceptions of life in the USSR. In my point of view, Vonnegut may very well comment on both of these topics, but he ultimately offers no definitive suggestion or insight on how to fix these errors in popular American ideology; rather, drawing from his personal values, he claims any system of government we impose is innately flawed due to human nature and error.

“Harrison Bergeron,” known for its moral ambiguity and commentary on government’s role in the lives of citizens, has become a powerful text in the world of politics, primarily championed by Libertarians and Alt-Right communities; however, their support stems from an almost comical misinterpretation. By overlooking the irony and satirical voice entirely, common teachings of the story determine that “Harrison Bergeron” is not a work of far-off science fiction, but rather a prescient depiction of life as American government works to totally equalize society, leading to some members being held back and “leveled off.” In fact, this work of fiction has been used in United States courtrooms in order to defend things such as segregation and discrimination (Reed 51). Essentially, the conservative view of this story creates a narrative in which equality is seen as debilitating; it is depicted as a “zero sum game” in which smarter, stronger, and more attractive people must suffer at the expense of their counterparts by wearing handicaps.

Darryl Hattenhauer addresses his concerns about this common misinterpretation by stating, “The critics have taken this text’s absurd utopia as representative of egalitarianism,” demonstrating that most readers mistake Vonnegut’s use of satire as truth (387). Hattenhauer claims that Vonnegut depicts a world similar to that of Americans’ idea of communist Russia rather than the reality, poking fun at commonplace fears of “leveling off” society and how misunderstood the idea of egalitarianism is within U.S. ideology (389). It is also noted in this article that economic inequality, a primary concern of socialism, is not addressed under the system undertaken in “Harrison Bergeron.” Hattenhauer states that economic redistribution would greatly conflict America’s dominant ideology that “the rich are smart and the dumb are poor,” and that “athletic and attractive people deserve wealth.” (390). Anti-intellectual leveling is the system used in this narrative, which is not a characteristic of socialism nor communism. Hattenhauer concludes his argument by stating the story “satirizes the American definition of freedom as the greatest good for the smallest number,” and highlights the myth that only under a rigid class system can all Americans have true equality of economic opportunities (391).

To add historical backing to Hattenhauer’s claims, it is important to note that Vonnegut was first published in 1952,

and “Harrison Bergeron” was commissioned for the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1961; therefore, The Red Scare and McCarthyism, characterized by heightened paranoia and propaganda against Communist nations, set the stage for Vonnegut’s earliest works. Because the protagonists are watching ballet on the television, Hattenhauer notes that Vonnegut is alluding to the Swedish and Russian ballet theatres, both highly competitive and publicly funded institutions (390). He adds to his argument by identifying an American misconception of life in socialist and communist countries by discussing their competitive nature and their excellence in spite of communism.

Although I agree with the majority of Hattenhauer’s argument, there are some drawbacks. First, he acknowledges that “if ‘Harrison Bergeron’ is a satire against the Left, then it is inconsistent with the rest of Vonnegut’s fiction;” however he fails to recognize that Vonnegut never strictly identified his political beliefs (387). Vonnegut stated that the real political parties in the U.S. are the Winners and the Losers; he never gave characteristics of what it meant to be a Loser, but he did self-identify as one (387). It is confirmed that Vonnegut agreed more-so with socialist ideologies, however, modern critics assert that he was not Marxist enough to be included among the faces of some of the better-known Leftists of contemporary America. Next, it’s critical to consider the author’s conscious, as well as subconscious, intentions behind producing a text. The analyst makes bold claims about Vonnegut’s personal politics and the objectives of “Harrison Bergeron,” but then relays that “[Vonnegut] could not remember anything from producing the text,” (Hattenhauer 388). Just this simple comment from the author, (although hilarious and very Vonnegutian,) adds yet another layer to this short story. What happens when a text as powerful and misunderstood as “Harrison Bergeron” is used to justify atrocities such as segregation or economic disenfranchisement of minority groups, meanwhile the author cannot even recall his thought process behind writing it? Not only is the story convoluted in interpretation, but its own origin story is a mystery.

I concur with Hattenhauer that Vonnegut is satirizing American’s view of the USSR, poking fun at how allegedly robotic and identical its citizens became under communist rule; however, even if Vonnegut comments on it, he does not produce any sort of

conclusion of what to do next or how to alter American ideology. For example, after watching the death of her son televised for the entire nation, Hazel does not rebel, nor does she even remember to tell George what happened. The final lines of the story, a commonly recycled piece of sitcom banter where George says, "You can say that again," demonstrate the repetitive and cyclical nature of suffering under oppressive governments (Vonnegut 14). Keeping in mind, Hazel and George are not Russian or Swedish, but American, implies that any nation, including "God's favorite country," can fall from grace (Hattenhauer 389). Using these final light-hearted lines to draw attention away from the tragedy of Harrison's brutal murder is a tragedy within itself. In a roar, the teenage tyrant announces, "Now watch me become what I can become," kisses the ceiling, then dies before he hits the floor (Vonnegut 12-13). Harrison's short-lived levitating slow dance is symbolic of what the modern youth could become if uninhibited, and Diana Moon Glampers, an average adult somehow placed in such a high position of authority, butchering an übermensch like Bergeron, represents the demoralization and death of young leaders. Whether with good intentions or out of selfish greed, such as the arrogant titular character seems to be portrayed as, they do not have the power to change their institutions, as they are repressed by older figureheads appointed by arbitrary rules. Life goes on. No one remembers Harrison after he dies.

On the other hand, a primary concern of Benjamin Reed's is that, because so few students obtain an in-depth look at Vonnegut's work in an academic setting, "*Harrison Bergeron*" is taught in such a way that misrepresents who Vonnegut is as a writer as well as an individual, a claim I strongly agree with. Reed mentions works like *Player Piano* (1952), Vonnegut's first novel that mocks utopian societies, as well as *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), where citizens happily live under the same system of handicapping that exists in "*Harrison Bergeron*." In addition, Reed propounds the idea that Hattenhauer interprets "*Harrison Bergeron*" to be "critical of communism and yet simultaneously, tacitly supportive of socialist ideologies by virtue of its implied criticism of capitalism," (Reed 52). In turn, Reed includes his personal interpretation that Vonnegut crafts "*Harrison Bergeron*" as a commentary on the "intellectual

and cognitive damage wrought by television" (57). Reed states that unlike Harrison and George, people of average intelligence, such as Hazel, do not need mental handicaps, for the television already provides a way to mentally numb them (57). Vonnegut personally believed television exists as a way to justify the streaming of advertisements into the home, further captivating the minds of the population, turning them to consumerism as a means of comfort and self-medication (Reed 62). "Short bursts' is the ideal structure for television, both for programs and commercials," which is the only way people like Hazel know how to think; under the handicapping system, everyone thinks like Hazel (62). In the United States, we do not watch privately owned TV stations for entertainment, but because corporations pray we stick around for the commercials. In essence, the program is actually the break from the advertisements.

There are fewer conflicting opinions between my own interpretation and that of Reed's as there is between mine and Hattenhauer's. What I find to make the biggest difference in their arguments is the professor's lens in which Reed writes his essay through, recognizing the shortcomings of the American education system when attempting to acquaint students with not only Vonnegut's fiction but science fiction in general. With that lens in mind, it is also important to note the window in which the story's characters interpret the world around them: through the television. Vonnegut's short story demonstrates how unfazed and disconnected people have become to what they see on television. Another way in which we are all equal, even prior to 2081, is in our collective ability to drown out unpleasant news and what we wish to be untrue. In other words, it is easy for the tragedies of modern life to become a faint background noise, and while George Bergeron needs a 21-gun salute ringing in his ears in order to forget, the average person, such as Hazel, can forget all on her own.

Reed argues that the common classroom interpretation of "Harrison Bergeron" does a tremendous disservice to Vonnegut's name and mythos, and I have to agree. For this fictitious 2081 is not just 2081—it is just as much 1961 as it is 2020 as it is the future. "Harrison Bergeron" is not a prescient, conservative horror story about communist nations or the downfall of America at the hands of liberal ideologies. Rather, it is a history lesson, it is the five o'clock

news, it is an oracle's prophecy. "Harrison Bergeron" demonstrates that we are in a united "state of denial, about to face cold turkey," for the telecommunication systems of our world, such as TV, social media, and other anti-intellectual systems are not only here, but here to stay (Vonnegut 110). How we react to them and how we treat one another, Vonnegut claims, makes all the difference in combating these numbing and desensitizing machines, for if we do not resist them, we could very well become them.

Although often pessimistic on his view of human nature and our ability to do anything of real merit, Vonnegut still advocated for treating others with kindness above all else, regardless of reward or punishment. From reading his speech, "How Music Cures Our Ills (And There Are Lots of Them)," one can see that Vonnegut was more so in favor of socialism and secularism than of unregulated capitalism and nationalistic ideals, which is the opposite view to those who interpret "Harrison Bergeron" as a conservative text (98). Like the meaning of "Harrison Bergeron," Vonnegut's politics sit in a murky gray area. In this speech, he also makes a handful of claims about the harms of television, which help expound the argument made by Reed in his piece on how "Harrison Bergeron" may be alluding to the danger of, and desensitization through, television. He states in the speech, "One of the few good things about modern times: If you die horribly on television, you will not have died in vain. You will have entertained us," and in turn appears to, almost directly, correlate to the events that take place in his short story (101). Hazel cries when her son is murdered on television yet forgets before she can even begin to process her trauma. There is an emotional reaction produced from this episode, but no psychological understanding or recognition of the weight of it; therefore, Harrison's death entertains Hazel by provoking her grief, but due to anti-intellectual leveling and normalized violence on the television, Hazel gains no sense of growth or deep meaning through this experience, as she is desensitized and dazed by modern life. She has been indoctrinated to believe that what happens on TV does not concern her, even if the murder victim is her own fugitive son.

As a secular humanist, a central concern in Vonnegut's life was how we treated one another. In regard to "Harrison Bergeron," this concern seems to manifest itself—from my interpretation—in

the question of whether the government structures in place are promoting equal care of all people and treating them with dignity. Although a common interpretation is to claim that government models, such as communism and socialism, dehumanize the individual, a similar notion could be made about the titular character whose idea of a coup-d'état is to name himself the monarch (Reed 56). This behavior could be a reflection of American nationalism, rooted in egocentrism and a sense of almost hyper-individualism within our western societies. In turn, Vonnegut alludes to the fact that this degrading "handicapping" system was amended in the constitution, suggesting the failure and potential harms of democracy, as well. Due to anti-intellectual leveling in this society, it seems fair to conclude that the 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments were added by totally uneducated individuals, as they cannot focus long enough to understand the consequences of what is currently happening around them. This further exhibits that when the majority of citizens are unaware of how their government systems work, they can easily go against their own self-interest and convince themselves they are happy when they are, in actuality, far from it.

The problem Vonnegut addresses is not only our structures of government, but us. For example, the most unnerving feature of "Harrison Bergeron" is not what occurs during the story, but what is left out at the end: Harrison's parents carry on. As previously mentioned, the democracy imposed in this short story is oppressive towards American citizens and is cyclical because, by failing to react, Hazel and George perpetuate it. We will never live under a flawless system of administration, for humans ourselves are innately flawed. However, Vonnegut seems to argue that this should not make us feel hopeless or justify unfair treatment towards others. Even though Hazel forgets why she is crying, she still cries, nonetheless; although she has been stripped of her individualism, she is still very much human. The system cannot take that from her.

In summation, I agree with the majority of the assertions made by both Benjamin Reed and Darryl Hattenhauer and commend their arguments made in order to debunk the classically conservative and harmful interpretations of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." However, for the sake of my own argument,

I find it equally valuable to synthesize their commentaries with the author's own political values and add historical context. Like most of Vonnegut's work, there are a myriad of morals one can glean from this short story, but one overarching theme is Vonnegut's classic call to action: damn it, you have to be kind. Although it is interesting to notice the ways in which American government in 2081 oppresses its people, it is more so inspiring to notice the characters themselves, no matter how average and identical they may seem to one another. In the face of the law metaphorically weighing down citizens, as well as literally doing so with bags full of birdshot, Hazel looks to George, the man she loves, and says, "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while," (Vonnegut 9). It is in this line that we see Hazel's humanity, her empathy and ability to set herself aside for another's comfort. Hazel, as stupid and simple minded as she may be described, is still able to embody the watchword of Vonnegut's life and work: "we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is," (Vonnegut 96). If Hazel can, can't we all?

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Judge's Comments: *Striking out against received wisdom about Vonnegut's intentions, the author of "Desensitization, Dystopia, and Ballet Dancing: Varied Interpretations and the Influence of Kurt Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron'" makes a complex argument that synthesizes secondary sources while maintaining its own voice, carving a nimble yet temperate path through socio-political contexts. Filled with insightful moments and delivered in clear language, this essay is never polemical and always thought-provoking.*

SECOND PLACE

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Childlike Grief in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's The Little Prince

Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is widely known and beloved as a children's novella that tells the story of a young boy and his love for a flower that sends him from space to earth and back again. Saint Exupéry's work has long been celebrated as a fable about love and its cost, and rightly so, for there is much truth to this interpretation (Dodd 772). Many of those who have pursued a more psychological interpretation of this work have chosen to focus on loneliness, which is the most obvious aspect of The Little Prince's psychological struggle (Saint-Exupéry 61). However, a more in depth interpretation may be reached by the reader who takes into account Antoine de Saint Exupéry's personal history in addition to examining the text: Saint Exupéry tragically lost his father at the innocent age of three years (Kalsched 132). One may therefore conclude that The Little Prince does not speak only on love, but also carries a deeper message about loss, especially traumatic loss in childhood. In *The Little Prince*, Antoine De Saint-Exupéry draws from his childhood experience of the death of his father to express a child's experience of the five stages of grief.

In addition to the criticism mentioned above, some literary critics have considered *The Little Prince* in the context of Saint Exupéry's older life and other works, which leads them to conclude that all of Saint Exupéry's works are about the isolation of the human experience (Cantrill 71). Still others take into account his life as a pilot to conclude that he means to criticize the discipline of geography in favor of a more cultural and experiential approach to the world (Bunske 97). Mitchell examines the text itself, divorced from Saint Exupéry's personal experience, to explore the use of the

didactic style in the form of a narrative story (Mitchell 454). An overview of the criticism of Saint Exupéry's works, specifically *The Little Prince*, shows that much attention has been paid to Saint Exupéry as an author and pilot, but little thought has been paid to how his childhood experience of grief impacts the message that appears in *The Little Prince*.

When reflecting on the writing of Saint Exupéry, one scholar conjectures that, "To the lonely airman, situated at the centre of the universe, nature reveals a living soul, and he becomes the measure of all things he meditates" (Triebel 95). What Triebel means by this is that Saint Exupéry, a pilot who spent much of his time on long and lonely solo flights, based much of his writing on his own experience and view of the world. This is a key reason for the fact that Saint Exupéry positions himself as the first person narrator, the Pilot, as well as for the subject matter, which is based on Saint Exupéry's own childhood grief.

The story of *The Little Prince* is twofold: the frame narrative which includes the Little Prince's relationship with the pilot, and the story of the Little Prince's journey through space. It is therefore possible to follow the Little Prince's journey through the five stages of grief in two ways. The first way is to explain the five stages in a linear fashion, beginning with his choice to leave his flower and incorporating the events of the frame narrative in chronological order to explain the Little Prince's consecutive journey through the five stages of grief. The second way to interpret the Little Prince's journey through grief is to examine the text itself in the order it appears, beginning with the moment at which the Pilot meets the Little Prince, through the Little Prince's story of his journey, to the moment the Little Prince dies. For the purpose of this study, the text and journey of the Little Prince will be examined in the order in which it appears, on the basis of the argument that these events are a more true expression of Saint-Exupéry's struggle in the order in which he wrote them. Furthermore, as the narrative explaining the Little Prince's journey to earth is told by the Little Prince himself, it is natural to assume that the events would be told through the filter of the ensuing stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

In her work, *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduces the concept of the five stages of grief and describes the first stage in the following way: "Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses" (Kübler-Ross 35). The Little Prince is in the middle of this denial when he arrives upon the scene, meets the Pilot, and expresses denial in a variety of ways. The first and most obvious way in which the Little Prince expresses denial is through his simple avoidance of the topic which is the cause of his grief. When the Pilot first comes upon the Little Prince, the Pilot is surprised to find a child in the middle of a desert who, furthermore, does not seem to be suffering from this dire situation. The Pilot describes the Little Prince as a child who does not act in any measure like a child who is lost nor suffering (Saint Exupéry 10). This makes it clear that the Little Prince is denying his situation so effectively that he hardly seems aware of it himself.

The Little Prince further expresses his denial of his grief and the situation which causes it by directing curiosity and frustration at the Pilot. The Little Prince, in true childlike fashion, directs many questions toward the Pilot; however, he directly avoids questions about himself at any point at which the Pilot asks him one (Saint-Exupéry 13). It is clear that the Little Prince fears and evades the introduction of this topic. He denies his sorrowful situation by avoiding the topic; this he does largely by means of filling any silences in which the Pilot may bring it up.

The grief expressed by Saint Exupéry through the Little Prince is particularly childlike in the inability of the Little Prince to comprehend his situation. Most children, most likely including Saint Exupéry as a child, cannot wrap their minds around the reality of death and loss when they are faced with these things at a very early age. In the article, *Understanding Death and Grieving for Children Three and Younger*, the authors point out that the discomfort that even adults feel at the subject of death and grief severely complicates the ability of children to understand it. Because of this, especially young children may be crippled in their ability to wrap their heads around the meaning of death and grief (Norris-Shortle 736). Saint Exupéry had not yet reached his fourth birthday when he suffered the loss of his father, and his shaky childhood

understanding of death is expressed in the Little Prince's denial. Not only does the Little Prince deny his situation, but he does not seem to comprehend its gravity as he wanders in the desert, oblivious to his problems and surroundings, and avoids the explanation of his dire situation to the Pilot.

According to Kübler-Ross, "When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment." (Kubler-Ross 44). The Little Prince enters this stage as he expresses misdirected anger at the pilot specifically and at all grown ups generally. This is a direct expression of Saint Exupéry's own childhood frustration at the loss of the most reliable grown up in his world. The Little Prince expresses frustration at the Pilot for being so preoccupied with "matters of consequence" (Saint Exupéry 27) and ignoring the truly important things of life. The Little Prince resents the Pilot for his ignorance of the grief the Little Prince is experiencing, which leads him to delineate similar frustrations he has faced with grown ups on other planets.

The Little Prince explains that he has visited six planets on which he has met a king, a conceited man, a tippler, a businessman, a lamplighter, and a geographer. On these planets, the Little Prince has discovered, with mounting frustration, the preoccupations of grown up people. The Little Prince concludes that all grown ups are concerned with their own selfish interests and that the Pilot is no different; the Little Prince is enraged at this, but he does not seem to realize that his anger is being misdirected as it is truly over the selfishness of his rose.

This stage of grief is uniquely childlike in the way it is expressed in *The Little Prince*. In "Exploring Themes of Resiliency in Children After the Death of a Parent," Christie Eppler explains that "A bereaved child may lash out at well intended peers who inadvertently upset the child" (Eppler 189). The Little Prince's frustration at the Pilot and other grown ups, rather than at his rose, expresses this reality. The Little Prince cannot process his frustration at the flower itself, so he instead projects it onto others around him; similarly, a child who has lost a loved one may be frustrated at the loved one for dying, but directs his experience of the anger stage at the nearest alternative relationship.

The Little Prince's journey to different planets has a duality of function when it comes to the stages of grief. Not only does it serve to express the Little Prince's anger toward grown ups, but it also provides a segue into the next stage: bargaining. The reader can observe the beginnings of the bargaining stage as the Little Prince travels to other planets in search of an alternative to life with the flower. In his journey to other planets, the Little Prince seeks for a relationship with a person with whom he connects as much as with his flower. This is illustrated when he complains that on only one of the planets did he find someone who, to him, did not seem ridiculous (Saint Exupéry 51). While his search ends, as seen above, in anger and frustration, it is clear that the Little Prince is simultaneously expressing his bargaining with the loss of his closest companion.

Once he lands on earth, the Little Prince enters the bargaining stage with full force upon meeting the snake. The snake offers the Little Prince a way back home, and it is implied that what he means by this is that he will fatally bite the Little Prince, which will cause the Little Prince to return to his home planet (Saint Exupéry 58). Elizabeth Kübler-Ross explains that "Bargaining is really an attempt to postpone" (Kübler-Ross 72), which means that at this juncture, the Little Prince prolongs his business with the snake in order to delay the acceptance he now knows is inevitable. From the time that the Little Prince meets the snake until the end, the Little Prince is considering the snake's offer and meeting him from time to time to bargain.

This bargaining stage of grief is singularly childlike in how it plays out in The Little Prince, especially as an expression of a child's grief over a lost parent. Like in the previous stage of anger, it is not insignificant that an aspect of the way Saint Exupéry expresses the Little Prince's bargaining is through seeking out a grown up with whom he shares some commonality. A child who is experiencing acute bereavement may postpone the realization that they have lost something irreplaceable by attempting to find an emotional stand in for that which they have lost; this is, essentially, bargaining with reality itself. Children cannot process the reality that they must grow up in a world without the person they have lost, so they cast about for a stand-in who will allow them to go on with life as it is.

An example of this is the value that is placed on a father or mother figure by children with deceased or absent parents. Furthermore, the snake is significant as an expression of a child's experience of the bargaining stage because snakes are creatures which children classically fear. The Little Prince is bargaining with the snake directly, but the snake also represents that which the Little Prince most fears: acceptance.

However, before the Little Prince reaches this acceptance, he experiences the fourth stage of grief: depression. The Little Prince goes on from the snake to meet the fox, with whom he forms a bond which deepens his understanding of love. After this encounter, he begins to understand the measure of the love which he has experienced and lost with his flower, and this realization plunges the Little Prince into a gulf of despair. At this stage, the Little Prince becomes very lonely (Saint Exupéry 61) and dejected. Kübler-Ross suggests that, at the depression stage, attempts at encouragement and reassurance are not as impactful (Kübler-Ross 76); because of this, the Little Prince rejects the weightless efforts at comfort which are put forth by the Pilot and fox. He becomes weary with earth and begins the journey to acceptance.

In his groundbreaking work on separation anxiety, John Bowlby explains that a child goes through multiple phases when learning to be separated from a parent, the second of which is despair (Bowlby, Separation Anxiety 90); this despair is directly reflected in the Little Prince and his childlike ability to process his grief. Bowlby goes on to state in his article on Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood, "Sooner or later...despair sets in. The longing for mother's return does not diminish, but the hope of its being realized fades. Ultimately the restless noisy demands cease; he becomes apathetic and withdrawn, a despair broken only perhaps by an intermittent and monotonous wail. He is in a state of unutterable misery" (Bowlby, Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood, 16). It is obvious from Bowlby's insights into childhood psychology that not only does the loss or absence of a parent severely effect a child, but the stage of depression is acutely observable in young children who have experienced loss.

The Little Prince arrives at acceptance in the shape of a fixed determination to find the snake and accept his offer. Having gone

through an excruciating struggle of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, the Little Prince discovers that he is tired (Saint Exupéry 75), which leads him to stop struggling against his grief and accept it. This he does, as stated above, by agreeing to meet the snake and accept a fatal bite on the ankle, at which point the Little Prince hopes to be sent back to his own planet. Kübler-Ross explains that the stage of acceptance is not happy, but is rather “void of feelings” (Kübler-Ross 100); this symptom of the acceptance stage is evident in the aloofness of the Little Prince in the final section of the book. The Little Prince has no more energy for grappling with his grief nor for explaining the situation to the Pilot, and expresses a dull acceptance of his fate.

The Pilot’s response to the Little Prince’s decision is to desperately attempt to subvert his plans for suicide, which is representative of the helpless efforts of adults to assist young children in the grieving process. The Little Prince responds to the Pilot’s attempts with his own efforts at comfort, explaining, “When your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be content that you have known me” (Saint Exupéry 85). The wise instructions of the Little Prince to the Pilot regarding how to grieve may express Saint Exupéry’s unconscious desire to assist young children who are facing similar grief to his own. It is as if Saint Exupéry is addressing his grieving young readers and assuring them that they, like he, will eventually see the end of their struggle and remember their loved one with fondness.

In the end, it is of unique importance that the ultimate expression of the Little Prince’s acceptance of his grief is through death. While these five stages of grief may be more or less common to all grievers, they represent extremely important developmental facets for children who have experienced early childhood grief. While there have been many things said about the possible messages in this book with regard to suicide, the true point at which Saint Exupéry is driving is that the acceptance stage is synonymous with the death of childhood for children who have experienced early childhood grief. In an article compiled by Àngels Doñate, Teresa Iribarren states, “[The] message in The Little Prince is that all children grow up, which means having to assume responsibilities and deal with loss” (Doñate); when children are indeed forced to

face excruciating loss at such an early age, the acceptance of this loss is synonymous with growing up and leaving childhood behind.

In light of the fact that the first person narrator, the Pilot, is meant to be Saint Exupéry himself, one may conclude that the interactions between the Pilot and the Little Prince reflect Saint Exupéry's attempts to access and understand himself as a child and the trauma that shaped him. The consistent helplessness and frustration of the Pilot in the endeavor to communicate with and comfort the Little Prince gives further evidence to the truth that the childhood of Saint Exupéry was lost to his grief. Saint Exupéry can never truly access himself as a child in order to find healing because that version of him has died. However, the reader can be comforted by the fact that Saint Exupéry expresses peace in the end after he has learned to accept not only the death of his father, but also the loss of his most innocent self.

In conclusion, Antione de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is an invaluable insight into the grieving process of a child. This insight can aid children who feel alone in their grief as well as provide a tool for adults who seek to empathize with children as they grieve. Saint Exupéry, who is uniquely equipped to write about such a topic, expresses his own past experience while simultaneously learning to accept who he is as a result of that experience. Perhaps the ongoing popularity of Saint Exupéry's work will continue to catapult the world into a more complex understanding of childlike grief.

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Judge’s Comments: *Combining a strong grasp of secondary sources and keen close-reading skills with an impressive command of argument structure and pacing, “Childlike Grief in Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s The Little Prince” makes a compelling argument about a beloved book’s emotional resonance. It’s rare that a student essay can cast truly fresh light on a canonical text, and this essay manages the feat.*

THIRD PLACE

V. Taylor Davis

Middle Tennessee State University

“Wish Gone Wrong: Sapphic Queerbaiting in the Magical Girl Genre”

“Moon Prism Power, Make Up!”

The words barely leave Sailor Moon’s mouth before her transformation begins. Sparkling magenta ribbons explode from her now translucent form as her anatomy becomes doll-like, replacing her school uniform with a superpowered version, a magical amulet nestled in the giant bow on her chest, her hair buns shining with round red jewels, her pleated skirt rippling in a mystic wind. She is a magical girl, a heroine of an anime tradition harking back to the late 1960’s (Kumiko). With her powers and her friends’ help, she deals divine justice to the enemies of good with hyper-feminine appeal, her battles won by glitter and love.

The magical girl, or mahou shoujo (魔法少女), genre is beloved by fans all over the world, especially the young girls it seeks to empower. They watch raptly as the heroes that look and act just like them use their kindness, smarts, and friendship to defeat even the most powerful of foes, saving entire universes with a wave of a wand and a battle cry along the lines of “Pink Sugar Heart Attack!” (“Battle”). Magical girl media tends to stay within the realm of comics and animation, which lend themselves well to striking visual elements. Staples include extended transformation sequences where the characters’ heroic alter-egos undergo magical costume changes complete with cute, powerful weapons; dazzling attacks soaked in color and light; and mentors in the form of marketable animal companions.

While it’s possible for magical girls to operate as a solo unit, it’s much more common for magical girls to operate as a team, in following with their emphasis on the power of cooperation and bonds. The numbers vary, but a typical cast will range from two to

seven characters with one main girl taking a leadership role within the group. The series are often slice-of-life affairs where the girls will deal with problems their young viewers would experience, such as family issues, school life, and fights between friends, while then shifting into fantastical battles when their enemies and/or monsters appear. Lessons are learned; morals are imparted. Usually, all the problems are solved by the end of the episode, with more serious threats and themes put off until the end of the season.

By then it's usually a matter of saving the world. The foes are more powerful than ever, and the girls must summon every inch of their courage and power to end the evil once and for all. Imagine a duo team: their gloved hands are clasped, and deep stares are exchanged, their eyes sparkling with determined tears. Their souls touch, brilliant energy pulsing out to envelop their bodies in shining auras, and their foreheads meet as they become closer than they've ever been before. One of them says, "I love you." The other nods, a few tears spilling. Then they turn their combined feelings onto the villain into an unmatched wave of power. They can only scream and brace themselves as it washes over them, either redeeming or obliterating them entirely. The girls alight, having saved the day, hands still tightly held.

The sapphic overtones are undeniable. While magical girl series as a whole may not have started out with the direct intention of making queer content, queerness has indeed become an inextricable part of the genre, even if in some cases it is relegated to fan response. Since the 90's, many shows have embraced this, teasing relationships between characters while never outright confirming them. While this may seem harmless, it is actually a damaging practice known as queerbaiting, "a marketing technique used to attract queer viewers that involves creating romantic or sexual tension between two same-sex characters but never making it canon" (Urban Dictionary). So why is queerbaiting harmful? Who benefits from these implied relationships, and what's harmful about keeping them unconfirmed?

To fully understand why queerbaiting exists in the magical girl genre, one must look to the money metrics of anime. The hardcore fans of anime, known as otaku (オタク) in Japan, are a driving force in their country's economy, spending millions on official

merchandise and fan content from their preferred series every year. Anime conventions are a hub of interaction between producers and consumers, with the most dedicated of fans spending up to thousands to “cosplay”—a portmanteau of ‘costume’ and ‘play’—their favorite characters, pouring countless hours into recreating and modeling wigs and often handmade costumes to literally become the characters themselves. In Japan, the most famous convention for anime fan creators there is Comiket—another portmanteau, this time for ‘Comic Market’—a mammoth venue where over 35,000 selected publishing circles out of a rigorously screened 51,000 applicants sell their handmade fan comics and art to buyers (“Comiket”).

These fan comics are known as *doujinshi* (同人誌). *Doujin* means ‘self-published’, and the works can range from completely original stories to works featuring characters from beloved popular series. In Japan, *doujin* creators aren’t required to stop selling their works unless specific complaints are issued by the series creators, and since the fan comics are generally believed to not impact the sales of the original works, this rarely happens. Therefore, fans have the freedom to draw whatever they want with whoever they want, and most importantly, they can draw whatever romantic pairings they want.

The majority of customers at Comiket are women, and over 38.3% of them end up buying BL *doujin*—boy’s love, also known as *yaoi* (やおい). These *doujin* depict male characters from popular series in romantic and oftentimes sexual relationships. While it’s unfair to say that there aren’t any queer creators involved in making these *doujin*, the wide majority of BL artists are straight creators, marketing to a demographic of straight female fans known as ‘*fujoshi*’, literally translated as ‘rotten women’ (Galbraith). These fans have earned notoriety for fetishizing queer men, obsessively consuming BL content in a fetishistic manner while being homophobic towards their ‘3D’ counterparts. However, it’s not just *fujoshi* who buy these works, and the works are not just focused on men.

An almost equally large section of *doujin* revolves around girl’s love, more commonly known as *yuri* (百合). The demographic for *yuri* is more varied than *yaoi*, appealing to both men and women readers. While some fans can appreciate sapphic relationships

in a healthy manner, it is far too common for these doujins to be consumed on the basis of a few negative stereotypes, namely that yuri is ‘softer’ than yaoi. This belief is rooted in sexist and biological essentialist undertones. A trans-exclusionary view of yuri would assume that no penises are involved in any sexual activity between the two characters, resulting in a ‘cleaner’, less visceral, more pure and innocent form of lovemaking. The expectation for female characters to be inexperienced and gentle is misogynistic, and there are troubling ties to be made to the sexualization of children and child-like behaviors.

Examples of this practice can be found across decades, with an easy milestone found in the 1990s with Sailor Moon. Sailor Moon is arguably the most recognizable magical girl series, having exploded in popularity in both Japan and America during its runtime from 1992-1997. It follows the exploits of the titular character and her band of Sailor Senshi (translated as Pretty Guardians in the English dub) as they use the power of the solar system to defeat evil aliens. Sailor Moon’s team is comprised of the Inner Senshi, which has four other girls who feature prominently in the first two seasons and represent Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter, and an Outer Senshi in the following seasons that take their power from the remaining planets.

Two members of the Outer Senshi, Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune, are undoubtedly a couple. They share longing looks and charged, tender dialogue, the backgrounds filling with flower petals and sparkles behind them, a classic anime visual cue for romantic love. Uranus is an androgynous character, beautiful with long legs and boyishly cropped blonde hair, the butch to femme Neptune, who has long, waving teal hair and fluttering lashes. Their chemistry is undeniable; at one point, Uranus drives Michiru home in her sports car after some intense flirting, claiming that she’s “not letting her go home tonight” (Century). Their relationship is a rare canonized instance, as Sailor Moon creator Naoko Takeuchi has confirmed that they are a couple.

However, when distribution company DIC bought the rights to an English dub to air on American television, the producers balked at the implications this would have on their sales. Two girls openly loving each other in a show for children was unacceptable. They

changed the script to make them ‘close cousins’, inadvertently (and hilariously) making the relationship even more inappropriate by implying that they were not only gay but also incestuous. However, even to this day, official merchandise featuring Uranus and Neptune as a pair help drive profits (Otaku Mode).

Even more nefarious is the excessive queerbaiting featured in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. This was a darker, grittier take on the magical girl genre marketed towards an older audience that aired in 2011 (“*Puella Magi Madoka Magica*”). Here, the bright colors associated with mahou shoujo became muted, the cartoon violence turned into realistic gore, and the themes of happiness and hope twisted into depression and despair. It rocked the anime community, exploding in popularity and spawning multiple lucrative spin-offs, including manga series, an anime sequel, three movies, and a gacha-style mobile game.

Out of a team of five main girls, four of them are paired off into couples: the two main characters, Madoka and Homura, and the two secondary characters, Kyoko and Sakura. In the third movie, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica: Rebellion*, Homura pulls Madoka out of a created heaven into an interdimensional version of hell just to be with her forever, embracing the angel-coded Madoka with her arms and jet-black demon wings. Surely, these are not the actions of a middle school girl towards her best friend, and the fans have noticed. Searching online doujin sites for “*Madoka Kaname/Homura Akemi*” produces hundreds of results, often featuring the two underage characters in sexually explicit contexts. That’s another troubling aspect of queerbaiting: due to the nature of the genre, there’s an inherent element of pedophilia when the girls are depicted sexually, which creates issues of both morality and legality.

Is there any end in sight to magical girl queerbaiting? A solution might begin with independent creators, as seen with Mary Cagle, the American artist whose most recent webcomic, *Sleepless Domain*, is a fantastic step in the right direction regarding representation in the genre (Cagle). Although *Sleepless Domain* is not animated, the two main characters, Kokoro and Undine, are nevertheless magical girls to a T, following all the expected tropes: fighting on teams, sporting colorful, girly costumes, and navigating daily life and fantasy battle in turn.

One of the best threads of Sleepless Domain is the slow-burn romance between its two leads, both of whom are non-white and non-straight, a far cry from the mainstream reluctance to depict main characters as anything other than homogenous and heterosexual. The bonds that Kokoro and Undine form through the natural actions of fighting as magical girls—training together, protecting each other, and comforting each other in times of strife—culminate in a deep friendship that evolves into a believable, healthy romantic relationship. Sleepless Domain is currently ongoing, and with any luck, it will start a trend in all magical girl media to expand the horizons into something little girls can see themselves in, no matter what their race, gender, or orientation may be.

The bottom line is that girls who love other girls shouldn't be used as marketing ploys. Lesbians and bi women aren't anybody's fetish, and they deserve to be depicted with respect. When creating content that's primarily for children, there needs to be a conscious effort to avoid sending a message that gay people are undesirable or inappropriate by the standards of polite society, and if numbers go down from fans who are only happy if they feel that they can romantically or sexually pursue underage girls, it seems like a sacrifice that should be gladly made. Magical girls inspire countless viewers to be true to themselves and their friends, that love always wins the day. We should fight as hard for them as they would for us.

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Judge’s Comments: *In spirited, imaginative prose, “Wish Gone Wrong: Sapphic Queerbaiting in the Magical Girl Genre” makes a canny argument that sets itself the difficult task of describing then resituating a popular genre. The writer’s admirably readable voice carries the reader through a capably structured piece that combines impressive rhetorical awareness and thoughtful analysis with strong use of primary and secondary sources.*

LITERARY MAGAZINE

FIRST PLACE

Chestatee Review

University of North Georgia

The diverse range of forms is impressive: poetry, short story, one-act play, creative nonfiction, formal essay, and visual art. The journal also includes the winners of the Halloween Writing Contest and separate sections for prize winners, including a prize for academic writing/freshman comp. The writing is bold, entertaining, and well-crafted. The visual art is a robust, diverse collection. The journal is attractively designed and laid out. Includes bios for authors. Judges write extended appreciations for contest winners. Overall, a top-shelf production.

SECOND PLACE

Aonian

Hendrix College

This journal publishes poetry, fiction, nonfiction, visual art. It also includes one piece of drama. The writing is solid and distinguished. The journal has a very attractive layout. Visual art sprinkled throughout the journal in an attractive manner. The journal is printed on heavyweight, glossy paper, giving it an impressive feel. The journal attracts distinguished judges: Nickole Brown, poetry; and Kevin Brockmeier, fiction. Fine work all around.

THIRD PLACE

Sequoia Review

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

This journal publishes poetry, fiction, nonfiction and visual art. It is very handsomely laid out using a clean, sans serif font. Some very good work is included, featuring a range of approach. Excellent visual art.