

2024 Southern Literary Festival Anthology
April 4–6, 2024

Designed and Edited at Blue Mountain Christian University,
Blue Mountain, Mississippi

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Printed by Paulsen Printing

Book layout and cover design by Connor Fisher, Blue Mountain Christian University.

Cover image: Southern Magnolia (fruit). (*Magnolia grandiflora*). Mary Vaux Walcott, 1925. In *North American Wild Flowers*. pub. by the Smithsonian Institution.

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2024 Southern Literary Festival Judges

Paul Cunningham – Fiction

Paul Cunningham co-manages Action Books. He is the author of two books from Schism Press: *Fall Garment* (2022) and *The House of the Tree of Sores* (2020). His poetry and prose have appeared in *Poem-a-Day*, *Quarterly West*, *DLAGRAM*, *Yalobusba Review*, *Texas Poetry Review*, Agnes Scott College's *Writers' Festival Magazine*, and many others. His translation of Sara Tuss Efrik's play *Danse Macabre Piggies* will be anthologized in *Experimental Writing: A Guidebook and Anthology* (Bloomsbury, 2024). Cunningham manages the MFA in Creative Writing Program at the University of Notre Dame where he also teaches.

Gale Marie Thompson – Poetry

Gale Marie Thompson is the author of *Helen or My Hunger* (YesYes Books 2020), *Soldier On* (Tupelo Press 2015), and most recently *Mountain Amnesia*, winner of the 2023 Colorado Prize for Poetry. Her poetry and prose have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Bennington Review*, and *Mississippi Review*, among others. Gale lives in the mountains of North Georgia, where she works as an editor for YesYes Books and directs the creative writing program at Young Harris College.

Nathan Dixon – Creative Nonfiction

Nathan Dixon is the author of *Radical Red* (forthcoming, BOA Editions), which won the BOA Editions short fiction prize. He

received his PhD in English literature and creative writing from the University of Georgia. His creative work has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Fence*, *Tin House*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Redivider*, and elsewhere. His critical/academic work has appeared in *MELUS Journal*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Transmotion*, and *Renaissance Papers*. He lives in Durham, NC, with his family and teaches at North Carolina Central University.

Ben Rutherford – One-Act Play

Ben Rutherford is a PhD candidate at the University of Georgia whose research interests include ecocriticism and twentieth century poetics. His writing has recently appeared in the *Georgia Review*, *Terrain.org*, the *Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics*, and elsewhere.

Leslie LaChance – Formal Essay

Leslie LaChance is a poet and essayist based in Nashville, Tennessee. She works as a youth writing mentor with the non-profit Southern Word and serves as an academic portfolio consultant for the University Scholars Program at The University of Tennessee at Martin. Some of her poems and stories have appeared in *Still: The Journal*, *Mead*, *Quiddity*, *Apple Valley Review*, *The Birmingham Poetry Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Juked*, and other journals. *How She Got That Way*, her poetry chapbook, was published in the quartet edition *Mend & Hone* from Toadlily Press in 2013. Three of her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She blogs about living with metastatic cancer at *Sojourn & Stardust*, and she is a regular contributor to *The Nashvillian* magazine.

Lily Duffy – Print Journal

Lily Duffy is a writer, editor, and Licensed Social Worker. They're the author of the full-length poetry collection *TACT* (Vegetarian Alcoholic, 2021) as well as the chapbooks *Wet Water Hill* (Garden-Door Press, 2021) and *Sour Candy* (Really Serious Literature, 2018). Duffy's poems have appeared in *Anomaly*, *APARTMENT Poetry*, *The Journal Petra*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Yalobusha Review*, among other journals. They hold an MFA in Poetry from the University of Colorado Boulder and an MSW from Metropolitan State University of Denver. Duffy currently lives in Longmont, Colorado, where they have a private psychotherapy practice supporting high masking and late identified neurodivergent adults. With Ray Levy, they co-edit the literary magazine *DREGINALD*, which has been publishing writers and multimedia artists from all over the world since 2013.

2024 Southern Literary Festival

Hosted by the University of Mississippi
Oxford, Mississippi

Keynote Speaker

ANDRE DUBUS III

Andre Dubus III's nine books include the *New York Times*' bestsellers *House of Sand and Fog*, *The Garden of Last Days*, and his memoir, *Townie*. His most recent novel, *Such Kindness*, was published in June 2023, and a collection of personal essays, *Ghost Dog: On Killers and Kin*, is forthcoming in March 2024. He is also the editor of *Reaching Inside: 50 Acclaimed Authors on 100 Unforgettable Short Stories*, (Godine, 2023.) Mr. Dubus has been a finalist for the National Book Award, and has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, The National Magazine Award for Fiction, two Pushcart Prizes, and is a recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature. His books are published in over twenty-five languages, and he teaches at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.



Fiction

FIRST PLACE

Elliot Jackson

Hendrix College

Underwater, Underground

Almost every autumn, my little brother comes down to the beach to visit my ghost. I'm usually there too, but he never speaks to me.

In the off season, this is a pretty peaceful place to be dead. I flicker in and out with the tide, letting the salt-sharp air scrape pieces of me clean away. Trying not to come back into focus. Trying to forget myself long enough to disappear for good.

There's good fishing on this part of the beach. Fish can smell death better than people can, but they don't think about it like we do. Death pulls them forward into the hooks, makes them that much hungrier to meet something red and sharp and final. When I'm enough of myself to *have* ankles, the schools swirl around them in thick, spiraling patterns, their wide, empty mouths grasping for each other's tails.

I'm not a calming presence for anything that can sense me. Gulls squawk in alarm and take off when I drift towards the buoys where they perch. Little kids don't like to chase beach balls that splash into the weed-choked muck at my feet. And fish go ravenous, desperate to taste blood even if they have to gnaw each other's flesh from the bone to get it.

The older fishermen, the ones who clean fish at the end of the pier most evenings, like to spin yarns about what churns them

into their spiraling, cannibalistic frenzies. Sometimes they hit pretty close to the truth.

“A kid drowned out there, something like sixty years ago,” one said once. He had a good decade on the other old timers and could gut a fish without looking down. “Local boy. Went out for a night swim and got caught in a rip.” He spat, feigning casual, then lowered his voice. The group leaned in, hooked. “Fish remember where they’ve had a good meal. Generational memory.”

One of the more solid parts of me reveled in the looks of disgust, but the moment didn’t last. The conversation meandered away, and I faded back into the breeze.

I was made of meat, once. That part of the story is true. I’ve forgotten so much already. Maybe when I forget what it meant to be meat, to be full of hot, frightened blood and so, so desperate to keep being alive, maybe then I’ll be able to let everything go.

My brother doesn’t help. Freddie was twelve when I left him behind in our father’s house and seventeen when I died, and I think part of him will always believe it was his fault. He comes in September, most years. It matches up with my death date, and the plane ticket is probably cheap.

Even in cold autumns, he wears his trunks down to the shore and wades right in, up to the knee. Barbara comes with him. Even after fifty years with Freddie, years I never got, she’s jealous of me and doesn’t want to leave us alone together. Or maybe I only think that because I’m jealous of her. He always says the same sorts of things, talking fast like he’s spent all year bottling them up just to release them into the wind.

“Hey, Dill,” he says, throwing an arm around Barbara’s waist for balance and leaning into her shoulder.

Freddie was the only person who ever called me Dill. Our mother called me Dylan until the day she died, our father didn't bother, and my beaus used a shifting patchwork of ephemeral stage names, none of which ever totally felt like me. I was still searching for a good name the night the sea took me. But Freddie never let go of my childhood nickname, just like he never let go of the big brother I didn't stay to be.

Every year, it takes a little bit longer for my ghost to appear. Every year, I hope that this time he won't. But he does, blurred at the edges but unmistakably there. I can never resist drifting closer to study him.

There's my nose, my salt-crusted hair, my too-dark eyebrows, my eyes and the anger behind them, the anger I still haven't been able to leave behind. Maybe it's the anger in me that draws the wild hunger out of the fish. My ghost wears the outfit I died in: a crisp grey suit jacket, starched shirt, yellow tie, and flower-print boxers. The colors are perfect, and that's odd because Freddie wasn't there that night. He shouldn't remember what I was wearing, and who else is my ghost here for? But I've had to accept that death doesn't make sense. Arguing with it is something to do, but it doesn't matter what *I* think. It isn't *me* Freddie comes to see.

For all the hunger in Freddie's eyes when he sees the ghost, it's impossible to look at him and pretend he's a living brother. There's a blue-grey, waterlogged undertone to his complexion, and his skin is ragged where it's been nibbled by fish. One of his eyes is blackened, a pre-death injury I remember all too well. Every so often, liquid—bile or seawater—trickles from the corner of his mouth. He looks at Freddie without blinking or moving his head. Sometimes I get the sense that my ghost is as ravenous as the fish. Always, I am

burningly envious of the way Freddie looks at him, at his lost, drowned older brother.

Barbara clutches at Freddie's arm. She used to shriek when my ghost appeared, but I guess fifty years of marriage is enough time to get used to anything.

I've never known how to read the look Freddie gets when he sees my ghost for the first time. It isn't happy or sad or even scared, really. It makes me wonder if he knows why he can't let me go. I always stick close to listen while he talks to the ghost. I was a terrible sister and a worse brother, but I figure I owe him that.

"We went up to Southport to see Mom and Dad this morning," Freddie says. "Left Mom some flowers."

When the tourists leave, less than five hundred people live in this town, so all our dead who aren't swallowed by the sea are buried in the churchyard of the next town over. I remember him telling the ghost that I have a granite marker there, too, so I don't know why he doesn't talk to that instead. The stone has as much of me in it as this apparition.

Freddie's rambling now, complaining that the new groundskeeper at the church in Southport doesn't keep the paths as neat as the old one used to.

"He said he'd look into it," Barbara interjects mildly. "I think he's a nice man." She offers the ghost a tight smile. Barbara came into the picture after my exit, and part of me sympathizes with her. I must be a particularly unwelcome sort of in-law.

"Sure," Freddie says. It's the same "sure" he used to use when Mom told him to be home by dark, a token agreement. "Nice enough." His eyes don't leave the ghost's face. "The kids are getting big, Dill. You wouldn't believe it."

The kids are his daughter's children. She named the older one after me, and I feel bad about that sometimes in case the name I tried to cast off acts like a prophecy or a curse. In case my kind of distance can pass down a bloodline.

A thin trickle of seawater runs out of the corner of the ghost's mouth. I hover by his right ear, close enough that I can sort of pretend it's me Freddie's looking at. There's less of me left every year. Soon this ache will fade and me along with it.

"Sam's into computers," Freddie continues. He chuckles. "I don't really understand what she does with them, but she thinks it's funny to try to explain it to us. And Dylan is still... Dylan." His mouth twists the way our father's used to when I wore the right outfit or spoke without working hard enough to hide what I wasn't supposed to say. "Wants to be a librarian or something. He's got some kind of job sorting pictures at a museum in the city, but they don't pay him or anything. Says it's work experience."

"He's getting a foot in the door," Barbara interjects. "I think it's good for him."

"Sure," says Freddie, *sure I'll be back in time for dinner*, "but it's not helping him save up for college."

Barbara says something vague about resumes, but I'm watching Freddie's mouth. The moments when he reminds me most of our father are also the times when I'm guiltiest for leaving. If I had stayed in that house, in the narrow world beneath our father's thumb, could I have pulled Freddie further away? If I had stayed, would he remember me as more than the ghost of a silent brother?

"I'm sorry," I say, and just like every year my words are carried away in the wingbeats of the gulls circling overhead. I say them anyway, reaching out for hands that can't feel my touch. "I never let you know me. Dad wouldn't—I'd already lost him. I

thought that keeping you at arm's length was the only way to keep you in my life at all, but I didn't—"

There isn't enough left of me for tears to fall, but my sorrow hangs in the salt mist. Maybe Freddie and Barbara can feel it, because they draw closer together.

"He's a smart kid," Freddie says in response to one of Barbara's vague arguments in their grandson's favor, "but I wish he knew what to *do* with it." He watches the ghost's face. "I want you to be proud of him, Dill."

"I'll never know him," I say, and the gulls carry my words out to sea. "I'll never know him and he'll never know me."

The air in the museum's basement is thick with the scent of dust and mildew, and that's probably the worst part of interning there. Dylan has to keep his inhaler in a drawer of the desk he shares with two other unpaid interns who work different hours. The second-worst part is the paper cuts. He swears some of the photos in the collection are possessed by malevolent spirits who want nothing more than to slice teenagers' skin.

Everything else is wonderful, whatever his parents say about it. His father grumbles about driving him into town at rush hour and picking him up late, and his mother frets about his homework and his asthma and his posture. When he got the internship, Dylan promised her that he would do some of his homework in between tasks, but he broke that promise immediately. There is always something to see in an archive, something to read or sort or clean. All of his clothes have taken on the smell of disintegrating newspaper.

He's just settled in to spend the evening sorting state fair memorabilia from the early seventies when the intern supervisor, Chloe, bustles in with a stack of scrapbooks almost as tall as she is.

Her eyes are alight with the manic fire specific to archivists hot on the trail of a buried story. “The fair can wait, Dill,” she says. “You *have* to see these.”

Dylan sets aside a tray of commemorative clown-faced pins circa 1972, because anything that lights Chloe up like that is worth looking at. Especially because it’s Chloe, who is just enough older than him that he probably doesn’t have a chance, but cool enough that he desperately needs her to turn that shining look his way as often as possible. She’s the only one who calls him Dill, and somehow from her it doesn’t feel like an infantilizing nickname.

“What’ve you got?”

Chloe beams. “New donation, fresh out of some Rotary guy’s attic.” There isn’t any room on the desks, so she deposits the scrapbooks on the floor, where the stack immediately topples over. “Have to be careful with these—it’s a lot of old staples.”

Dylan winces in understanding. His second week at the museum, a puncture wound from a rusted staple circa 1986 sent him to the doctor for a tetanus shot. It took a lot of arguing to convince his mother to let him come back after that. Chloe isn’t making fun of him—all the archivists have similar stories—but he’s still embarrassed that she remembers what happened. Chloe wears thrift-store jackets studded with handmade patches and hand-painted jeans. She *has* to think he’s cool, or at least tolerable. The mere thought of the alternative makes Dylan want to shrivel up and die.

Chloe pulls a scrapbook from the middle of the heap, seemingly at random. “Look, look, look!” Her voice is halfway to a shriek.

Dylan leans in, and for a moment the lavender scent of Chloe’s hair overwhelms the archive’s must. This close, he can see the glitter of her perfect eyelids. He isn’t sure if he wants to fuck her

or be her, and either way the need for her to stay this close to him is like a hook in his stomach.

Chloe opens the scrapbook to a bald page stained with disintegrating glue. A scattering of loose photographs spills out onto the carpet. *July 1962*, reads the caption at the top of the page. Chloe's voice is reverent. "We have eight of these to go through. Eight! If half of them are this good..." She trails off, and Dylan knows she's thinking about her thesis.

"I could stay late," Dylan suggests quickly, even though he knows it'd be a hard sell with his dad.

Chloe shakes her head slowly, like someone emerging from a dream. "Don't worry about it. Sort what you can until your parents come and get you, and I'll finish." She dives back into the pile of scrapbooks. "Some of these are family reunions and birth announcements and stuff, but some of them are Family." Dylan can hear the capital letter. "I don't know how they got half of these pictures developed!"

Dylan changes into a fresh pair of gloves, then starts leafing through the loose pictures. They're all grainy amateur shots, taken with cheap cameras. It makes them fascinating raw material, but it also makes them delicate and the subjects hard to identify.

The first picture he flips over has a handwritten label on the back, half-covered by an orangey glob of glue. *Me and D at Judy's. Southport, 1962.* The two women in the picture are dressed for a night on the town. They're laughing, arms and legs tangled together. In the next picture, one of the women lies alone in a field with a posture of affected ease, a flower tucked behind one ear. She's sticking her tongue out at the camera. The handwriting on the back is different: *Glamour shot! Keep this in case I make it big.* There's a mark at the bottom like the writer signed the note and then scribbled over it.

Dylan flips through the other photos. They paint a portrait of an idyllic summer spent in backrooms and bars and outdoor places. The two women from the first picture are in most of them, but many others come and go, laughing and drinking and posing in gaudy clubwear. It isn't until Chloe taps him on the shoulder that he notices the growing ache in his chest.

“You okay?”

Dylan struggles to put it into words. “Sometimes I just get a sense of the distance,” he says at last, even though that isn't what he means. “Between them and me.”

“Well, this won't help,” says Chloe brightly, dropping a slim booklet into his lap. “He even looks a little bit like you.”

It's a funeral program. It takes Dylan a moment to see what Chloe wants him to see, because whoever put together the scrapbook took the time to cross out every instance of the dead person's name. Dylan. The surname is familiar too, and Dylan wrinkles his nose, making a mental note to ask his mother if their family ever lived near Southport.

Then he turns the program over and freezes when he sees the picture on the back. It's a fuzzy image, cropped from a group shot, but the resemblance to D, the woman from the other set of pictures, is unmistakable. Suddenly the hook in Dylan's stomach feels like it's pulling harder than ever.

“Weird, right?” Chloe leans over his shoulder, filling his nostrils with lavender again. “She must have really hated him, to want to get rid of his name that badly.”

Dylan swallows, and suddenly he knows without a doubt that he's stealing one of the other pictures, one of the ones where D smiles or laughs at the camera, and adding it to the shoebox under his bed where he keeps a shoplifted lipstick and one of his little sister's

old ballet costumes, things he wants and can't touch or think about wanting.

"I think she really loved her," he says, startled by the hitch in his voice.

"Honey," says Barbara at last, "we should think about dinner."

They'll go to the same place they always do, a crab shack that stays open until eight and doesn't skimp on the sides. Freddie says it gives him heartburn, but whatever nostalgia he's chasing by visiting my ghost year after year compels him to complete the ritual. It isn't me he wants to see. If it was, he'd see me.

I have to believe that, or I'll go all the way nuts.

"Honey," Barbara repeats, because Freddie isn't looking at her. He can't stop looking at the ghost, just like he can't stop coming back. "I'm cold."

"*I'm* cold," I say, because I am, even though I died on a warm night, still in sight of shore, with my father searching among the dunes and bellowing for me to come back and face him like a man. I could have let him whoop my ass. I could have hidden down by the rocks. I could have made a break for it and tried to hitch my way to Southport.

Nothing I could have done would have let me stay and be the sister Freddie needed, the one who would have taught him a better way to be a man. So maybe I let the water take me, let it scour the gel from my hair and caress my stinging lungs. I've never been totally sure if it was my choice to leave, in the end. Maybe that uncertainty is another hook forcing me to stay.

Finally, Freddie tears himself away. The ghost lets out a sigh only somewhat more tangible than my voice and winks out like a streetlight at sunrise.

“That crab shack gives me heartburn,” Freddie grumbles.

“So we’ll go somewhere else,” says Barbara patiently as they wade back to shore. They won’t.

Out in the deep water, the fish start to spiral. There’ll be a good catch tomorrow, and plenty of blood in the water at the end of the pier.

Dylan doesn’t say anything to his family until he’s sure, which takes most of a year. By then he is fielding college applications and the manila folder in the shoebox under his bed is as thick as an atlas. It feels like one, too, like a map charting out the long way home.

Enough of the photos in the scrapbooks were captioned that he was able to assemble a good list of names of people who might have known D. Several of them turned up too-young obituaries or faded into dead ends as names changed or the world swallowed them up, but other names led to email addresses or phone numbers.

Dylan developed a script for when the connections succeeded and, as if by wizardry, he summoned a character from the background of an old photograph to speak down a phone line. “Good morning/afternoon/evening. I’m an intern at the Franklin Museum’s historical archives, and I’m calling in the hopes that you can give me some background on some of the materials in our collection. Do you have a minute to talk?”

Often, his contacts were hesitant to say anything concrete. Many of the laughing people in the bright, cheerful photos had died in the closet, and outing them even fifty years later seemed wrong. Eventually, Dylan learned to tell the truth.

“I’m particularly interested in D. Guarino,” he taught himself to say. “I think she might be a relative of mine.” The last part of his script always came out a little too quietly, and he was never able to shake the waver in his voice. “I want to know more about her life. I think someone should.”

And the stories started to trickle in.

Sometimes, especially on bad nights, Dylan shuts his laptop on the latest draft of his personal statement, rubs the bridge of his nose, and digs out the shoebox. The faded ballet costume is still there, serving as a nest for the lipstick, half a dozen bottles of nail polish, and a thin tube of eyeliner. On top of them is a carefully-folded skirt, its tags still on. The manila folder has pride of place at the very top of the stack. As it gets thicker, as D gets more substantial, it makes Dylan feel like something’s moving forward, like maybe he won’t be a teenager living in his parents’ house forever. Just feeling its weight in his hands makes it easier for Dylan to breathe and keep breathing.

Nana and Pops come down to celebrate Dylan’s high school graduation that summer, and he waits until he and Pops are out on a walk to ask the question that’s been burning a hole in his stomach for weeks.

“I want to know about the first Dylan. The one I’m named after. What happened?”

Dylan’s mother had warned him that the subject would be painful for Pops, but even after listening to so many other old people sob into the phone as they talked about their memories of D he’s still unprepared to see his grandfather’s face crumple.

“He drowned,” Pops said at last. “I was your age. Dill was five years older, and I hadn’t seen him in—” He takes a shaky breath.

“—in too long. Your great-granddad had a temper, and he and Dill were always going at it.”

Dylan’s hands itch to open the recording app on his phone, but it would feel like a violation to do it without asking first, and it feels like any movement from him might break whatever spell has made his grandfather finally tell this story.

Pops speaks in a rush, as if the words have been tamped down inside him for longer than Dylan’s been alive and now they’re fighting to get out. “He came home for our mother’s funeral. I don’t know how he heard—we never learned where he *was* for five years—but somehow things went bad that night. Dad chased him out the back door just like he used to when I was a kid, only that night they both kept running. And it was dark, and the waves—” He clicks his tongue, fiddling with the end of his walking stick. “I don’t like to try to guess at how Dill ended up in the water. Everyone called it an accident, and maybe it was. I didn’t follow them. I didn’t watch.”

The look Pops levels at Dylan is heavy enough that it takes a long moment for Dylan to learn how to shoulder it.

“Your mom and Nana don’t know that story.”

Dylan’s eyes burn. He nods. “Thank you,” he manages.

More than the weight of Pops’s gaze, Dylan can feel the heft of the thick manila folder under his bed. What would D want him to say? It’s a question the distant voices on the phone can’t help him answer.

Pops is still watching him. “I’m proud of you, son,” he says. Dylan is startled by the roughness of his voice, like he’s holding back tears. “You’re growing into an amazing young man.”

Dylan makes up his mind. Even without the manila folder in his arms, part of his mind reaches out for it, to take D’s hand for

strength. “No,” he says. “I’m not.” And with his other hand, his real hand, he reaches for his grandfather. Pops’s fingers are warm.

Freddie comes to visit me early this year. It’s still summer, which means there are still tourists sunburning and taking selfies and avoiding my patch of water or shoreline without quite knowing why. Freddie likes privacy for our talks, so he comes at night. Barbara isn’t with him. Part of me worries, though I can’t say I miss the way she looks at my ghost. Is Freddie grieving again? But then I get a good look at who he’s brought instead.

She stands tall at the water’s edge, letting the waves brush her bare feet without wading in all the way. Her hair is short, in the uncertain intermediary stages of growing out. The salt breeze pushes her too-long bangs into her eyes, and she brushes them away with the back of her hand. She can’t be more than eighteen. She’s beautiful.

I drift forward without really meaning to, drawn closer than I usually come to people. She doesn’t shiver as I spiral around her amongst the ocean spray. She keeps her eyes wide open.

“Dill’s usually here by now.” Freddie chews his lip, glancing back at the girl. There’s a catch in his voice, one I remember from our childhood, before he stopped letting himself cry in front of me or anyone. “I don’t know why he isn’t here.”

“Can we wait a little while?” the girl asks. Then, quieter, as if just for me and the breeze, she says, “Um, hi. I don’t know what to call you, but I’m your great-niece. Do you know Judy Cochran’s still alive? She ran the drag bar in Southport in the sixties. I have a picture of you standing out front.” She starts talking faster, a little frantically, like she’s desperate to be heard by someone, even if it’s just me and the wind out here. “She’s almost a hundred years old and not very

good with cell phones, but she remembered you. Said you still owe her for the shot glasses.”

A memory. A ripple in the air. I filled a whole kitchen shelf in my first apartment with bar glasses. D’s trophies, my beau-of-the-hour called them. How did I forget?

And then, in a rush of motion, I can feel the wet sand beneath my feet, the foamy water sloshing between my toes. I’m there. Not all the way, not *alive*, but there.

“Pops,” says the girl, and Freddie turns around. He sees me. He sees me, and his face unfurls like a flower, turning into something open and new.

“Dill,” he says. “You look different.”

I do. I know that without needing to look. It’s like there’s only one ghost of me left, and I’m inside her skin. I don’t think I can stay here long now that I’m like this, but I don’t think I need to. “Hey, Freddie,” I say, and the voice that comes out of my ghost’s mouth is mine. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Judge’s comment: At once a mourning and a rebirth, “Underwater, Underground” slowly pulls you into its hooks. Structurally, as a ‘ghost story,’ it dizzies and shocks in ways that echo the films of Almodovar and the stories of Poe. Here, the voice feels distinctive and the writing somehow feels genreless. Strangely, I felt the way I felt when reading Saunders’ “Sea Oak” for the first time. Or Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracle at Little No Horse*. A feeling I can only describe as awakening. “Underwater, Underground” is a stunning meditation on bodies and identity, past and future, self-recognition and self-actualization. This is incredibly nuanced, careful writing that invites a second and even a third reading. Bolaño was 27 when he wrote *Antwerp*. Rimbaud was 19 when he wrote *A Season in*

Hell. Given these bleak times, I say: read this story and be reminded of the breadth and importance of a young artist's vision.

SECOND PLACE

Anja Christensen

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Hook

Dave's an hour into the wait, bobber stationary on the water when there's a shout from the cliff. The sun is still low in the sky as it eases through the morning, and he doesn't have to squint to peer up at the steep mound of earth on the opposite side of the water. People are always camping up there. Foolish, in Dave's opinion. He doesn't much like the idea of stepping out of his tent to take a leak in the night and plunging into the river instead. But it's popular with the younger generation, the ones eager to get away from prying eyes. You'd have to have real determination to be prying this far out from the road.

It sounds like just a couple today – a man and a woman, their voices loud enough to carry through the trees that are quickly taking on orange hues. It's late in the year to be camping. The river is a spectacle, sweeping the falling leaves further downstream as quick as it can catch them, but there's a distinct chill creeping in and the temperature plummets at night. The forest feels alive most of the year: he can always hear a quiet scuffle nearby of something moving, birds overhead, or the rustle of the treetops themselves. When the leaves have disappeared and the branches have become jagged bones sticking from the earth, it feels wrong.

Dave shakes his head and focuses back on the water. This hadn't been his intended spot to fish at when the alarm went off, but

Len's getting sly at grabbing the spot by the smaller, quieter bend. Not that it will be quiet with him there – Len never quits firing his mouth off, and seeing the back of his truck complete with decades old 'My kid's an honor student' bumper sticker had been enough to have Dave continuing on down the road. He's the kind of neighbor that knows everyone's business, who laments Dave's 'boring' nature for not giving a shit who might be moonshining or cheating on their wife.

Boring is fine by Dave. Nobody's ever accused him of being interesting, and that's the way he likes it. He ticks 'no' to smoking and drinking on medical forms, is consistently early for his job – “if you're not ten minutes early, you're ten minutes late,” his grandfather had said with a voice only decades of smoking can achieve – and his hobbies are fishing and hunting. Whatever can get him into nature, alone.

Now even without Len, he won't escape the noise. The voices get closer, until he can see figures up on the cliff. The arguing is taking on an edge, sharp in the air with the quick inflections of their voices. Something about tent poles, then something about a brother. There's a tug on Dave's line but no reaction as he watches them scuffle. More pushing than punching, but Dave's chest seizes up all the same.

He's not one to believe the psychics or fellows with goatees bending spoons with their minds on television, but in that moment, he knows one of them is going off the cliff. It's as certain as the frost returning in the winter, or Len's shoddily made fence falling apart during a storm. When it happens, it's not the fall that shocks him, or that it's the man that goes over the edge. It's the thick, roiling wave of nausea that spreads through him.

Dave's frozen. He's eight years old again, listening to the yelling, crying, the thump and then the *wailing*. He'd pull the covers over his head even though he never slept that way. The day after, his stepdad would take them all out for breakfast. To this day he can't smell syrup without remembering the strained smiles, the extra layer of concealer beneath his mother's eye. *It won't happen again*, she'd tell Dave when his stepdad disappeared into the gas station for smokes, leaving them in the car with a cracked window, *he's sorry*.

There are plenty of rocks beneath the surface.

The woman hesitates for a moment where Dave thinks she might jump in there after him — his mother would have. Would rather have drowned together than to live apart, in the heat of the moment. Dave's fingers tighten on the reel as he watches, as she stares down into the river.

When he was about twelve or so, he'd stood behind his stepdad on the stairs (Reese, his name was, Dave's lips never could quite form the word 'dad' no matter how his mom pleaded) and the thought had been there: *push him. It will all end if you push him*. His heart had been in his ears, thumping hard enough to feel like a war drum. For a moment at twelve, he tasted what it would be like, before swallowing it down.

A dark head clears the water, and the man's mouthing off, screaming up at the woman and she's screaming back down. Dave is a statue reflected by the water in distorted ripples. He's close to blending in with the river thanks to the dark green of his waders and the low ceiling formed by branches over the riverbank. *You look like one big rubber boot*, Rosie had told him. They've been married for twenty years and she's never worn a lick of concealer.

He stands there for what might be an hour, long after the soaked, near-miss man has dragged himself out of the water and up

the cliff, the continued arguing fading as the couple must head for Wymont Road. Whatever Dave caught has long since wriggled its way off the line and free, but his heart still kicks up a notch as he finally reels the hook back in, packs up his gear with trembling hands.

Reese made it until four days shy of Dave's fifteenth birthday before, with an empty whiskey bottle on the backseat, he flipped the family pickup and put an end to the Waffle House breakfasts for good. They took it in turns by the graveside to gather a mass of dirt, stain their palms with earth sending Reese into the ground. Dave's mother cried hard enough to wash away some of her makeup, leaving streaks of mascara beside the fading blue. Dave couldn't find the tears, then or since. It wasn't grief that sat humming beneath his skin. His mom went through a string of almost-Reeses in the years after the funeral, each one just as fond of the bottle, fast and loose with their arms during arguments, but none with the same sticking power. Dave had long since grown and moved out of the house by the time she stopped recruiting them, hung Reese's photo in the lounge like the patron saint of alcoholism.

He trips on the way back up the embankment and digs his fingernails into the soil. Lugs his fishing box on top of the incline before following it up with his body, fingers coiling around roots to heave himself up. Once he hits the road, his hands grab the steering wheel too tight, fingernails still full of dirt.

He'll stop by the store on the way home. Grab them some chicken. *Fish weren't biting*, he'll say, even though it's too early.

Judge's comment: This story felt terrifyingly real. Like a startling shout from the depths of the woods, "Hook" constantly sparks curiosity, never failing to kick the heartbeat up a notch. Not only did this story's characters' domestic interiors feel thoughtfully examined,

but the author holds nothing back when tackling difficult subject matter, which ranges from substance abuse to the violence of maleness. “Hook” is an important story written by a sharp-eyed writer with long, long reach.

THIRD PLACE

Ethan Tatom

Christian Brothers University

A Brother's Keeper

The shell pressed against Jack's ear whispered in a crashing hum he was told the ocean on the other side of their mountains sounded like. Its white outside curling around a soft pink inside reminded him of the flowers blooming on the edge of the woods. The shell weighed nearly a pound and cost four times as much as the wool he had peeled off his sheep. They would need to be shaved again, soon. For now, though, he could rest under the tree at the edge of his property, eyes shut. The sun baring down on him through the scantily clad tree branches was the same that bore down over the sea, and if he imagined hard enough, the wind brushing past him could be waves climbing over him. The wool tangled in his fingers could be an identical hand, one with an identical heartbeat and a face that would know how to smile.

Grass brushed past boots behind him, ones that thought they were stealthier than they were.

"Bah," announced his neighbor, grabbing his shoulder, "if I were a wolf, you would be dead."

"If you were a wolf," Jack opened an eye, "I would wonder what you were doing in broad daylight. How are you, Mira?"

Mira grinned and nudged the sheep that lay next to him with her foot. Dolla got up on unsteady legs and wobbled away. Mira took

her place next to him. “I’m alright. The kids have been irritating, but that’s to be expected.”

Jack nodded, as if he knew.

“Dolla’s pretty far along,” Mira nodded to the sheep she had nudged away, “Thinking about selling the lamb? I’ll trade you a coat I made from the wool you got me in the winter.”

“What use would I have for a coat in the summer?” Jack smiled and placed the shell in the bag that lay next to him. He stood, gripping his crook to help him up. “Give me your strawberries, and I’ll consider it.”

“Boo, strawberries are harder to keep than your lambs.”

“Dolla’s pretty big. The lamb is probably going to be born quite big. Might even take Dolla out of commission for a while.” He turned to Mira with a raised eyebrow and lowered a hand to help her stand.

She took it and stood with him, “Maybe. Could be a twin, though. I’ll take the twin that survives and give you some bullets for your rifle in case our friend from the woods comes sniffing around your place.”

“If it’s a twin, I’ll leave both of them in the woods for the damn thing.”

“Alright, I’ll give you a crate of strawberries for the lamb,” she held her hand out to shake, “no need to get droopy on me.”

He took her hand and gave it a firm shake. “Shouldn’t have mentioned our ‘friend’ if you didn’t want me in a mood.” He dropped her hand and went to shoo his flock to the confinement where their troughs were. They had grazed long enough and needed something more.

Mira followed him anyway. “Hey Jack, how much did you get your shell for? The traders from the sea are coming to the valley soon, and I was wanting to get something for the oldest.”

Jack paused and turned to her, “Fern is curious about the sea?”

“The kid is curious about anything he reads. We got some books about the sea animals, and he’s been obsessed.”

Jack considered being honest. Mira had been his friend since they were young. He was almost married to her, but managed to convince his own mother otherwise before she made any promises to Mira’s mother. He couldn’t keep her from buying the shell from the merchants if she wanted it. They didn’t have a large collection, but they were affordable enough for someone like her, if she traded wisely.

“The shell cost a pound of wool,” he lied.

Mira whistled, “I can do something like that. Thanks, Jack. You doing dinner alone tonight, or do you want to join me and the kids?”

He considered it for a moment. The kids liked him. They thought he made an excellent tree to climb, and they loved to use his crook to hit each other. Mira’s husband, though. He was a different story. The man was barrel-chested, stronger than Jack on account of his carpentry. He would fix Jack with some incomprehensible look from across the table whenever Jack came for meals with Mira. Jack had thought it was intimidation, but the man never took any actions to suggest the intent of that look. He was perfectly civil in their conversations, in his admonitions, in his congratulations. But his eyes were set firm on his face, and his lips only pulled into a smile were he looking at the children or Mira.

It was unsettling.

“I’ll pass,” Jack leaned on the fence of the confinement where his sheep filed in. “I need to keep an eye on Dolla. She’ll be giving birth any day, now. And she has shown a preference for giving birth at night.”

“Alright. In that case, I’ll leave you with your only real friends,” Mira teased, “I’ll bring you some leftovers if we’ve got any tomorrow. Tell your mom I said hello.”

Jack clasped the gate behind the last sheep as it filed in, “Alright. Be safe on your walk home.”

“I’m sure you already scared away all the wolves back into the woods with your big stick,” she laughed, turning away and beginning the short walk to her home some acres away. “I’ll bring your strawberries tomorrow, too. Just keep in mind what they’re for.”

Jack waved her off. He turned back to his sheep, watching their heads bobbing over each other to reach the trough. His mother used to sit on the porch and watch them while they ate so that Jack could make themselves something for a midday meal.

She was inside now, and he found his fingers aching for the smooth keratin of the singing shell. He pulled it out of his bag with careful reverence and held it against his left ear. He could barely hear the sigh of the sea over the mundane cacophony of bleating sheep. He wondered how much it would cost to join the merchants on their travels.

The stars crept up on him, but he got the sheep in their barn before the sun fell behind the mountains and the darkness curled out from the woods, with the trees casting shadows like arms stretched across the earth, looking for something else to take back into the woods.

He washed his hands in the basin his father had carved many years ago before he went to his mother's room with her bowl.

The door to her room always opened with a creak. He did not oil the hinges, knowing that his mother preferred the groaning of old wood to tell her someone came in.

"Jackie," she cooed from her desk. Stones were scattered across the desk, and she was pressing the smoother ones into a basin of sand, patterns dragged with an intricacy that spoke of years of effort curling in the sand. "I can smell your soup. Are there mushrooms in it? It smells warm."

He sat in the worn chair next to her and placed the bowl next to her. "It is. I traded one of your sand gardens for some mushrooms and ginger."

"Ginger?" she grinned, pulling the bowl to herself, "They must like them quite a bit. Anyone can make them, though."

"Sand costs money to import. And cairns take practice to stack, something not all of us have. Especially with stones as smooth as the ones you use."

"I started when you and the other one were born," she brought the spoon to her lips and sipped without cooling the soup.

"I wish you wouldn't call him that," Jack pulled one of the stones into his hand and rubbed his fingers over the smooth blue surface.

"I can't very well call it anything else," she said, and Jack cringed, "It wasn't a 'him', and you should know better than to call it that."

"You made a cairn for him," Jack said, thinking of the stones stacked deep in the woods, on the edge of the stream they were not meant to cross.

His mother heard him, though she did not answer. She simply continued to enjoy the soup as hot as she could stand it, though he knew that it burned her tongue to the point that it would be difficult for her to even taste the bright, earthy flavors that harmonized within the bowl. He had tasted it himself, earlier. It was salty, and the ginger shone bright. His mother did not comment on the taste.

“I’m going to bed, Mother. Will you be alright to get to your bed, tonight?”

“I know where everything is,” she chided, “and I can see enough that I know where the floor meets the bed. I’ll be alright.”

“Okay,” Jack nodded, more for himself than her, and stood. He left for his room.

His window stayed open in the night. He knew that many in the community believed that it was foolish. *An invitation to our friend in the woods*, they would say. *He’ll come in and take the breath straight out of your children’s lungs*, he heard once. He didn’t have kids, though. He never met the thing in the woods, either. It haunted conversations, spread through whispers and shaken heads. He never saw its hands, though. No, white claws like smoke did not drift through his window during starless nights.

It didn’t need to. Not if the community did what they were told. Wash human blood within an hour of it being shed. Cover broken mirrors. Throw fruit that has rotted past the stream that ran in the forest. Take the twin that cried first and lay it on the other side of the stream. Do not return until the other twin has slept through the night for the first time.

Jack pulled the shell from his bag and lay in his bed. He closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the ridges circling the crown that stretched from the top of the shell. Once it warmed to his touch,

he could imagine the spires were fingers. If he fell asleep like this, he could imagine the fingers curling around his own. They wouldn't be sweaty like Mira's, or grip too tight like her husband's. They would be alive, though. That would be enough.

He was covered in stinking blood and amniotic fluid when the second lamb fell from Dolla. His hand slowed from where he wiped the first lamb's yellow wool clean of fluids. The second lamb cried for its mother. Dolla had twins.

Jack placed the other lamb beside him, and reached for its twin. It flinched and tried to crawl away on bony legs, but he pulled it into his lap with gentle hands. He towed it off, though he knew he shouldn't. It cried before the other had. A knife glinted on the wall of the barn, next to shears, leads, an ear notcher. He could cut its neck here and drop it on the other side of the stream. He could hold it in his arms and take it to the creek alive, leave it like his mother left his own brother. The first wouldn't know to mourn the other when it grew older like he knew how to mourn. He could make good on his empty words to Mira and take both the lambs to let them die together. Dolla lay on her side and watched him with eyes the color of sand, the pupils flat and dark with exhaustion.

"Only one choice left, huh, Dolla?" He let the second lamb out of his arms, and it bleated at its twin.

Jack stood and took off his apron, throwing it onto the table below all the other tools. He took two leads; he wrapped one around the mother, and one around the firstborn. He picked up the second and led them to the lambing jug. He placed the younger one with its mother and sibling. He closed the pin once he left.

He did not stay in the barn to shear the others, as he had intended. He left the barn and went to his porch, where his rifle waited.

The forest was alive at this time of afternoon, and the trees screamed to one another, littered in cicadas. Ants made their orderly marches across the floor, and squirrels scrambled over them. There were stumps from cut trees, in this part of the woods. Berry bearing bushes were cleaned and propagated, and there was a small, man-made trail to follow.

Jack left this trail. He pushed further, past the branches bent backwards, past the plucked berry bushes. He soon found the stream. It bubbled in a small line, over brown and grey stones that sparkled beneath darting fish and lazying leaves that rode the current.

The cairn was here. Old rocks, older than him, stacked for as many years as he had been around. As many years as the soul that screamed first was left on the other side. There weren't any bones on the other side, dragged deeper into the darkness by wolves, foxes, and something else.

He checked once again to find his rifle was loaded. He had four bullets. It would be enough. It needed to be.

He crossed the stream.

It was darker on the other side. The crowns of the trees pressed close against one another in conspiracy, leaving only small patches of light to pass through the leaves that overlapped one another. It was quiet, too. Birds called to each other in voices more hushed, here. Wasp wings buzzed past his ear, but the cicadas did not hold dominion this deep like they did closer to the community.

“Where are you, old friend?” Jack stepped carefully, watching for snakes. “I’m treading your woods. I’ve left a bisected soul in my barn. Or are the livestock not as important as the people?”

Jack dodged the web a spider spun between two young trees. Nothing changed.

“I’ve always found it ironic that the community calls you a friend. I suppose the irony is the point, but it always pissed me off. Not because you are some sort of shadow that haunts us, but because you are barely there.”

He held his rifle in a tighter grip. It was smooth, but heavy in a way that evoked consideration for the heavy power that sat waiting to be born from the eyes of its barrel.

“You’re less than an acquaintance. And even now you don’t answer me. Are you afraid? Of a man?”

Jack knew he was more than a man. He was afraid. He had met many men before, and each were dangerous. There was no man more dangerous than one who was afraid. Fear could give men the power to kill their own children, let alone a beast.

Flies buzzed past Jack’s face. The sweet smell of rot greeted him as the sun that shone even on the sea shone in patches here. He followed the smell of rot.

He expected the fear to leave him when he killed the thing. But when he saw it, the rifle slipped from his fingers.

His old friend was sprawled across the forest floor, rotting. Its tan fur was torn open in browning wounds. Its back legs had been dragged off somewhere, and its eyes were gone, black holes where flies crawled in and flew out.

“A deer,” he said.

Jack picked up his rifle, but he felt that he left something else in the woods when he crossed the stream again. He placed the rifle on the porch. His mother was in the house, making cairns for those who have passed and will never stop passing. Dolla was in the barns, nursing her two lambs.

The sheep did not have hands to mourn with, but Dolla's sandy eyes met his, reflecting beneath the lights hanging from the barn's roof. He left the shell with them.

Judge's comment: With a haunted mood that feels reminiscent of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004) or Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), "A Brother's Keeper" not only feels strikingly cinematic, but its author's compassionate response to the cruel mysteries of life is a most welcome one. It challenges readers to listen more closely and look with more intensity. A story written by a writer who dares to render the invisible visible.

Poetry

FIRST PLACE
Dominic Diamond
Hendrix College

For Essie

With lines from I.S. Jones's "Esperanza"

"I must have misremembered Esperanza to mean wild horse woman."

I look at the grey mane of your head and still
justify a belief this. The way you treat your ringlets
with hope and castor oil. Let them curl towards the sun
like cucumber vines. Close your good left eye. Leave open the
dead
right. Tell me, in the absence of my sight, do you see storm
cloud?

Does your destructed iris flash images of the brindle and her foal?
Does it swirl and brood? Does lightning quicken
for the sound of laughter? The milk-gray remnants of your iris,
are an uncharted sea, and in its reflection, there I am.

*"My grandmother lifts her head & wind bows, shifts her legs & a man's knees
buckle."*

A man only needs one good eye so long as his heart is well
worked, his knees buckled for sex and prayer and his stomach
full.

Essie, always keeping bellies full. And how she does it so
gracefully.

The cooking, the cleaning, maintaining and mothering.

“Essie Mae my morning coffee, my all-day cream,” my
grandfather sings.

How, Essie how you hear his song and don’t melt
in its hugging humidity, I’ll never know. How you keep
Your body wrapped in its floral dress, how you keep the work
clothes washed, how you keep the water out of the house on
Brook Street and feed it to the fig tree as if you are the river itself
is a mystery.

“I could see it: a thousand grandmothers galloping into the dusk.”

When you go, your passing will be migratory.

You will again join the heard of generations

you once kept alive in you. Picture it.

A heard of you, all grandmothers

birthing out sweet black boys and speckled starlings
into the rolling plains of the night.

Leave us your horseshoe, that small, floral slipper
a relic of your wilderness.

Judge’s comment: Poems written to those we love are so special—
and this one in particular demonstrates how undying that kind of
love is. “When you go, your passing will be migratory” speaks so well
to the bonds we build that last much longer than we do. I am full of
admiration for how the poet uses Jones’s lines in a similar
“migratory” way – they have journeyed to a new home in this poem.

SECOND PLACE

Theodore Lopata
University of North Georgia

bacchanal

/'bäkənäl,'bakənäl,'bakənl/

noun | personal

a wild, unsupervised and libertine celebration, often characterized by more than three shots of vodka; revelry

With the style of buttery, fried eggs– breakfast– the horizon tucks
over us.

My head locked into your side, nestled under the censer of oil and
chives.

I'm content to rest here the rest of our lives.

Our eyes repose to the sounds of hangover breakfast, sans-hangover;
saffron diagrams outstretched through the clear glass window to
dance on our clear glass faces
we share honey-gilded kisses; butterscotch embraces.

It's the kind of scene one only crafts when ill (lovesick), a coffee-cup
filled finally with intent.

each of us are held by careful cohesion
to the brim of my bed
to each other.

The world– the real world– to which we will eventually return
rumbles outside. My roommates
make hangover breakfast with actual hangovers,
and the creamy dawn drips over us
leaving light on the top of your cheek.

Judge’s comment: This poem builds a scene where time has come almost to a stop, where two separate worlds co-exist as if they are each the only one. But the inner world, the world of these lovers, is even richer, even wilder in celebration than the one with “actual hangovers” is outside. I was sold with “the horizon tucks over us” and “I’m content to rest here the rest of our lives.”

THIRD PLACE

Hannah Ritter

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Interrogation

inspired by Ted Hughes' "Woodwo"

Where are you? Are you afraid of me? All I see is ground,
everywhere;
do you want me to find you? I think it is too dark, I think I am afraid
of the dark; do you know where we are? I remember a story about a
rat,
trapped for weeks underwater, waiting; is it me? Do you know
my name? What is it? If I am the rat, who is water? Are these my
hands,
cold, cold and dead and purple? I don't know them, but they will not
leave me;
should I hide? I cannot see, there is only dirt and roots, roots, I think
the roots are above me and below me I hear water; I am still cold,
cold and afraid and I do not want to move anymore, but I have to
keep going

Judge's comment: I admire how quickly I found myself attached to this speaker: existentially unsure, blind in this world. More and more self-conscious in this environment, the speaker surprises us by asking, "do you want me to find you?" They do not know their hands, "but they will not leave me." All we have are our questions and our bodies. What a simple way to describe our lives. And we have to keep going.

Creative Nonfiction

FIRST PLACE
Kearra Weiting
Lipscomb University

Play Pretend

Power is a necessity to cultivate strategies and organize in politics. To create lasting political change (or to climb the ladder), make a power map. When building the map, keep in mind: power is about relationships.

05/30/2022

*Inside my Green Hills apartment,
scoping out targets*

I cut my teeth in electoral politics working for Andrew Yang's presidential campaign, convincing perpetually busy people across the United States to support him. I transmuted angry pleas over the receiver into vote and caucus promises, becoming the best phone banker in the South. After my promotion, I stumped for Andrew at events with names like "Cocktails & Candidates". Memorizing the names of Davidson County Democratic Party members in attendance, I made the best impression on Andrew's behalf. After working for a national candidate, I was eager to focus on local politics. It felt strange to live in a state without knowing the comprehensive lay of the land. I was always looking for events to attend, typically among liberals and leftists with whom I share beliefs. My colleagues encouraged me to consider becoming an elected

official one day. And if I was good enough, perhaps I could help people.

In 2022, The Faith and Freedom Coalition held their annual Road to Majority conference in Nashville at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center. I'd never heard of the organization but stumbled upon an article mentioning the confirmed guests by chance. My propensity to spend hours hunched over my hefty laptop fueled my ability to obsessively research anything related to politics. The Road to Majority conference would solely appeal to conservative voters, but I was not deterred. As a matter of fact, I was eager to learn firsthand what such an experience might be like. Many of the attendee's names were notable: Donald Trump, Nikki Haley, Lindsey Graham, and on and on. An orgy of influence accessible to anyone willing to purchase a \$65 ticket.

The attendee's names caught my eye, but I'd been waiting for an opportunity to experience conservative politics firsthand. A Republican supermajority controlled the Tennessee legislature, maintaining a stranglehold for over twenty years. Now, the Tennessee Democrats struggled to regain a balanced set of power-relations. I lived in a state without understanding the political apparatus. I wanted to experience it all, to know truths beyond text.

I read about politics to the point of nausea. The text paled in comparison to lived experiences. Reading the transcript of a Supreme Court hearing is a far cry from being physically present in the room as the justices speak. I attended weekly Tuesday evening meetings held by Nashville's Metropolitan Council. In doing so, I watched council members carry asides to each other from across the room. While drinking in the interactions, relationships between people became exceedingly clear. In person, people-watching provided

insight and entry points. A deeper part of me also subsisted on the thrill obtained after thrusting myself into unfamiliar territory.

Before attending political events, I obsessively pour over pages of Google search results. I study the old photos of past attendees, learning how to dress in advance. Social media posts became a golden visual corpus: every person, business, and event maintain an online presence. In the contemporary era, anyone can learn how to play a role. And I *really* enjoy playing roles well, no matter what situation I find myself in. It was time to perform a new one. Playing pretend imbued politics with exciting shades of fun, keeping disenchantment at bay. After working for Yang, I was eager to avoid burning out again.

I would attend the conference, blend in, and attempt to be treated like everyone else. I wouldn't be afraid to use unconventional methods to gain access and trust. In doing so, perhaps I could gain insight into a political movement I solely read about online. I'd digest the experiences, synthesize them, and the revelations would make their way into my writing. Perhaps someone would read the pieces if I posted them on a blog. No matter what, I would be equipped with knowledge once obscured from my vantage point. I could use the acquired information later. I wasn't sure how or when, yet.

The Faith and Freedom Coalition represents the political advocacy arm of the Republican Party in the United States. The founder, Ralph Reed, called it the 21st century iteration of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition of America. Reed was one of four original CCA directors but resigned once their finances failed. After a career as a lobbyist, a stint as chairman of the Georgia Republican Party, and a failed run to become Georgia's lieutenant governor, he founded the Faith and Freedom Coalition in 2009.

Tea Partiers and Evangelicals flock to the yearly conventions to hear influential voices make promises: Ralph Reed's vision came to fruition.

Scope out a target. Power is not owned by one individual, but some individuals have access to more of it. Single out top tier prospects. Map their connections to other people and resources. Find out who they influence, and who influences them.

06/17/2022

*embarking upon the
first day of Road to Majority*

I woke up at 4 AM after tossing and turning relentlessly. I sleepily scanned my walk-in closet for the perfect outfit and settled on a vintage blue hibiscus print swing dress. Two-inch black slingback kitten heels. 10 denier pantyhose. A blue lanyard featuring a badge with my name, confirming my insider status. I remembered how older conservative men complained about women who didn't wear dresses anymore or whatever. The same men often approached me or stared at me from their ridiculously large pick-up trucks as I walked to the grocery store. MAC's Ruby Woo lipstick became part of my everyday makeup routine, alongside black liner perfectly carved into my lid. I remained committed to wearing heels every day, developing protective calluses on my toes. I loved when people complimented my "perfect Barbie legs" while wearing pantyhose.

I learned that playing into traditional displays of femininity garnered the attention of older affluent men. I knew the outfit would help people trust me even though they'd never seen me before. I was now equipped to blend in.

I arrived at the convention center by 7 AM, and the line was egregiously long. As my eyes burned, I regretted not arriving sooner.

I struck up conversations with various people while we stood in line, grateful for the early morning sun's grace. A woman approached me, almost immediately launching into how much she loved Trump. I smiled welcomingly, maintaining perfect eye contact as she described her brimming excitement. Without hesitation, I provided rapt attention as she described the mobile application she built.

“I found a way to aggregate all the discounts and benefits available to military families. Most of ‘em don’t even know about this stuff!”

“That’s nice of you to do. Did you put it together yourself?”

“I sure did! Paid for it all, too. I don’t get many donations. That’s not the point. I’m expanding it! And I’m trying to get the word out to as many people as I can. So many veterans need help, they don’t know it’s out here.”

The woman procured her iPhone from the back pocket of her jeans. In under a minute, she extended the phone to me. I admired the well-designed user interface, thumbing the endless scroll of discounts for grocery stores, restaurants, clothes, and much more. Her attention to detail was impeccable. She seemed genuinely interested in making people’s lives easier. That idea is what attracted me to electoral politics in the first place. My heart was warmed by her painstaking effort. The conversation helped pass the time, and I eventually managed to find a seat close to the front center of the stage.

Secret Service agents strutted around the room in anticipation of Trump’s arrival. People continued to pour in for what felt like an eternity in my sleep-deprived mind. They carried Trump flags, donned Trump hats, and started “Trump ‘24” chants from time to time. When the man of the hour finally made his entrance, he opened

with an expression of gratitude for his religious advisors in the Southeast. He mentioned a familiar name I hadn't heard in a while.

Plot out relational power lines when building a power map. Do you possess any personal connections with your target? Consider recent interactions, especially if they occur on a consistent basis. Do you know anyone else who might? If you've established enough rapport, get to know them better.

02/08/2020

*On an American Airlines flight
from Milwaukee to Nashville*

Winter in Wisconsin was beautiful in 2020. I used to think summer provided the best weather for visits back home. I could stroll along the sidewalks, arm in arm with my mother as we conquered the boutiques and restaurants on the East Side. I found myself falling in love with the heavy lake-effect snow pumping thick flakes into the humid air. We were nearly snowed in at the start of my stay with my mother in Milwaukee. I was sad to leave. Three years into my mother's colon cancer diagnosis, I often regretted not spending more time with her. Whenever I expressed those thoughts, she urged me to focus on my goals. We spent hours on the phone, and she actively enjoyed every story I told her about my political experiences. She encouraged me to lean into my potential, and I loved making her proud. The reason why I pushed myself in the first place was to impress her. And even in her absence, I planned to do right by my mother. Her dreams for me would come true. Her caring, consistent efforts and love would never go to waste.

On the final day of my trip, we strolled over to Ma Fischer's Cafe and shared burritos. My mother couldn't eat much these days. I

took the latest possible flight back home. The mostly empty plane assuaged me that I'd have a row all to myself.

“Do you mind if I join you here in this row, young lady?”

I'd just placed my headphones in my ears when a short older man with white hair began speaking to me as I sat in the back row of a plane. His ill-fitting tan suit swallowed his arms and legs whole.

“I don't mind at all.” I preferred to be alone, but I couldn't envision the man deciding to speak with me much. Perhaps a bit of small talk, which I could navigate for a short period of time without escaping into MP3s. I kept my headphones in my lap, providing an easy out for myself just in case. My headphones always helped me convey my desire to be left alone whenever I ran out of steam to be personable.

My cat Eris rested inside her roomy carrier on the middle seat. She always traveled with me on trips, whether by car or plane. We were on our way back home to Nashville after a brief stay with my mother in Wisconsin. I was almost certain I'd have the entire row to myself, but I didn't mind sharing. The man stared at me after sitting down. I focused my vision on the light blue seat ahead of me as he ceaselessly sized me up. He poked for every little inane detail as he engaged me. I answered his questions, but never returned them. The man seemed more interested in learning about me than having a real dialogue, anyways.

“Would you move the carrier down so I could get closer to you?”

I placed the carrier on the carpet without thinking. I didn't like being disagreeable to men. I knew his demeanor might shift if I said no anyways, or he'd find a way to convince me. Besides, Eris had plenty of room to fit below. He moved to the middle seat and gathered himself for a moment before leaning into my right ear.

“You’re quite striking, you know.”

I swallowed hard as his breath danced around my earlobe. My heartbeat picked up, the pulse intensifying across my chest before reverberating through my torso and limbs. The ripples of tense energy gripped me. I’d heard compliments like these before, but it could be difficult to predict how his words might steer the conversation. He was officially in control, and I was his sole captive audience member.

“We could never be alone in a room without my wife.”

I was surprised and taken aback by his ability to conceal critical details about his life so well until now. I wondered why he assumed anything would happen between us, as he didn’t seem attractive to me at all. The desire to set the record straight welled up within me, but it was soaked in futility. I wasn’t entirely sure how well he would respond to reason. I allowed his monologue to continue without interruption.

“My name is Pastor Dale. I’m known as the wicked liquor preacher. I don’t like alcohol, and I don’t like television either. It’ll send you to hell quicker.”

Pastor Dale’s East Tennessee brogue allured me. I felt compelled to keep listening, even though I could scarcely take him seriously. I’d never heard anyone decry the evils of television unironically in public before. His novel disposition kept me hooked. I wasn’t certain I’d never meet somebody like him again.

“I am not bound to any religion, but I find all belief systems fascinating.”

That was enough to convince Pastor Dale that I embraced a dangerous lifestyle. He procured his email address to stay in touch. Despite Pastor Dale’s strange and unsettling nature, I wasn’t afraid of him. After working for Andrew Yang, I’d grown desensitized to

strange and unsettling men in political spaces. In general, I was accustomed to receiving attention from men. And we would never meet again, anyways.

He sent videos of the people he claimed to save. He claimed he could find me a husband. As the content of his emails grew more fantastical, I began to doubt some of his claims. How could he have been responsible for saving so many people? Googling the man returned unsavory results, many of which inspired fear. Pastor Dale's name peppered local news headlines, sometimes capturing national attention for his "wicked liquor" protests from time to time. Local news stations across the state covered his antics consistently over the years. Pastor Dale never lost his zealous passion for proselytizing. In his sermons, he raised his voice without flinching, booming and slowly enunciating each word. He stared, with an unflinching intensity, into the lens of his phone camera as he recorded Facebook sermons for his loyal followers. The fire and brimstone dripped off his voice like molten lava. He never seemed nervous or encumbered. The positive comments and likes online fed his ego. His congregation, though in a small town, continued to expand. He forged a relationship with prominent controversial Tennessee Pastor Greg Locke. Pastor Greg made a name for himself burning "evil" books. Together, they occasionally met and preached under tents in small towns across Middle and East Tennessee.

After I created a clearer picture for myself, I eventually stopped replying. I wasn't quite ready to play with fire, and I wasn't entirely sure who I was dealing with.

When building a power map, make careful judgments. You might accidentally ignore individuals with access to significant amounts of power. These individuals

may not initially appear as powerful as they are. Omitting them creates gaps in mapping power and influence.

06/17/2022

*On Delta Island at the
Gaylord Opryland Convention Center*

I wondered if I would run into Pastor Dale after hearing Trump say his name. After two hours of struggling to keep my eyes open, we broke for lunch. A maze of restaurants led me to tempting slices of pepperoni pizza. Standing in line, I felt a large hand grab my forearm before looking up. I recognized the face before me.

“Pastor Dale?!”

I feigned surprise to the best of my ability. I felt like I manifested the encounter, but I couldn’t figure out how to explain to Pastor Dale that I wondered if I’d see him. It seemed to unfold perfectly—perhaps too perfectly. He’d probably assume I was a witch, and I couldn’t risk planting any seeds of doubt before officially reuniting with him. The truth is, I’d gotten kind of good at being in the right place at the right time (sometimes).

Pastor Dale was flanked by a tiny woman in a long black dress and a bald oblong man in the garb of a reverend. I’d never seen either of these people before.

“If you’ll eat with us, I’ll pay for your lunch too. We can share a pizza.”

Pastor Dale introduced me to his wife Cindy and his close friend. He bragged about his connection to Trump, his October invitation to Mar-a-Lago, and his close relationship with Governor Bill Lee. He bemoaned the weak men in the pulpits. He was president of the Tennessee Pastors Network, and he was going to strong-arm his rank and file into becoming lions. The state legislature

seemed ineffective, but he was working on that too. He was standing in the gap for truth. He leaned over to speak into my right ear.

“I still can’t believe how striking you are. Never seen a girl who looks like you before. Could never forget it. Real nice seeing your face again.”

Nobody at the table uttered a word. Cindy kept her eyes down. Goosebumps devoured my flesh. We all pretended not to hear. I couldn’t forget Pastor Dale’s face, either.

“Are you saved now?” Pastor Dale was still concerned about the fate of my soul.

“I am, Pastor Dale! I’m attending Lipscomb in the fall.”

There was a partial truth to my utterance. After studying the Book of Lamentations over summer break, I began embracing Christianity. I chose the private university founded by a Christian Anarchist on purpose. I wanted to explore my faith in an academic setting. But I wasn’t officially saved.

“I hear that’s a great school. I’m real proud of you. Would you say that I had something to do with saving you?”

“Oh, Pastor Dale. After our conversation on that plane, I followed you on Facebook and started listening to your sermons. I sought out the kernels of truth in your words. You did save me.” I bent the handle of the truth spoon. Without forethought, the urge to carve out half-truths came to me naturally.

It didn’t feel bad, either. And there was some truth here, as well. I listened to Pastor Dale’s sermons, but I wasn’t sure where the truth lingered within his words. His speeches were thunderous, sometimes frightening. He loved to raise his voice, carrying the last syllables of a word with his voice like a vocal run until he ran out of breath.

Pastor Dale began to smile. Cindy applauded. She seemed genuinely happy for me.

“We’ll have to get your testimony on camera at some point. People should hear your story.”

It’s easy to diminish a person’s status when your information is rooted in assumptions. To avoid omitting important individuals, pay close attention to them. Consider their environment. Pay close attention to who they interact with. Note what others say about them: friends and enemies alike. Keep an eye on their behavior.

06/18/2022

*In the Magnolia Section of the
Gaylord Opryland Convention Center*

Cindy was too sick to attend the final day of the convention, so Pastor Dale invited me to attend a dinner in her place that evening where Mike Pompeo would be awarded the Ronald Reagan Defender of Freedom Award. Before the dinner, we attended panels. As we sat together and listened to the founders of the Babylon Bee, Pastor Dale mentioned the hotel room that he’d been given for free.

“I can’t believe they gave me something like that. You know, I’m just a hillbilly preacher. That sure was nice of ‘em, wasn’t it? I haven’t even seen the inside yet!”

Pastor Dale preferred to drive with Cindy all the way from Sparta to Nashville on each day of the convention. It seemed strange to me that he troubled himself instead of making their lives easier. I wondered if Pastor Dale preferred to self-inflict suffering to make a point sometimes. Maybe it made him feel humbler, or relatable.

“Oh Pastor Dale, you underestimate how inspirational and influential you are.” I smiled as I gazed into his eyes. He blushed.

I couldn't believe that I'd embedded myself so firmly amongst the conference attendees without so much as a flick of the wrist. Being in proximity to Pastor Dale invited people to approach me more. He seemed to love the attention. I wondered how they could believe I belonged there so easily. I began to wonder how many other people might be pretending just like me.

Pastor Dale introduced me to a Pentecostal pastor from Atlanta. Pastor Paulina invited us to speak in tongues in the middle of a crowded hall. She believed that invoking the Holy Spirit would save me even more. She demonstrated first. My tongue curled and wobbled around as I imbibed and imitated her glossolalia. People watched and smiled. I felt humiliated, but I craved credibility. The crazier I acted, the more legitimate I became to the onlookers. They seemed prouder with every extension of ecstatic fervor.

"Don't overthink it! Stop getting in your own way! Let the Holy Spirit speak through your heart!" Pastor Paulina implored me to merge with her tradition. She encouraged the refinement of my babbling. I found a rhythm somehow. She deftly conducted my solo with an unyielding grace.

"Praise Jesus, oh, yes God. We need you God; we only know our strength through you. Praise the Almighty!" Pastor Dale moaned without reluctance. We faced each other in a circle as the onlookers continued to gather. They basked in our spectacle. Pastor Dale refused to join our duet. He didn't have to prove himself. Casting his eyes down to the perfectly maintained floor, his reflection momentarily casted in the shiny reflection. He lifted his head back up, meeting my eyes.

"I'm a Free Will Baptist. We don't speak in tongues."

After the embarrassing initiation ritual, Pastor Dale pulled me aside to a quieter section of the hallway. He grabbed me by the forearm, as he tended to do.

“Do you need any money?” His delivery was blunt.

He pulled out a wad of cash and stuffed it into my left hand.

“I don’t need this, Pastor Dale.”

“I don’t mind. I want to help take care of you. Take my number down. We’ll stay in touch better after tonight. You can come stay with me and Cindy in Sparta. I’ve been building a barn-dominium, and it’s nearly finished. Maybe you can come with me to Mar-a-Lago, too. West Palm Beach is beautiful in October. Have you ever been?”

Florida began calling out to me after my mother passed away. My mother was born and raised among swamps, orange groves, and vipers in a small Central Florida town. Growing up, she regaled my little brother and I with bewildering stories about her childhood. I could easily imagine the farm she grew up on and the way in which my great aunts would tell her to pick out a pig for breakfast in the morning. South Florida, in terms of distance and culture, was a far cry from the midsection of the state. But any entry point felt appealing to me, and I wondered if I might soon be able to get my feet wet in the autumnal waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Judge’s comment: Every creative writing student has heard the dictum “write what you know,” but it is only the courageous student-writer that seeks out knowledge itself rather than falling back onto the shifting matrix of his/her/their personal identity. This slippery political thriller looks outward rather than inward. The author’s relentless pursuit of experience reveals how easily an outsider might gain access to the glitzy subterranean world of conservative politics.

To “Play Pretend,” to put on masks, to cozy up to despicable men, is to flirt with unknowable consequences. Those named in the manuscript may retaliate in any number of ways, and it feels dangerous to read, let alone write. Wearing MAC’s Ruby Woo on her lips and high heels on her feet, the author finds she is “[e]quipped to blend in” and stalks on “Barbie legs” into the widening rabbit hole of queasy hotel room talk, wads of cash in sweaty hands, and tongue twisting glossolalia. “The crazier I acted,” she writes, “the more legitimate I became,” and at the periphery there vibrates a foreboding awareness that these others are not pretending. The conclusion feels like a caesura, and I am eager to find out what happens next, both in this story, and in this writer’s career.

SECOND PLACE

Clara Turnage

University of Mississippi

The Lucky Ones

My family called me the lucky child when I was growing up. I wrapped the umbilical cord around my neck and nearly died at birth, was hit by a speeding sedan, trampled by cows, kicked in the chest by a horse and falsely diagnosed with cancer – all before the age of 15.

It's odd how lucky and unlucky are often the same.

The day after a stranger died, I woke up late. It'd been hard to sleep the night before, and I'd tossed and turned in the little bed that my husband, Jesse, and I shared. In my dreams I heard the windshield crack again and again, saw the spider web of shattered glass and the dark shape of his body inches from mine. Jesse had laid with me until I slept, but stayed awake for some hours after. He was trying not to remember. I was trying not to forget.

When I was a crime reporter, I trained myself to gather details of scenes, to seek them out and hold them in my mind to scribble later in my notebook. I would include little things in my articles – the kind of flowers that bloomed behind a dead woman's home, the clutter on a front porch, the positions of bodies hidden under white tarps on the side of the road. These details always mattered not because they would solve a case, but because they showed who a person was when they lived, showed that the dead were human, too. So, when a crime played out before me, I knew

what to do. I memorized the way the dead man's sneaker was laying on I-55 North in Memphis. His black, off-brand sunglasses – one lens missing – sat upside down on the yellow line on the roadside. I noted the signs, the unblemished cell phone thrown three yards from his vacant, splayed fingers. I memorized the face framed in auburn hair and a wiry beard, the lifeless eyes staring up at the bright blue sky.

When I got home after the accident, and for days after, I wrote. Not because I had a story to turn in to my editor – I was not a crime reporter anymore – but because it was the only thing I knew to do. Where else could I store all the little facts I had gathered in my chest? I cataloged every detail I could remember about that day, trying to piece together how and why this had happened. Who was the perpetrator? Who was the victim? Who would I be in someone else's story?

I knew when I saw the man lying on the pavement that he was dead. I knew it in the stillness of his yellow-vested chest. He looked so perfect, like he could wake up at any moment and walk away unscathed, as we were unscathed. The open cavity of his skull was on the ground, out of view. The only hint of his injury was the pool of black-red that leaked beneath his sun-bleached hair.

I never cried at crime scenes when I was a reporter – not when the death was gruesome, or when it was a child who was killed. I numbed myself in the constraints of my job and, when I needed to, cried after.

I had nothing to hide behind on that day, no wall of professionalism to pull over myself like a girl with her blanket. I wept like a child.

When one of the police officers handed me a witness statement form, I was relieved to finally have something to do with

my hands, to be useful, to be able to organize my thoughts in a medium I knew.

On Sept. 30, at approximately 12:43 p.m., my husband, Jesse, and I were traveling northbound on I-55 headed to a wedding in Little Rock, Arkansas. Jesse (driver) had put on his blinker in preparation for the turn ahead onto Interstate 240 west. We were traveling approximately 60 miles-per-hour, but slowing because our turn was approaching.

I didn't say that I had been in the driver's seat until about six miles before the accident, or that I asked Jesse to drive for me so that I could reply to a handful of emails. I didn't say that we'd stopped for gas before leaving Oxford, or that I'd insisted on leaving early so I could shower at our hotel before the rehearsal dinner. I didn't write these things, but I thought them. If I had driven through Memphis before responding to the emails, if I had filled up the car the night before like I'd promised Jesse I would, would the corpse before me breathe?

"What?" Jesse had asked seconds before the windshield exploded. His voice was soft, surprised. I looked up from answering emails and saw the blur of a man before us. Jesse swerved.

That moment is the only time I saw him alive – less than a second. There was a large, black SUV ahead of us, so we'd never seen him enter the roadway, despite the vibrant, violent yellow vest he wore. He never saw us coming, either.

Glass shattered across the windshield in front of me, spider-webbing across the passenger side, showering us in fragments that stuck to my clothes, my hair. For a moment, the man and I were only inches apart, separated by nothing but breaking glass.

When our car came to a rest, I wrenched my door open and noticed that it resisted. Something large had caved it in, but I pushed

harder and it broke free. A smattering of blood fell from the door frame and dripped down my fingers.

“There was nothing ya’ll could’ve done,” said a man who stopped his car just ahead of us. He saw the accident, though he didn’t stick around to tell the police what he’d seen. He closed the door of his small, red sedan and drove away.

I dialed 911 before I saw him. It was the end of noon on a Friday in Memphis; the street was full of cars zipping about their day. Maybe they were trying to get back to work before their lunch break ended. Maybe their weekend was starting early and they just wanted to get home. Maybe the dead man had a family waiting for him while he lay empty on the interstate as the living passed him by.

“The cars won’t stop,” I told the 911 operator, crying. “I don’t know why they won’t stop.”

An 18-wheeler ran over the dead man’s shoe, crumpling the gray and white sneaker beneath its weight.

Manslaughter, the journalist inside me whispered, pulling the words from articles I had written and forgotten. *Vehicular manslaughter*.

I heard a man yell and saw a foreman run across the traffic to stand between the dead man and the oncoming cars. He checked for a pulse, hands darting over the body as if to do chest compressions, but froze. There was nothing he could do.

When police officers blocked off the lanes, stymying the flood of traffic and onlookers, the foreman told me what happened. The man – whose name I know but will not say – had “missed the hole.” They were doing a routine bridge inspection, and the man had needed to cross the road. When roadworkers cross major highways, they look for “holes” in traffic and sprint across. He had time when he began crossing, the foreman said, but he’d dropped his cell phone.

He turned back to pick it up. The cars were coming faster than he'd realized. He missed the hole.

Manslaughter, the journalist said. *Vehicular manslaughter*.

We sat on the side of the highway for more than four hours while we waited for the state police – who had taken over the investigation – to arrive. The day was beautiful and mild; the wind blew across the highway and the grass was green and lush beneath the feet of reporters who had set up cameras on tripods behind us. His body lay on the asphalt in the sun, his unmarked face and palms facing up at the blue sky.

Just before 5 p.m., they removed the corpse, wrapping him in a white cloth that bloomed red flowers where it touched his scalp.

Jesse saw the blood on my hand as we waited on the roadside. Two flecks of blackish red no bigger than pencil marks had dried between my thumb and pointing finger. He reached to wipe it off, but I shook my head.

“Why?” he asked and reached for my hand again. I pulled away from him.

“I don't know,” I lied. The journalist's words echoed in my mind.

Scrubbing it away wouldn't make me any less stained.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation's public relations department had put out a press release on social media by the time we got home that night. It didn't list the dead man's name, but I found it anyway.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” said a thousand posts on the widow's Facebook page. I found photos of the dead man, of his sons, of him at baseball practices and hunting. I read memorial posts about how kind of a man he was, how great a father, how great a

Christian. I found his church, read the messages of mourning. I watched the live stream of TDOT officers escorting his body to the graveyard days later. I watched every news report, read every article I could find. There's video of me crying on the interstate on Action 5 News, video of Jesse speaking with a police officer on Channel 13. I don't blame them. They were doing their job – as I had done mine – and they, at least, made no judgments.

I read countless comments about how a negligent driver led to his death, how no one respected transportation workers. How we should be in jail. They speculated that we were texting and driving. They imagined we had been speeding in a work zone. They didn't know there were no cones, no signs, nothing to tell us there was a bridge inspection happening. They didn't know we had been approaching a turn, going slower than the speed limit. They didn't know anything about us, but hated us all the same.

And who could blame them? The police report found us not at fault. The insurance investigation found us not at fault. But if I had done one thing differently – any one thing – his sons would still have a father. If even one choice had been different, she would still have her husband. I'm not at fault, but it is my fault.

Everyone tells me to move on, but how could I? How dare I forget? I see him in the replaced windshield every time I drive to work, in every flash of neon on the road. I think of her every time I see a family, every time I see two little boys playing on the field where I walk my dog. I hear the windshield crack over and over in my dreams and it's not always his face on the other side – sometimes it's Jesse's. Sometimes it's mine.

I wrote a letter to the widow that I know I'll never send. I tell her I'm sorry. I say it over and over and it still sticks to my tongue, like "I'm sorry" will never be enough. My therapist asked me why I

won't send it to her, said it could bring some closure to the wound we share. The truth is, she deserves someone to blame, someone to hate. That's the role I play in someone else's story, and I won't take that from her, too.

At the scene of the accident, one of the officers said if Jesse had swerved any farther, we may have toppled over the bridge and into Interstate 240, 15 feet and 8 inches below. If the fall hadn't killed us, the oncoming cars would.

"You're lucky to be alive," the officer said.

It's odd how lucky and unlucky are often the same.

Judge's comment: A paradox permeates this recounting of an accident: those whose "good luck" bears comment must often have escaped "bad luck." The author, a former crime reporter, finds herself a character in a story she might have reported. Words from her past life reverberate from the asphalt. But this is no hard-boiled noir; the author's detective work revolves not around "what happened," or "whodunit," but around what this happening means. Her lyrical meta-commentary turns the story into a set of nested dolls. Just as she used to massage details into her descriptions of crime scenes to show "the dead were human, too," so her tactile specificity in recounting the accident and its aftermath puts the reader in the writer's shoes. "How human," I thought as she tic-listed the micro-decisions that might have changed the future. We have all looked backwards and wondered what we might have done differently, but not all of us go to the page to work it out in writing. The real triumph of this piece is the author's attempt to articulate the painful struggle—and perhaps the impossibility—of moral classification itself.

THIRD PLACE

Luis Arteaga

Christian Brothers University

Colors Across Borders: A Portrait of Carlos Valverde

Cantinflas

The terracotta houses spread across the Mexican landscape like mandarins on a tree. A little boy made his way through the roots of the town, his shoes kicking up the earth beneath him. When he arrived at his abuelita's house, she embraced him into her arms.

“Holaaaa Carlos, mi muchachito.” She gave him a big kiss on the forehead before he darted to the living room. He slid down in front of their CRT TV, but instead of movies, he found that his grandma had left it on the Telenovela Channel. He could not understand the allure of people kissing so he flipped to the movie channel. He was just in time to catch the beginning of a Cantinflas¹ film. In this particular movie, Cantinflas found himself entangled in an arranged wedding with his boss's daughter, mistakenly labeled as a money grabber by the wedding attendees. One of the boss's workers engaged Cantinflas in a *copla*² and off they went strumming on a guitar. Carlos' grandmother, hearing the commotion, couldn't resist stepping out from the kitchen to watch for a while.

¹ The Charlie Chaplin of Mexico.

² A poetic duel of song between two people where they cleverly insult one another.

The worker sang, “I’ve had the joy of fighting and responding with my valor / for I’m a man of honor and have never sold my soul.”

Cantinflas snatched the guitar and countered, “If you’ve never sold yourself, I’ll never really figure out / It might be for your bad looks or it might be cause you smell / and since I don’t really like you I’ll be going on for real / I’ll give you all my strength and Imma give it to you now”

Cantinflas then shattered the guitar on the worker’s head leaving Carlos in a fit of giggles. His grandmother returned to the kitchen to prep the ingredients so they could make their handmade tortillas together.

Mexican: Native: American

With one foot in and the other out, trekking into the United States is a hard dream many follow, some too young to understand. Carlos trailed behind his parents. Their feet left imprints on the sandy dirt and his shoes were still too small to fill their footprints.

“Carlos, stay close,” his mother urged as he dragged his boots through the dirty sand. The sun browned his clothes and beat on his neck as he marched step by step into new land. All he had were questions. If they moved to the US, would he ever come back? To his life? To his friends? To his grandmother?

The sun dipped below the US-Mexican border as they reached the final hurdle, the mighty Rio Grande. The sluggish current moved the muddy water down to the Gulf of Mexico, slow enough to cross but too deep to walk.

“I can’t swim,” his mother whispered.

Carlos turned his head towards her.

“I CAN’T SWIM,” his mother let out in a panic.

Before despair sank, Carlos already descended down the river bed. Even a river this mighty gets contaminated with pollutants—plastic bottles, discarded shoes, a buoyant, bald tire. It probably floated downstream after someone dumped it. He rolled it back to where his family was and cast it into the water. They hoisted his mother on top of the tire and began swimming across the river.

They were not alone in the open emptiness of the border. Hidden in plain sight were the native wildlife such as prairie dogs, birds, and bobcats, all fighting for their piece of land. In the distance, a coyote trotted along the horizon towards the United States, its disheveled desert coat reflecting the sun. Perhaps it was going home or perhaps it was Xolotl³ leading them to their new life.

Wisdom Crows

In Petrified Forest National Park, fossilized trees sprawled fallen and kaleidoscoped across the white Arizona sand. The horizon was decorated with stone valleys, brush stroked in red, white, and black like a Native American War Bonnet. Some of those stones carried the scars of humans. Primitive carvings of symbols, people, and animals, all told a story of the past.

Carlos hiked through the park, strong boots kicking away the rocks under him. The sun warmed his brown skin and sweat beads dripped from his forehead to his jaw. He kept pace on the trail, not stopping to wipe the sweat. Just the rhythmic inhale of his lungs and his steady, beating heart. In the US, he needed to be strong. Only one more year until he was 20. Yet he was still unable to get conventional employment. Unable to get social services. Unable to go back home.

³ Xolotl was considered a guide of souls to the underworld in Aztec mythology.

As he stopped to take a swig of his water, he became aware of the scenery around him. He noticed a crow perched on a rock, tilting its head toward him, watching. Recalling the wisdom attributed to crows in Native American culture, Carlos refrained from approaching the creature, continuing his workout. The crow followed some distance behind him. Soon another crow joined the trail. Then another. Soon the crows circled far above him moving towards one direction, East.

The Roving Artist

In old Mexico, arrieros⁴ moved goods. In old America, cowboys moved cattle. In 2018 America, Carlos took up the art of painting and moved from New Mexico to Memphis.

Carlos started painting what he knew. Enter the British hell-raiser. A real rock-and-roller. Lemmy. Through the bombastic drums and the distortion guitars, Lemmy was Carlos' first real introduction to the English language. He ironically sported a leather jacket with thick button chops exuding the presence of a man's man. Against a fire-red gradient, Lemmy took center stage in the painting, donning a black skull hat and a sleeveless vest. He wore sunglasses and kept his hands in his pocket, probably to hide the fact he was hungover but it was nothing a touch of coke couldn't fix. Next Carlos went for a fire-orange gradient as the undertone and background. The foreground was a crow. It had a shiny black ink body with a royal blue to serve as the highlights of the darkness. A memory from Arizona. Finally, he continued with a folk art style. A native woman. She was wrapped in a black poncho adorned with earth-tone strips. She looked into the

⁴ Arriero's used mules, donkeys, or other pack animals to transport goods such as food, supplies, or merchandise across difficult and often mountainous terrain in Latin America.

distance over her shoulder, hugging herself, hopeful that her children would not experience the same violence that native women continue to face.

With the passing of DACA, Carlos got some privileges to his name. Deportation protection. Work authorization. A driver's license. Armed with rights and courage, Carlos embarked on a mission to showcase his artistic prowess.

From New Mexico to Memphis.

To Selling and Showing.

Talking to Artists and Patrons.

Showcasing Mexican: American.

Downtown Memphis

Man-made ravines and buildings of steel and stone carved the landscape with underpasses through bridges and the sound of cars passing overhead. The buildings were in a state of construction or destruction. It may have once been an area of business and commerce but now artists feverishly worked in the underbelly of the buildings towards one goal. Every year, artists from all over the USA gather under the banner "Paint Memphis". Their mission was to cover the downtown area with murals of their choosing. Personally, I walked through the concrete ravine in search of a man.

"Hey, have you seen Juan?" The group of artists looked at each other slowly without saying anything. Perhaps I could've introduced myself better. They said no and I made my way to the next group I saw. The artists were spread across the ravine like

checkpoints. They all sported various outfits from baggy pants and spray cans to professional-grade respirators and sprays. Each group I approached gave me the same response. No one knew Juan. I double-checked the event flyer, Juan Valverde.

I walked to the very end of the ravine where I met the final group of artists. This time I tried Juan's last name.

"Dude, I swear Valverde is Carlos's last name. I don't know anyone by the name of Juan here, though."

"Dude, but like, you think he's talking about Carlos or Carlos Carlos?"

"I don't know. I think it's the first one. Either way he's late. I'm going to give him a call".

I hung tight and after 10 minutes of waiting, I met Carlos Valverde. From our back-and-forth emails, he was about what I expected. Short. Concise. Serious. He stood at about 5'7" with a stocky build. He wore his baseball cap backward and the wrinkles on his face went down like a permanent frown. A bulldog.

I started, "Hey man, I hope I didn't rush you. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to meet with me."

"Yeah," he responds.

I waited for more, but nothing came. It also seemed like he was waiting for me to do something. Feeling a bit awkward, I invited him to pick the interview spot. so we could get started. First, he asked, "What are the questions so I have some time to think?".

"Well, a question I see people get asked a lot is if you could talk to yourself 10 years younger, what advice would you give him".

He quickly remarked, "Not date that girl for 8 years."

His dry humor broke through the serious demeanor. After a little laugh, we started the interview. To every question I asked, he responded slowly yet firmly. No stops or stutters, never missing a

beat. He was the most articulate person I ever met. Or at least that's how it felt like.

I ask, "Dude I'm like really impressed with how you talk. You're super articulate."

"When I was younger, my mother emphasized being as clear-spoken as I could be. Those who don't ask, don't get. Also, I did most of my growing here in the United States, and I needed to improve my broken English."

I continued, "The next question, they say there's a bit of every artist in their work and I see you paint Aztec gods and social injustice but I also see you draw things like Elvis and Cantinflas. Where are you in your art?"

"First, I want to showcase my heritage which is one of the most important things for me. Being an immigrant, I got to the United States when I was 11. So I really had no idea about my own heritage, which is something I had to find out through time, growing up, and being around older people who spoke my language. For me, portraying every bit of my culture is representing not only me, but the people behind me: my parents, the people who live in Memphis who can't voice their opinions. I want to bring that into Memphis as a painting. On walls, I paint Elvis and Lemmy because I like the music and grew up listening to it, but I also make Cantinflas. I painted it because my grandma passed away and I wasn't able to see her. We would see him when I was little and watch Cantinflas movies and that for me was closing the cycle on my upbringing and wanting to celebrate my heritage. It's a very personal thing I do."

Before the interview concluded, I let him speak his mind.

"You told me you were undocumented and there's a lot of people like us. There are kids in colleges and schools, but some have to work on farms or other places to help sustain their household. I

know that being in this country is really hard. I know that it gets really tough, and I know that there's a lot of tears involved, but you get it. We are a culture that stands out. Keep on connecting with other people who are like you, think like you, do right by you, and help you grow. Life is about decisions and making the right ones, because if you make the wrong decisions, you'll go down a path that is not enlightening."

At the end of the interview, Carlos was still just as serious as when we started except he felt a little warmer. He gave me his contact information along with the info of some people he knew if I ever needed help connecting with artisans. I gave him my thanks and wished him luck on his mural, recognizing it would be a piece of him.

Judge's comment: This "Portrait of Carlos Valverde"—a speculative biography packed with imagined concrete detail—stretches the boundaries of what we might class "nonfiction." The author takes the photograph of the final section—the interview—and overpaints it with desert colors, with childhood scenes, with migrations across borders both physical and artistic. It can be read as an allegory of biography itself—or any "nonfiction" for that matter, which is not, this author proves, a genre devoid of imagination, but an imposed restraint that writers must push up against in order to define. We all "hand-color" our nonfiction "photographs," but this author calls attention to the process itself by means of formal manipulation, which make the colors shine all the brighter in the borderland.

One-Act Play

FIRST PLACE
Cameron Ireland
Christian Brothers University

Beasts in the Making
A One-Act Play

Cast of Characters

Dean:	The son
Polly:	The mother
John:	The father
Leanne:	The clever one

Setting

The family lives together in a modest home on the western border of South Carolina. The year is 2016.

The stage contains one large room divided into two: a living room and a kitchen. The living room contains a sturdy sofa and a mismatching recliner, both aimed at a flatscreen television, as well as a rocking chair. In the corner stands a bookshelf filled with self-help and financial advice books. The walls display photos of the parents with their child, as well as POLLY with her sister LEANNE. A

wooden door sits in the far wall, with a window out to the front yard. Another doorway indicates a hallway stretching off-stage. A wall perpendicular to the audience separates this room from the kitchen, with a door to connect them. The kitchen has linoleum flooring and a bar extending from the counter. The room is decorated with a farmhouse style, and all of the dishes are clean and put away.

Scene One

(The curtain lifts on DEAN sitting at the kitchen bar. He writes in a spiral notebook and hums to himself. Appearing to be in his early twenties, he wears a light jacket and jeans. On his upper face is a mask bearing resemblance to a cicada, with rotund eyes like knobby growths on his forehead.)

POLLY (Enters through the front door. She is just home from work, wearing a business coat and slacks. On her face is a mask bearing the visage of an ox, with protruding horns. She carries a large purse but sets it on a table in the living room and advances to the kitchen. She gives DEAN a quick hug.)

Good evening, dear. Still working on your assignment?

DEAN Hey, mom. No, this is more of a personal project, actually.

POLLY (Opens the refrigerator and pulls out a container of leftover birthday cake. She places it on the counter, making the candles that display “45” visible.)

POLLY Would you like a slice? I’ve been thinking about this for hours.

DEAN No, thank you. You’re home sooner than I expected, come to think of it.

POLLY (Has already cut a slice for herself, savoring the texture.)

I was supposed to work overtime tonight, but the computers were out all afternoon. Our IT guy said he would have to make some calls when I talked to him, so I said, “Screw it” and came home.

DEAN I’ve told you before that you ought to take more time off.

POLLY If I left for longer than twelve hours, the whole building would crumble to dust.

DEAN Alright, but you’re the boss now. Don’t you decide the hours?

POLLY (Putting the cake back in the fridge.)

Like I’ve told you before, that’s not how being the boss works. If we don’t work, we don’t make money, and I can’t afford to pay my employees. Then I’ll be telling you to come work afternoons and paying you in experience.

DEAN (Frowns at the proposition.)
I don’t enjoy the work like you do.

POLLY (Defensively, with her arms crossed.)

I don’t enjoy the work much at all. I enjoy being able to pay the bills and feed my family.

DEAN And a good cake.

POLLY Well, who doesn’t?

DEAN (Flipping a few pages backwards in his notebook.)
Hey, do you have a minute to listen to this new piece I wrote?

POLLY Hold that thought until John gets home, dear. We'll talk about it in the den.

POLLY (Returns to the living room, looking through her purse for her cell phone. At this time, LEANNE appears gracefully from the connected hallway. She is adorned with a green sweater and a mask resembling the face of a tortoise with pale and leathery skin. She is uniquely composed and mellow.)

LEANNE Hello, sister.

POLLY Leanne, so nice to see you outside of the guest room.

LEANNE I often leave my room. How else would I make use of the restroom or obtain my supper?

POLLY (With thinly-veiled sarcasm.)

Yes, of course. While it is such a joy to observe you float by like a leaf in a stream, I do wish we spent more time chatting like we used to. You are more than welcome to sit and eat with us.

LEANNE I will if it pleases you, sister. I simply found myself quite fond of enjoying my suppers in my own den of quiet comfort. The chaotic lights of the television cause me some unease.

POLLY Then we'll eat with it off tonight. It used to be that way, anyway.

(She sits on the sofa, raising her voice.)

Dean, come sit and chat with us!

(DEAN carries his notebook with him into the living room, where LEANNE has already seated herself in the rocking chair. He finds a seat on the sofa with his mother, who is continuously looking down at her phone. LEANNE alternates between watching the two and staring out into nothing contentedly.)

POLLY I'll bet the computers will still be down in the morning. The IT guy never responds to my messages, I swear. He must know how frustrating it is.

DEAN I thought you were done working for the day.

POLLY I was going to work overtime anyway. But you're right, dear.

(She sets the phone down beside her.)

Leanne, how was your day? Productive?

LEANNE (Nodding.)

Oh, yes. I meditated for so long that I nearly forgot to eat lunch. Then I spent some wonderful time with the flowers in my windowsill. I have been so worried about frail little Earnest, but he hasn't wilted at all. His color tells me about the peaches we used to eat with mother. Do you remember?

POLLY (Looking at her phone.)

 He still hasn't responded. It's going to set my whole week back at this point.

DEAN Mom.

POLLY Hm? Oh, I'm sorry Leanne. Yes, I remember.

 (She places the phone into her purse and sets it on the ground.)

 She had the peach trees behind the house, we called it her orchard. I used to gather them up and sell them during the summer. I offered to share the money with you if you helped, but I seem to remember that they would go missing before any customers showed up.

LEANNE It is in our nature to partake in the fruits of our labor and share with those in need.

POLLY I doubt that the local deer were in dire need. You know, you should use the flowerbeds outside. We certainly haven't kept them very well. I'm sure Dean would be happy to help you clear them out.

DEAN (Looks to his mother as though he wants to say something.)

LEANNE Oh, I have no intention of leaving a mark so permanent. I'm quite content to make use of what I have.

POLLY Hm. Well, the offer is open if you manage to change your mind. Dean was telling me about something he wrote.

LEANNE (Turning her head towards DEAN.)
 What kind of writing makes you happy, Dean?

DEAN Um... I usually write stories. I'd like to write a novella someday. But I was telling mom about this poem I wrote for class, if you'd be interested in hearing it.

LEANNE (Nods and tilts her head.)
 Open yourself, and the world cannot help but listen.

(DEAN looks down to his notebook and finds the correct place. Just as he goes to speak, there is a knock at the front door, and it opens. JOHN enters, with a pizza box in hand. He has on well-worn jeans and a fur-lined coat. A toothy grin bursts out from beneath his mask: a sheep with fluffy wool lining the edges.)

JOHN I brought dinner! Oh, look at everybody together. Am I in trouble?

POLLY No, hun, we decided it had been too long since we just talked.

JOHN I agree, as rare as that is. Let me set this down and then I want in on this action.

(JOHN takes the pizza into the kitchen and sets the box onto the stovetop. LEANNE has not taken her eyes off of DEAN, still waiting for him to begin. JOHN reenters the room, leans down to kiss POLLY, then drops into the recliner and leans forward.)

JOHN Is it my turn, then?

POLLY Do you have something you wanted to tell us?

JOHN Oh, I don't have much to tell today. It was a slow day at work. I spent a couple hours reading Gordon's new book. He's the guy I told you really should read, Polly. He's been in the stock market for almost fifty years. He's one of the few multimillionaires that made all of his money right here in the states. Anyway, his new book is all about analyzing and playing the market as it is right now. It's the exact kind of stuff that he used to get where he is, and we can use it too! In fact...

(He stands, moving to the bookshelf and eventually pulling out a finance book. As he returns to his seat, he opens the book and begins thumbing through the pages.)

This is one of his older books. It talks more about the international market, but some of the same concepts pop up in both.

POLLY John, hun.

JOHN (Looks up from the book, but doesn't close it.)
Yes?

POLLY I pray that you never have a busy day at work. You'll bring all eight hours home to us.

JOHN You're in a haughty pair of shoes to tell me about bringing work home. But fine, fine.

(Holding his hands up.)

I don't mean to take over the conversation.

LEANNE Dean was about to share his mind with us.

JOHN You've got something on your mind, pal?

DEAN (Staring down at his notebook again.)
No, I was just thinking about reading something I wrote.

JOHN All you had to do was say something. The floor is all yours.

(The three look to DEAN, waiting for him to begin. He hesitates, then begins reading from his notebook with growing confidence.)

DEAN When all at once our humanity bails,
what remains of us to burn new trails?
If our bones realign and our veins
intertwine, should we show shame?
Or will a new freedom emerge
from deep within our sapien purge?

Potential crouches not inside our DNA
but contained in forms which we cannot stay.
In the still lake's reflection, what do you see
if the inner beast is what you can be?

(There are a few moments of silence following DEAN's recital. LEANNE closes her eyes and muses. JOHN puts his hand on his chin in a classic pondering position. POLLY looks absentmindedly to her purse on the ground.)

JOHN I'll tell you what I see. A goat.

POLLY Hun, that's on the outside.

JOHN Now let me finish, would you? You've never seen a goat follow anybody else's rules. My grandpa kept goats, and those suckers would chew straight through the fence and go wherever they damn well pleased. I admired them, really. But that was in part because they chewed up Mrs. Bortle's laundry, and that old hag had it out for me.

POLLY (Stares wistfully at her purse.)

That kind of freedom does sound nice. I'd like to be a bird. A hawk, an eagle. I'd fly high, high over all of the buildings and never look back down. I could have the whole sky to myself, answer to nobody.

(She trails off and begins to rummage through her purse. When she finds her phone, she scrolls through it aimlessly.)

JOHN We'd still make a good pair, then. I'll climb up and down the mountainside, and you can lead me to all the best fields.

(DEAN looks over to see LEANNE's response. She looks back at him with a serious expression.)

LEANNE What did you have in mind while you were writing?

DEAN Me? Oh, I've been thinking that I would want to be a crocodile. I heard that they never really die because of age. They could theoretically live forever, but they get so big that they can't get enough food to survive and starve. I think that's something really amazing. What if I could just be a crocodile and be careful about how much I hunt? It'd be a simple life that you could perpetuate for as long as you wanted.

JOHN It wouldn't hurt you to have a little more bite anyway, pal.

(He laughs a bit to himself.)

LEANNE And how do you refer to your poem?

DEAN It's title? It's called "Beasts in Progress."

JOHN Well, Leanne? The rest of us know our answers.

LEANNE Smiles politely, providing her answer slowly.

I would be a human. It provides me no favor to wish myself into anything else. I am what I am, and I do what I do.

(She reaches up and removes her mask, placing it in her lap and running her fingers over it fondly. Nobody reacts to this.)

One may be able to mask their soul with whatever they fancy, but its true shape is not so easily altered.

(A few moments of ponderous silence fall over the group.)

POLLY (Eyes still on her phone.)

They fixed the computers. I'll be working late tomorrow.

(SCENE END)

Judge's comment: This play anticipates a careful reader. The characters are sketched vividly, not just through their words but through their gestures, yet this subtlety leaves us pleasantly unprepared for the revelatory tone of the poem that appears midway through. I loved how the careful dialogue repeatedly made me forget that the characters were wearing masks—a nice corollary to how the banality of middle America can make one overlook its darker elements.

SECOND PLACE

Charlotte Miller
Hendrix College

Such a Liar

Cast of Characters
(2 Female, 1-4 Male)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1: Female, 20s.

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2: Female, 20s.

BOSS: Male, 50s.

CO-WORKER: Male, 20s.

BANKER: Male, 40s.

Casting Note: The roles of BOSS, CO-WORKER, and BANKER can be played by one actor.)

Time

The Present

(Lights up. CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 enters stage right wearing business casual and outwardly reflecting her long workday. She flops into a chair on the right side of the stage and appears to fall asleep when her phone begins ringing. She jolts awake and presses answer.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (casually.)
Chrysanthemum speaking.

(Pause. CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 straightens posture, stands up and begins pacing.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (overly sweet.)
Oh, hey Anna! Sorry I wasn't expecting you. It's so great to hear from you again. How are you?

(Pause.)

Oh! Wow, a promotion!

(Pause.)

No Anna, that's really incredible.

(Pause. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 and BOSS enter stage and BOSS takes a seat)

Yeah, no work has been really-

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 remains in position)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (casually.)

Hi sir. You wanted to see me?

BOSS

Yeah, come take a seat Chrysanthemum. So, I was reading your report earlier this week and I just had a few questions. I was hoping you could maybe clear up a few things.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 takes the opposite seat and immediately begins fidgeting.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (nervously.)

Of course, sir.

BOSS (unamused.)

Great... So, I would first like to start with your introductory sentence,

(BOSS lowers glasses)

“Granola makes old people crumbly.”

(BOSS stares at CHRYSANTHEMUM 2.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

(Nodding head.)

Yeah... So basically-

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 and BOSS still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

Oh, me and my boss? We have a great relationship! We just really... understand each other.

(Pause. BOSS exits stage. COWORKER enters stage.)

My coworkers?

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 stills. COWORKER turns towards CHRYSANTHEMUM 2.)

COWORKER (Trying not to laugh.)

So... He chew you out?

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (reluctantly.)

...Yes.

COWORKER (laughing.)

Chrysanthemum, I told you it sounded *awful*!

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Okay well you don't have to rub it in! Do you know how it feels to have a job where all you do is manipulate old people into buying unnecessary health products AND being bad at it?

COWORKER

No. I help elderly citizens recognize health concerns that they may or may not have and give them at least twice tested supplements.

(Whispering.)

On a completely unrelated note to our supplements, did you hear that one of the men in the clinical trial had a stroke last weekend?

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (shocked.)

WHAT?

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 still, and COWORKER exits)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (decrescendo.)

Yeah, no it just feels great to work in an uplifting environment where I know I'm making a positive difference.

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (continuing, brightly.)

Anyway! You mentioned in one of your posts that you finally got a dog?

(Long pause.)

Mhmm. Yeah, no that *really* is crazy that you rescued a purebred golden retriever off the street. That's great though! *Exactly* the dog you've always dreamed of.

(Pause.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (continued, choked up.)

Oh! No, I'm sorry I'm still here. Yeah, Hank is doing well. He has been... very peaceful lately.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 still. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 sits on floor crying with phone in hand)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Mom, I feel so bad! I was just so occupied with work and I didn't even think about it. I didn't even think of him. And now he's dead!

(Pause.)

He is not *just* a hamster Mom! He was a companion, a- a friend!

(Pause.)

Well... I... I forgot to change his bedding and when they stand in their piss for too long *deep breath* they get feet infections.

(Pause.)

MOM THIS ISN'T FUNNY!

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (sniffing.)

Sorry, let's not talk about my 3-legged hamster anymore! What about dating?

(Beat.)

Don't tell anyone what?

(Pause.)

ENGAGED! Anna, who is it?

(Pause.)

Jean François? No, tell me about him!

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 nods head.)

Model... and brain surgeon. *Oh...* for orphans specifically? I don't know Anna, are you sure he's the one? I'm super happy for you! I was a little worried you would never get over Matt from college, but your fiancé sounds... perfect!

(WILL enters stage.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (continued.)

Oh me? Well, there's been a few.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 stills. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 and WILL sit across from each other.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (excitedly.)

Hi I'm CHRYSANTHEMUM. Nice to meet you.

WILL (monotone and uninterested.)

Is that short for something?

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (confused.)

I'm sorry?

WILL

Your name.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 glances toward the audience)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Um, no. It isn't... and what's your name?

WILL

WILL.

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 (jokingly.)

Oh! Let me guess, that's short for William.

WILL (deadpan.)

No.

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Right. Sorry. So, where are you from WILL?

WILL

The South.

(Pause.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Cool... What brought you to the city?

WILL

Work.

(Pause.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

And where is it that you work WILL?

WILL

The bank.

(Uncomfortably long pause.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Wow! How *exciting!* You sure are a big talker WILL.

WILL

Not really.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 visibly becomes frustrated and inhales deeply. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 and WILL still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

Yeah, he was really... intellectual. Just a real... umm... real... intellect.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 2

Well WILL this has been... love-ly, but I think I *really* need to head out right this exact very moment.

WILL

(Talking very slowly.)

Before you go, I wanted to thank you for paying, but honestly, I'm not really seeing this go any farther. I know this may hurt now, but you'll understand one day Cassandra.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 opens mouth and takes breath as if to reply. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

Well actually I wouldn't say he's my Jean François, but hopefully I'll find him soon!

(Pause. WILL exits stage)

A vacation? You're going to Italy?! Oh, to his... family villa. Wow! Sounds fun!

(Pause.)

Yeah, I've actually been thinking of doing some traveling lately as well.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 stills, BANKER enters and sits across from CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 who is loudly chewing gum)

BANKER

So, I've got your current balance pulled up. Looks about normal, although you do seem to have a, and please forgive me if this is out of turn, quite frankly alarming amount of chewing gum purchases.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 halts chewing and slowly lifts hand toward mouth and attempts to stealthily spit out gum.)

Right, well besides that, you have a decent credit score, but I wouldn't plan on any major loans anytime soon. Have you considered starting a savings account? Maybe get a jumpstart on retirement?

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 stares at BANKER.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

Possibly France, but I'm leaning more towards Spain.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 still.)

BANKER

I know you're only 24, but nowadays you can never be too sure what may happen.

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

I just really love the beach and the atmosphere. Maybe even brush up on my Spanish.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 still.)

BANKER

You can always start with just 8% and increase it just a little bit every year and before you know it-

(BANKER and CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 still.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1

Nope. I'm completely the same way! I can't stand being in a packed hostel with broke college students.

(Pause. BANKER exits stage)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (smiling.)

Hmm. Any new hobbies? Wait, yes actually! I've recently taken up knitting. I picked up some yarn, watched a couple videos, and now I have a red scarf. Even wore it to the office recently. What about you? Still doing scrapbooking like back in Freshman year?

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1's smile falls.)

Wow! Jet skiing! No, that sounds super fun. I used to do that all the time growing up.

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 and CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 glance at each other. CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 is confused, and CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 shrugs it off.)

CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 (continues, awkward.)

Yeah, it's just so fun to be on a jet... and ski. Yup!

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 2 rolls eyes and exits stage.)

No, no! The pleasure is seriously all mine Anna. I just love hearing all about your *amazing* life.

(Pause.)

Oh yes! Be sure to send that wedding invite my way. Alright! Talk to you later!

(CHRYSANTHEMUM 1 hangs up phone, stands still, and faces the audience.)

UGH! She is such a liar!

CURTAIN.

Judge's comment: Within the straightforward set-up—a woman lying about her life while on the phone—each episode deftly builds the character and brings us into her past. There is humor as well as sorrow at surprising moments. I loved the confidence I felt coming from the author: while the play moves via swift flashbacks, it muses on modern dating, death, and the corporate world.

THIRD PLACE

Genevieve M. Baddorf (Flynn Bates)
Christian Brothers University

You Can't Put That on TV—Live

[A backdrop of a log wall, meant to be the interior of a cabin. There is a window set into the wall, slightly to stage left, that shows a darkened sky with a faint sliver of a moon. There is a door to stage right, and a fireplace to stage left. A man, FRANCIS, kneels center stage, his back to the audience. A VOICE speaks from offstage.]

VOICE: State your need.

FRANCIS: (shaky) I need to find Lori - my fiancée. I- left her for someone else, and she just went off the rails. I... hurt her, bad. I think she might've done something horrible. I shouldn't be here. I... I'm supposed to be dead. I don't know what she did -

VOICE: State your need.

FRANCIS: (rambling) Nobody's seen her in a long time. I've been asking around, and her sister told me she's given herself up, wherever she is. That she was talking like she wanted to end it all. Believe me, I tried to rebuild, but - there's nothing left. I don't know how I'm supposed to live, knowing she's -

VOICE: State your need. FRANCIS: (pause) ...right. Right.

[FRANCIS rummages in his pocket and produces a piece of paper.]

FRANCIS: (reading, desperate) I seek to free a prisoner from the Mask. To free a voice from the forced song. (a deep breath) I... seek to break from the charade. To return to the Wilds.

[FRANCIS slowly lowers the paper.] VOICE: What is your sacrifice?
Your life?

[FRANCIS produces a knife from his jacket pocket, and cuts off a piece of his hair, holding it above his head.]

FRANCIS: (nervous) No, no, no. (as he's cutting) No, I... just got that back. My service, for twenty years. I'll do whatever you want, I just - I need to make sure she's okay. (a beat of silence) Please.

[A dim light turns on, revealing a tree shaped rune carved into the wall over FRANCIS's head. There is a low rumble, steadily growing louder.]

VOICE: Your offer has been accepted.

[As the rumble reaches a crescendo, FRANCIS's arm twists back, as if pulled, and he screams, the lights cutting out entirely.]

[When the lights come back on, a large screen hangs over the back center of the darkened stage, with a set of benches off to stage right, with various AUDIENCE MEMBERS seated. There is a table and chairs to stage left, and a MAN is slumped in one of the chairs facing

the screen. Dim lights in purple, yellow, and orange glow along the front of the stage, and a woman, LORRAINE, stands center stage, her hands on her hips. She is dressed in a horrifically yellow 1950's style knee length dress, and her hair is teased into impossibly stiff curls. She smiles wide.]

LORRAINE: It's late, isn't it? Are you bored? Sleepless? Hungry? Scrolling, changing channels in the barren wasteland of the world at one in the morning? Is this you?

[LORRAINE points stiffly to the chair, and a faint red light comes on over the MAN. He begins to twitch, facing the screen, which is now displaying a large, toothy mouth. He starts making an odd whimpering noise that turns into sobbing. LORRAINE snaps her fingers, and the light goes out, the man abruptly falling silent.]

LORRAINE: Well, worry no longer! You've come to the right place, the show of all shows! You're on-

[LORRAINE excitedly spreads her arms wide, and a light switches on over the AUDIENCE. She punctuates each word with a shift in stance, almost dancing.]

AUDIENCE: You Can't Put That On TV -

LORRAINE: Live! I'm Lorraine Watts, and we are here live with our studio audience! [She gestures to the AUDIENCE, who cheer wildly.]

LORRAINE: Loves, tonight's variety hour is a doozy, let me tell you that! All the games fit to play, guests who'll blow your mind, and all the news no one wants to talk about!

[A few STAGEHANDS come out and drag off the MAN from earlier. There's a puddle of red on the table. Sudden thunder, and an image of a storm is projected on the screen behind her.]

LORRAINE: First up, the weather! Now, I'm no meteorologist -

[She spins to face the screen, hands on her hips. She hums to herself, tilting her head.]

LORRAINE: (pinching her fingers together) -but I think it might be raining. Just a little. Just a teeny bit.

[LORRAINE turns back to the audience. When her back is turned, the screen cuts to an image of the edge of a patch of woods.

FRANCIS stumbles out of the trees, leaning against one of them. His hands smear red against the bark. Just as he looks up at the camera, the screen cuts to black.]

LORRAINE: It's looking like storms, folks! If you're going to be out and about tonight - (quieter, with a wink) and let's face it, you aren't - (louder again) pack an umbrella! Benny, how are we looking for the next week?

[A blaring static noise plays on stage.]

LORRAINE: You heard him, folks! It'll mellow out something wonderful, but I would still dress in layers, just in case! Speaking of layers -

[One of the STAGEHANDS tosses an identical copy of LORRAINE's dress to her. She holds it up in front of her with pride.]

LORRAINE: Tonight I'm wearing the Goldenrod Daze, from Sears' new Wildflower Collection! These dresses are high quality for low cost, and will last years down the line. It lends a pop of color for any occasion, although to tell you the truth - (talking behind the back of her hand, in a stage whisper) it's so comfy I just wear it around the house sometimes! And this dress can be yours for only \$14.99! To order your gorgeous Wildflower (and matching shoes for free), ring the number below!

[A sign pops up at the front of the stage with the first fifteen digits of pi. LORRAINE does a little twirl before tossing the dress to an AUDIENCE member, who promptly starts fighting with the person next to them over it.]

AUDIENCE 1: Give it!

AUDIENCE 2: I got it first!

AUDIENCE 1: You were here last week, hand it over!

[AUDIENCE 2 punches AUDIENCE 1, and LORRAINE watches them and tilts her head a little, almost as if checking for approval, before turning back to the audience.]

LORRAINE: (flaps one hand) Kids, aren't they just the best? In today's news; everything is going well! No one is dying, there haven't been any fifteen-car pileups in Mississippi, and Miss Polly Martins in London didn't poison her husband and herself at 4:30 pm with nearly a pound of cyanide, proving that sometimes staying with someone after they cheated on you doesn't work out!

[LORRAINE stares blankly into the audience for a minute.]

LORRAINE: In other news, the stock market went up substantially today, especially in oil, paper, and several other industries, which is wonderful for investors but so-so for people who like having food and clothes, (fluttering her fingers) so it's really a wash, isn't it?

[A pause, then a blaring noise onstage.] LORRAINE: Why, that's our Breaking News Alarm!

[A STAGEHAND runs onstage, and hands LORRAINE a paper.]

LORRAINE: (reading out loud) An Oregon man has recently been charged with faking his death and operating a stolen vehicle. Officers suggest that he may be armed and dangerous, so if you encounter him, keep your distance and alert the police. They'll handle the rest!

AUDIENCE 1: (shouting) Or shoot on sight!

LORRAINE: (cheerily) Or shoot on sight! Remember folks, you always have the right to kill someone if it's self-defense! Our segment La Trivia Niche later tonight is sponsored by Locke Security - if they step through your door, they've got to go!

[The screen behind her lights up again - a car parks in front of a dilapidated warehouse, the sky above clear but starless. FRANCIS climbs out of the car, and briskly walks to a door with a smile carved into its surface. He's gripping a dirty, ragged silk flower, with a ring tied to the stem and a tag attached to it, reading FOR LORRAINE. He takes a knife from his pocket, and a wooden totem of a tree. He cuts his palm, smearing his blood on the totem, and the door pops open. The screen cuts to black.]

LORRAINE: Dear friends, with the holidays coming up, it's only fair that we provide a few tips and tricks for making this season merry and bright!

[One of the AUDIENCE members tosses a box to her.]

LORRAINE: Gifts can be a real hassle, I know. But if you're wrapping presents for multiple, use different wrapping paper patterns for each! It makes handing them out a snap (snaps fingers for emphasis), and makes each gift feel special! And what better gift than being a guest star on the show? If you want to treat a loved one - or yourself - call or write us with your available schedule, and we'll get a representative to you the same day - that's right, loves! The same day! And we'll discuss rates and all those silly details. It'll be the chance of a lifetime, believe me!

[She hands the paper and box to a STAGEHAND, who leaves. FRANCIS suddenly stumbles onstage, bedraggled, his hair soaked with rain and shirt stained with blood, especially on the sleeves. He looks around with wild eyes. He staggers over to the chairs and leans against one of them, watching.]

LORRAINE: Up next, we're going to have a chat with the wonderful Liminality Faust, about their new album What I Wish I Could Unlearn-

[One of the STAGEHANDS places a green telephone on the table, which rings wildly. LORRAINE's head snaps to look at the table.]

LORRAINE: Why, it looks like we have a caller! Remember, you can call us anytime to suggest new segments, ask questions, or tell me I'm pretty. Please note that we cannot accept psychic visions at this time, as our designated mailbox is full and we already know about the eyes, Linda, and we should have the matter resolved within the next month.

[LORRAINE strolls over to the phone, looking right past FRANCIS, who is watching her with a look of horror. She picks up the phone, twirling the cable with one finger.]

LORRAINE: Hello caller! You've reached the number of –

AUDIENCE: You Can't Put That On TV –

LORRAINE: -Live! This is Lorraine Watts, what can I do to help you? (a pause) Uhuh. I see. Is that so? Well, that's just a real shame,

isn't it? Wow. Closed casket, too? (a pause) Why, thank you! (She holds her hand out to show her nails.) I painted them myself! Still, that's horrible about that. Send my condolences.

[LORRAINE primly puts down the phone.]

LORRAINE: (soberly) Viewers, this is a real tragedy. We've been forced to cancel our nightly game of La Trivia Niche, due to our scheduled guest, noted mycologist Montgomery Matthews, passing away from quite the gruesome lab accident earlier today. His family requests that, in lieu of flowers, to send donations to the Mycology in Medicine Initiative.

[The AUDIENCE makes assorted noises of sadness in varying volumes. LORRAINE nods glumly, staring down at the stage for a minute, before waving her hand, and the AUDIENCE falls silent again.]

LORRAINE: However, the show must go on! Up next - FRANCIS: (hoarsely) Lori?

[LORRAINE freezes in place, the slightest look of confusion visible on her face.]

LORRAINE: That's an odd way to address me. Why - (suddenly reverting back to her cheerful demeanor) - you must be our new guest!

[She grabs FRANCIS's hand, shaking it vigorously.]

LORRAINE: Hello and welcome! You're right on time - we unfortunately had to cancel our previous segment, so we'll start our interview after a short advertisement. Is that alright? I hope that's alright.

[She aggressively guides him to a chair, and he sits, promptly putting his arms in the pool of blood. FRANCIS looks down at his arms with disgust, then slowly back up at LORRAINE.]

FRANCIS: (with rising alarm) What did you do-

LORRAINE: (holding up the telephone) The new Songbird telephone from Paulson and Sons! This has the widest range of any telephone produced so far - with cutting-edge technology, you can reach a friend on the other side of the world in an instant, without those hefty long distance charges to your plan! It's lightweight for on the go use - anywhere with an outlet, you can call! Please note that this does not cover calls made from over two miles above sea level, or the Casey Woods Memorial Bridge between the hours of one and three in the morning.

[The phone begins to ring, and LORRAINE picks up the receiver, slamming it back down before answering.]

LORRAINE: Write our office or call the previous number listed for more details! FRANCIS: (pleading) Lorraine, please!

LORRAINE: And now, we'll have a chat with our special guest!

[LORRAINE sits in the seat opposite FRANCIS. She holds out one hand to the side, and a STAGEHAND runs out with a microphone, which she sets on the table, tapping it twice.]

LORRAINE: Alrighty! Dear guest, why don't we begin with your name, and a little about yourself. FRANCIS: (distressed) It's me! You... don't remember?

[LORRAINE stares blankly at him, tapping the microphone again. FRANCIS sits there in disbelief, before letting out a stressed sigh and leaning in towards the microphone.]

FRANCIS: (shakily) My name is Francis. Francis Juno. I... work in sales. I've been looking for you.

LORRAINE: (incredulous, gesturing to herself) Looking for me!

[LORRAINE and the AUDIENCE both laugh.]

LORRAINE: Trust me, Mr. Juno, everyone wants to be on this show! It's the hottest gig this side of the Mojave Desert! Why, just last week we had the most wonderful guest, Ms. Clara Dunham, the celebrated composer! We got to have a lengthy chat about her piece on the nature of creation and entropy, she was really quite patient on the technical aspects of musical theory. The audience loved her so much, they wanted to eat her right up! Isn't that right?

[Wild cheering from the AUDIENCE.]

LORRAINE: Now, Mr. Juno -

FRANCIS: (agitated, bracing his hands on the table) Frankie. You call me Frankie.

[LORRAINE pouts, leaning her head on her hand and watching him. Her movement is decidedly stiffer.]

LORRAINE: Frankie. Alright, Frankie. I appreciate the valor. I really do. (twirling a finger in her hair) What are your feelings on the new trend of purple and pink in men's clothing? Do you think it'll take off and become a mainstay?

[FRANCIS looks uneasily at both audiences.]

FRANCIS: (taking a shaky breath) I... I think it'll take off. Lorraine-

LORRAINE: Our guest has spoken! Friends, what do you think?

[She turns to face the AUDIENCE, and various AUDIENCE MEMBERS hold up three signs, reading YES, NO, and ASK NEXT TUESDAY. FRANCIS, appearing overwhelmed by frustration, stands, digs through his pockets, pulls out the dirty, crumpled silk flower lily, and holds it out to LORRAINE with tangible desperation.]

LORRAINE: Looks like he's right on the money! I'm so excited! There can always be more color in the world -

[LORRAINE turns and sees the flower, and falters. The chatter of the AUDIENCE grows louder, and the background lights fade as the lights over her and FRANCIS grow brighter.]

LORRAINE: ...what? What is that?

FRANCIS: It's for you. I... (pause, a deep breath to compose himself) I brought it with me. It's only as new as you are.

LORRAINE: (with mock indignation, putting her hands on her hips) Mr. Juno, how horrible! I'll have you know I look much better for my age! Isn't that right?

[The AUDIENCE applauds, and LORRAINE gives a little curtsy.]

LORRAINE: (looking him up and down) And even if I did look awful, I can't say you look much better.

[LORRAINE grabs FRANCIS's hands, turning them over and looking at the nails with disgust.]

LORRAINE: Like you just crawled out of a hole! Really, we should get you cleaned up. They'll like you so much more that way.

[She starts to lead him offstage. FRANCIS glances to the audience for a moment, thinking.]

FRANCIS: Lori, have... you slept recently? Eaten anything?

LORRAINE: (scoffing) Don't be silly, of course I have! Right before the show, I had... (pause) well, I can't remember. But I had something. I always have enough.

FRANCIS: Have you?

LORRAINE: Have I? Where... (faltering) where did you come from? Security didn't let you in.

FRANCIS: I killed the security.

[LORRAINE steps back, still stiffly, turning to face the screen, but FRANCIS grabs her shoulders and turns her back to look at him.]

LORRAINE: (with a strained smile, gritting her teeth) What are you doing?

FRANCIS: There was a door. I called it forth, and it led here. Lori, I got help - I reached out to something. It's not good, but it's the opposite, the antithesis to - (he gestures vaguely) All this. I can get you out of here.

[A STAGEHAND runs onstage and tries to pry FRANCIS away from LORRAINE but he shakes them off. LORRAINE grabs his arms, holding him in place.]

LORRAINE: Francis, this was - for you. I gave in for you, I couldn't just - let you die! (frustrated, with fake pep) Why didn't I just let you die?

FRANCIS: I failed you. I'm sorry. I can still make it right. You - don't have to forgive me, you never did. But let me fix this. We can still get out of this.

LORRAINE: (with increasing uncertainty, hysteria) Mr. Juno, that's just not true! Those things only cause trouble! I'm happy here! (putting her hands over her heart) I have - all my fans, I have a stable job, it's all color and light and good things. I have to be here!

[The lights onstage begin to go haywire, the STAGEHAND begins twitching in the background, and eyes are projected on the screen. Sobbing sounds from the AUDIENCE, and LORRAINE's nose starts to bleed.]

AUDIENCE 1: You're ruining the fun!

AUDIENCE 2: Ours! Ours!

AUDIENCE: (wailing, to FRANCIS) Death to the Wilds!

LORRAINE: You left me!

[LORRAINE tries to tackle FRANCIS, and the two struggle, the AUDIENCE clapping loud, at uneven, odd intervals, faster and faster. LORRAINE'S movements are frantic, stiff, and she elbows FRANCIS in the face. He staggers back, and as she charges at him again, he dodges. She charges again, and he dodges, grabbing her arm and using her momentum to push her down to the ground. He's tense, as if trying to restrain something within himself.]

LORRAINE: (unhinged) You beast! I'll put you down like the animal you are!

FRANCIS: (louder, trying to be heard over the noise) Five years, Lori! You've been missing five years! (turning to the AUDIENCE) You want your sacrifice? Here it is!

[The STAGEHAND tries to grab him again, and FRANCIS turns and produces the totem, bludgeoning the STAGEHAND with it. Then he runs up to the screen, stabbing wildly at it, once, thrice, five times. There's a loud, inhuman scream, and the lights go out, before slowly coming back - there is only a light over FRANCIS and LORRAINE. The AUDIENCE members are slumped over in their seats, and LORRAINE is collapsed in a heap. FRANCIS, breathing heavily from the exertion, walks back over to LORRAINE, and drops the knife, kneeling next to her and helping her sit up. Her makeup is smeared, and she seems disoriented, shaky, her eyes wide as if something is still burned into her vision.]

LORRAINE: (quiet, dazed) ...Frankie? I - (she takes a breath) it's you? I'm - I think I'm sick - FRANCIS: I know. Let's get you out of here.

[FRANCIS looks up at the screen.] FRANCIS: Is it dead?

LORRAINE: Banished. It'll - be back, we need to go -

[She reaches for his hand, and he takes it. He pulls LORRAINE to her feet.]

LORRAINE: I didn't mean to. I... thought it'd help me. I'd never have to worry again. (she gestures, uncertain, almost frantic) This was my dream! Dreams can't hurt you. It said it'd be an easy exchange, it'd bring you back if it kept me here. Not - like this. Not like this. It won't get out of my head.

FRANCIS: Lori, I'm so sorry. I came here as fast as I could, if I knew-

LORRAINE: (tired) Frankie? Can we go home?

FRANCIS: It'll be a long while. But - I think we can make it.

LORRAINE: (echoing) We can make it.

[The two of them, supporting each other, walk slowly offstage, leaving the flower lying by itself on the floor. The lights dim, then go out.]

[END SCENE]

Judge's comment: I was taken by the imaginative range of this play, how it was able to mix the surreal with the everyday, the mythic with the macabre. On the surface, it concerns itself with love, abandonment, and regret, yet what pulled me in was how thoroughly envisioned its warped spaces of media and entertainment were. There is simply a lot of fun here.

Formal Essay

FIRST PLACE
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The Catcher in the Rye and Post-COVID America

In 1951, author J.D. Salinger published *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel that reflected the grieving and isolated culture of post-World War II America. The novel is narrated by seventeen year-old Holden Caulfield, who is about to be kicked out of his elite boarding school, Pencey Prep. However, Holden decides to leave Pencey early and spends three days in New York City. He attempts to form deep connections with many people, from total strangers to his younger sister, but many of his interactions leave him more hopeless than before. At the time of publication, Holden's journey related to the experiences of Americans living in the aftermath of World War II. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, Americans struggled to process both the war's destruction and the rapidly changing world around them. Although the post-war period is long over, large-scale traumatic events continue to affect the United States. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal life for many Americans, leaving them much like Holden as he sets off for New York. Holden's personal trauma and grief result in the distrust of and separation from a failed society, directly reflecting the struggles faced by Americans living in a world forever changed by COVID-19.

Beginning in the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced isolation and sowed distrust in institutions, leaving Americans⁵ to deal with the effects of mass trauma. When the spreading virus was officially declared a pandemic, many businesses and schools moved their operations to be fully remote. People were advised to remain at home, and those who ventured outside had to wear masks and physically distance from others. Anyone who tested positive for COVID-19 or came in contact with an infected person had to quarantine for upwards of two weeks. American citizens often blamed the current political administration for allowing the virus to spread and not doing enough to combat it. Politicians, celebrities, and religious leaders were called out for espousing their personal beliefs instead of doing what was best for the public. Even though the virus is no longer as widespread, Americans are still reeling from the effects. Rates of mental illness and drug addiction have risen, and misinformation continues to spread. As a nation, America grieves the lives and time lost to the virus.

It is lingering grief that serves as an undercurrent for the entirety of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as Holden wrestles with personal tragedy. Several years before the novel begins, Holden's brother, Allie, dies of leukemia. Holden's rage over Allie's untimely death causes him to punch out the windows of his garage, landing him in the hospital. His hospitalization causes him to miss Allie's funeral and denies him full closure (Miller 130). As a result, Holden seems unable to move forward. For example, when Holden's sister Phoebe asks him to name something he likes, Holden says he likes Allie. Phoebe

⁵ While the COVID-19 pandemic affected countries across the world, for purposes of this paper, I will be specifically focusing on how it affected Americans. However, some of my analysis could also apply to countries outside of the United States.

points out that Allie is dead, to which Holden replies, “I can still like him though, can’t I?...especially if they [Allie] were a thousand times nicer than the people you know that’re *alive* and all” (Salinger 189). Holden’s statement highlights the extent to which his grief surrounding Allie prevents him from connecting with the world. He is continually fixated on his loss. Allie’s memory drives his thoughts and underscores his actions throughout his time in New York.

While the pandemic is largely over, America is still grieving from the losses caused by COVID-19. Daily life is dotted with reminders of what the virus took away, whether it be a person who died, or a special milestone that was never fully experienced, such as a graduation ceremony. People cannot easily forget the personal wounds COVID-19 inflicted on them. Many everyday occurrences have also been changed by the pandemic, which has left a sense of longing for pre-COVID life. For example, pre-pandemic, remote work and meetings were typically used on an as needed basis. However, after many companies transitioned to being partially or fully remote during the pandemic, a large portion of them have remained remote, or at least had remote work options readily available. The shift has disrupted traditional office routines and led to some workers missing out on daily interaction. Additionally, views of crowded areas have changed. After crowds became a safety hazard during COVID-19, anxiety about the transmission of illnesses in packed spaces remains. Lifestyle disruptions have exemplified the losses of the pandemic. While returning to normal was once a common desire, it is now clear that old notions of normal have changed.

Grief is often worsened by a lack of support, which in *The Catcher in the Rye*, is represented by the failed institutions in Holden’s life. One such institution is the family unit. Holden’s parents, who

should be a stable presence in their son's life, are largely absent from the novel. Holden's father never appears, and his mother appears only once, when Holden listens to her speak while hidden in his sister's closet. Holden only references his family in distant, passing terms, highlighting their failure to establish a meaningful connection with him. Early in the novel, Holden reveals that Pencey Prep is the third boarding school he has been kicked out of. Although Holden needed the comfort of home after Allie's death, his parents responded by sending him away. After each expulsion (which were Holden's attempts to return to the safety of home), instead of trying to understand his needs, his parents sent him off to another boarding school. The people who should have been a safety net for Holden only isolated him.

Holden's schools likewise represent the failure of institutions, as they hold to an ethical system that no longer has relevance. The teachers in the novel are portrayed "as sentimentalists and guardians of an exploded ethic" (Strauch 10). Holden often finds their academic advice unhelpful or even condescending. In chapter two, Holden visits his sick teacher, Mr. Spencer, before leaving Pencey Prep. In an attempt to motivate Holden to apply himself in school, Mr. Spencer tells him that "life is a game one plays according to the rules." Holden acts like he agrees, but internally, he violently disagrees (Salinger 11). Mr. Spencer is trying to impart advice on Holden that no longer holds real relevance. Allie's loss has shown Holden that life does not have simple rules and consequences as a game does, and it does not operate under the strict structure that a school does. Unfortunately, Mr. Spencer is not in touch with Holden or the world around him enough to know why his words are not what Holden needs. Instead, Mr. Spencer, and by extension, the

school system, make up an institution that is so far removed from reality that it cannot fully serve the people it was built for.

Holden's experiences relate to those of Americans who are now disillusioned with the government and higher health institutions, such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC). When the crisis began, many Americans expected the government to implant solutions to contain the spread. However, little action was taken until the virus had infected so many people that the country was forced to shut down. Guidelines about masks, and later, vaccines, became a source of political tension, and government officials often used them to further their party's agenda rather than promote policies that kept citizens healthy. On top of that, the CDC constantly changed recommended safety precautions, which created a culture of confusion. Over time, distrust in the government grew. To make matters worse, the January sixth Capitol riot took place in the middle of the pandemic, illuminating how fragile American government really was. Institutional failure created one of the greatest terrors of the pandemic: as the crisis grew, there were few solid systems to fall back on.

While many lives have changed forever, many larger systems have attempted to return to pre-pandemic life; however, now that illusions about their infallibility have been shattered, large populations of Americans no longer want to participate in institutional activities. Their struggles are reflected in Holden's outgrowing of any roles society holds for him due to his long-term grief (Rosen 553). Because his brother's death stunted his psychological growth, he has extreme anxiety about his sexual functioning, rendering him unable to fulfil the traditional masculine roles of the culture. Because he no longer understands the purpose of what he learns in school, he cannot progress upwardly in the way

society tells him to. Finally, he cannot participate in the commercial culture, which is represented by movies, because his personal trauma has only highlighted how Hollywood tends to “glamorize and distort” disturbing events (Strauch 17). The result of Holden’s separation from societal roles is his ultimate isolation. He struggles to make connections with most of the people he comes in contact with during his time in New York, and his ultimate desire is to escape society entirely.

Holden’s isolation from society results in frequent depressed moods, not unlike the increasing rates of depression and mental illness of post-pandemic Americans. Edwin Haviland Miller, a professor at New York University, observed that the moments during which Holden expresses the most depressed feelings are also his most isolated (130). An early example is when Holden is alone in his dorm at Pencey Prep, and he notices how quiet it is, leading to him feeling a sense of depression. Later, when he spends the night at a train station, he is surrounded by people, but no one talks to him. As he sits there, Holden tells the reader, “I think I was more depressed than I ever was in my entire life” (Salinger 214). Afterward, in one of his lowest moments, Holden walks across city blocks and feels so isolated he is worried he may disappear. He says that, “I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again” (Salinger 217). His sensation of spiraling downward is frequently associated with depression. It can reasonably be concluded that Holden’s isolation is the cause of, or at least a contributing factor to, his depression. A similar phenomenon can be seen across Americans who were severely isolated by the pandemic. During the height of COVID-19, physical distancing was enforced to slow the spread of the virus, and many chose to stay at home whenever possible. The resulting decrease in social gatherings lead to high

feelings of loneliness, which were worsened by the anxiety surrounding the illness. Even as lockdowns and distancing protocols were loosened and then removed, the sense of isolation remained. As a result, rates of mental illness have risen dramatically. The prevalent loss with no stable system to fall back on has created a more isolated, and therefore more depressed, America.

All of Holden's challenges converge in chapter seventeen of *The Catcher in the Rye*, when he goes on a disastrous date with Sally Hayes, one of his former girlfriends. Although Holden finds Sally annoying, he asks her to go see a play simply out of need for connection, which demonstrates how desperate he is for a genuine relationship in the latter half of the novel. Throughout their date, Sally shows off her interests in things Holden considers shallow. She is hesitant to make out with him because she doesn't want to ruin her lipstick, flirts with another boy in front of him, and insists they go skating after the play just so (as Holden presumes) she can wear a short skirt and show off her butt. Sally's actions reveal she is not interested in forming a deep connection with Holden; she merely wants to have a good time. Because her perceived shallowness reflects the same society that Holden hates, he is automatically emotionally distanced from her. Sally pushes him further into isolation when it becomes evident that she is not truly interested in forming a connection with him.

At the end of the date, Holden makes a proposition to Sally that exposes his hatred for societal confines and his confusion about his own feelings. He suggests to her that they run away together to live off the grid in a cabin in Vermont. Even though Holden has been annoyed with Sally throughout the date, afterward, he admits that he truly did want her to run away with him. Unable to understand his own feelings, he refers to himself as "a madman"

(Salinger 149). Because Holden's grief has stunted his growth, he is separated from his own feelings, and he generally seems confused about himself. When Holden asks her to go with him, Sally insists that it would be better to wait to run away until after they grow up and attend college, to which Holden immediately loses his composure. He insists that once they are fully adults, they will have to participate in the monotony of adult life. As Holden says, "I'd be working in some office and making a lot of dough and riding to work in cabs...it wouldn't be the same at all" (Salinger 148). Holden's hatred for societal roles is so strong that even the thought of participating in them triggers a breakdown. He cannot bear the idea of engaging with the same institutions that have failed him time and time again. When Sally makes it clear she is not interested in Holden's plan, he yells at her, and she leaves him.

However, Holden's breakdown during his date with Sally is not the end of the novel. Even at the convergence of all his pain, he finds hope through connections with his sister, Phoebe. After a lonely night at a park, Holden sneaks into his house to visit Phoebe. Holden admits to Phoebe that he did not apply himself at Pencey because he did not like anything happening there, to which Phoebe responds by pressing him to name one thing he likes. As aforementioned, Holden only says he likes Allie. At the reminder that Allie is dead, Holden yells, "I know he's dead!" (Salinger 189). The moment marks the first time Holden has acknowledged Allie's death aloud, which alludes to a willingness to process it. Prior to the conversation, Holden had been unable to admit his need for help, only using crass language to convey his mental state (Miller 131). While he has yet to fully expose his deeper needs, his open acknowledgment of Allie's death paves the way for healing.

In the novel's final chapters, Holden's stable relationship with Phoebe gives him someone to finally feel at home with. Holden makes a plan to run away to the west, but Phoebe insists on coming with him and becomes upset when he tells her she has to stay. Phoebe's actions reveal her genuine care for Holden, unlike others in the novel who are not interested in understanding Holden in any way. However, Holden knows he cannot involve Phoebe in his plans, and in order to calm her down, Holden takes Phoebe to the zoo and watches her ride the carousel. By choosing not to ride it, Holden demonstrates his realization that he cannot fully participate in the world of children anymore. Now that he has acknowledged Allie's death, which has held him back for so many years, he can begin to process it and move forward. Holden is overcome with happiness while watching Phoebe ride the carousel. In the novel's final chapter, when it is implied Holden is receiving treatment in a psychiatric facility, he reveals he will be returning to school in the fall. He also admits to missing the people he interacted with during his time in New York, even those he had negative encounters with. Holden's emotional arc is complete, and his authentic relationship with Phoebe has helped him open up to further connections. His newfound support removes the depression caused by isolation, giving him optimism for the future.

While there is no easy solution to the lingering trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, Holden's partial recovery illuminates the path forward. The hustle of American culture does not always allow for reflection on the past, but in order to move forward, Americans must be willing to acknowledge the losses of the COVID-19. There must be space created to process the lingering pain without influence from politics. Additionally, Americans must open themselves to forming new connections. The virus created a culture of isolation, but as

Holden's journey reveals, superficial relationships will never heal wounds. There must be an ability to look beyond the surface and truly empathize with one another. Finally, Americans must realize the future does hold better days. Even though traumatic events will continue to happen, there must be optimism surrounding the nation's collective recovery.

The Catcher in the Rye reflects the post-pandemic struggles of many Americans, but it also points beyond them and shows the path to healing. Grief, isolation, depression, and failed institutions remain very real problems faced by Americans. The road to recovery is long and involves confronting the genuine scars left by the virus. However, as Holden Caulfield demonstrates, such recovery is not impossible. Americans do not have to exist in grieving loneliness, cut off from the systems they can no longer trust. While Holden spends much of *The Catcher in the Rye* trapped in the past, he is able to move forward when he accepts his loss and finds comfort in those willing to look past his external problems to see the hurting boy underneath. Americans, too, can forge a path forward when they learn to acknowledge the pain felt by everyone and see the possibility for connections even after tragedy.

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Judge's comment: In considering *The Catcher in the Rye* through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences in America, the essay brings new relevance to a reading of the novel that takes into account how trauma, loss, grief, isolation, and institutional failure shape Holden Caulfield's character. It shows as well how those same forces have shaped the character of a post-pandemic nation. These forces that operate on the protagonist's psyche in a mid-twentieth century novel are likewise part of the American pandemic and post-pandemic experience today, and thus the essay makes the case that Salinger's potent themes resonate in a newly relevant way for a new generation of post-pandemic readers.

SECOND PLACE

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On a Dark and Stormy Screen: Bringing *Frankenstein* to Life in Black and White Films

Neck bolts, abnormal brains, secret lairs, and sulfur pits—the film adaptations to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* have, from their first iteration, gained a notorious reputation for outlandish embellishment. Debates have long transpired over whether these films are worth incorporating into critical thought, and their deviations from the source material have often prevented them from being seriously consulted for additions to the immense body of analysis on the story. However, I believe that those early, at times kitschy, adaptations of Classical Hollywood are especially suited for reinforcing the themes and images of the novel. Specifically, through their lighting and mise-en-scène, the black and white nature of the films allows for an almost direct visual translation of the images evoked in the novel, giving the early films an advantageous position as adaptations of written text while also expanding on many of the novel’s underlying themes.

The novel’s imagery of light, darkness, and their related natural forces such as fire, night, and lightning serves both to create chilling, suspenseful atmospheres and to draw complex links between characters and ideas. For example, when Victor first decides on the idea of reanimation, he says that “a sudden light broke in upon [him]” (34). He believes that his discoveries will “pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (35). In this sense, light signifies discovery,

knowledge, and ambition, though a sense of foreboding underlies it given the nature of Victor's experiments. Victor first sees the "dull yellow eye" (36) of the Creature "by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light" from a candle (38). Later, Victor wakes in his room and sees the Creature reaching for him "by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters" (38). Here the reader sees a light that is dependent on night's darkness, and the personified moonlight denotes ill will and violence. Additionally, the "yellow light of the moon" feels linked to the Creature's "dull yellow eye," an interesting parallel that equates the moonlight with the monster's appearance.

Without a doubt, other prominent aspects of both the original and cultural conceptions of *Frankenstein* are the atmospheric elements such as lightning, storms, and electricity. These factor prominently in the novel as harbingers of doom or indicators of the Creature's appearance. For instance, lightning helps spark Victor's scientific inclinations as he observes a tree "utterly destroyed" by a "dazzling light" from a "stream of fire" (26). The Creature's birth occurs on "a dreary night of November" (37) as "the rain pattered dismally against the panes" (38). After Victor returns home to reunite with his family following William's death, he is fascinated by a violent storm. However, a flash of lightning soon reveals the Creature looming nearby (52). These examples are a mere selection of the numerous instances in which such imagery is linked directly to characters as well as the novel's underlying themes of discovery, destruction, morality, etc. These images' vital importance in the novel makes them necessary elements to judge in adaptations. It is common to focus on plot and character in analysis, and while these are important, the aesthetics and atmosphere and how these can convey

important themes within themselves should be regarded with just as much consideration.

In examining the role of black and white films as *Frankenstein* adaptations, I will focus on James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* and Rowland V. Lee's 1939 sequel, *Son of Frankenstein*. Both movies seem to grasp the power of their technology, taking advantage of and repurposing its limitations to create compelling uses of shadow as well as light and darkness. For instance, these two films intelligently utilize set pieces to create eerie shadows that build an unsettling and suspenseful atmosphere. In Whale's *Frankenstein*, the graveyard scene at the beginning is populated with a dark, domineering statue of Death in the background, while Henry (this film's Victor) digs up a grave in a stark white shirt in the foreground directly beneath the statue. The contrast of light and dark in this scene seems to make complex statements about Henry, foreshadowing the coming misfortune as well as portraying him in a "pure" color while he commits an unholy deed.

An effect especially notable in *Son of Frankenstein*, characters often emerge from doorways and move slowly from shadow into light. In the scene where we first see the Creature walking, the light illuminates him sneaking up behind the Baron. We are forced not only to contemplate his appearance and unsettlingly slow movement, but also his approach toward the camera itself—and, by extension, the audience. Interestingly, the Creature is not the only character to pass through shadow; there are multiple scenes, for instance, in which the Baron walks down long, dark hallways, such as when he goes to check the crypt in which the Creature had been hidden. Like the evolving imagery in the novel, shadow links the Creature and his creator while toying with themes. If shadow is a representation of the

Creature's monstrosity, then its use for the Baron leads the audience to question the morality of his intentions.

As much as the laboratory scenes take advantage of sparking and whirring instruments, they also utilize shadow, especially in *Son of Frankenstein*. The decrepit, disorderly lab is populated with a plethora of strange, unidentifiable instruments that cast pointed and distorted shadows upon the walls. The lack of definable shapes and organization bestows on the lab scenes a sense of chaos and incongruency with the careful measurements being taken by the Baron. In his article "Approaches to *Frankenstein* in Film," David Pirie claims that "the laboratories of [Terence] Fisher's *Frankenstein* films are an aesthetic delight, full of bizarre colour effects and mysterious noises" (403). Pirie places value in these later color films' conceptions of an almost fantastic laboratory setting, which might be a valid point if he confines his argument solely to the meaning and nature of the films themselves. However, in terms of adaptation, the novel's lab is not rooted in brightness and fantasy but obsession, secrecy, and unnatural work, making the "aesthetic delight" of the color films feel incongruous with the images provided in the novel.

Markos Hadjioannou points out that nighttime encompasses "a darkness that has been culturally connected to the fears that surface as a result of our inability to see clearly what lurks within the shadows around us or what lies behind corners, doors, alleys, and so on" (133). Shadows and dark, nighttime images like that of Henry in the graveyard mirror in mood and function particular images in the novel, like the "glimmer of the half-extinguished light" of the candle when Victor first sees the Creature (38). Hadjioannou's point that darkness can be "associated with deviousness, crime, sinister desires, malicious dreams, pathological acts, and social disarray" (133) connects to the thematic emphasis on the unnatural and foreboding

in the novel as Victor upsets the natural order. It makes sense that a black and white medium, in which shadows can be easily conveyed and manipulated, is best able to visually illustrate such inherent fears.

As much as shadow and darkness are used to effectively evoke the themes and atmospheres of the novel, light is also used in these black and white films to innovatively portray horror. Most notably in my opinion, the scene in Whale's *Frankenstein* in which the farmer carries his murdered daughter throughout the celebrating crowds and bright, sunny streets of the village creates a stunning and disturbing effect. The vivid contrast between the farmer's movement in the foreground and the partygoers in the background as well as the cheerful lighting forces the audience to be hyper-aware of the corpse and the father's grief. I can only imagine that this sort of stark, inescapable confrontation of tragedy is what Shelley envisioned in scenes where Victor sees the bodies of his loved ones.

Nina Auerbach advocates for the aesthetics of color in *Dracula* films, saying that the "bright colors of Hammer [Film Productions] movies were their exhilarating innovation," and that in their "vibrant color, [the vampires] are substance, not shadows" (430). Auerbach makes the persuasive case that *Dracula* movies can be more impactful in color because they can highlight things like blood (430) as well as the "colorful rooms" in Dracula's castle, a tempting contrast from the "suffocating clutter of the virtuous family's Victorian home" (433). I acknowledge that for certain adaptations, color films might be the most effective medium, especially when color can highlight important themes like blood as temptation and violence, Dracula as offering escape from stifling convention, etc. However, the *Frankenstein* novel places prominence on contrasts of night and day, dark and light, and sources of light such as fire and lightning, so that these aspects typically hold prominence over actual

vivid colors. In film scenes like the one of the father with his daughter's corpse, color might distract the audience from the aesthetic impact of the scene because the flowers, clothes, buildings, etc. would be much more noticeable rather than provide an eerie, incongruent backdrop. Because these films deal so heavily with shadow and darkness, brightness and light stand out that much more.

Director Carl-Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), as discussed by Curtis Harrington, contains effective manipulation of both shadow and light, illustrating how "light and shadow become more than just contributors to a consistent style; they serve as dynamic participants in the story unfolded" (199). Harrington posits that the most "uncanny and terrifying" moments of this black and white film occur when "only a wild inexplicable play of light and shadow is seen" (199). The presence of the uncanny is vital to the *Frankenstein* story, since the Creature is a being at once human and inhuman, both alive and dead; film techniques can support these ideas in a confrontational format, illuminating the Creature on-screen and adding to or complicating his uncanniness by manipulating visual effects.

There is an overwhelming amount of possible discourse on the act of placing the Creature in a visual format, since the crux of his existence is that his appearance isolates him from society. While we can imagine the Creature in the novel, the films force us to face him directly and question our own ideas of monstrosity. Black and white films enhance the Otherness of the Creature by toying with the way light, shadow, etc. interact with his character. In Whale's *Frankenstein*, for instance, the at first tender scene in which the Creature plays with the little girl in the cheerful, sunny woods turns into a scene of horror as he accidentally drowns her. Not only are we confronting the Creature's appearance, but his wordless emotional reaction to his

own actions. The mix of violence with a bright setting and the visuals of the Creature's own shock and horror adds a level of nuance and compelling incongruity to the idea of his monstrosity. Applying Harrington's thoughts about "wild inexplicable play of light and shadow" to the early *Frankenstein* adaptations, one can see how, rather than struggle with a void of color, the black and white films create aesthetic and narrative power through their domain over light and shadow to produce a "sense of Gothic terror" (194), just as Shelley uses specific images and symbols throughout the novel to convey the Gothic and horror.

Finally, lightning and fire also hold special prominence in the black and white adaptations. Along with the storm effects for the laboratory scene, lightning and violent forces of light are used throughout the first *Frankenstein* and Lee's sequel. In the first film, the Creature is afraid of fire, with which Fritz taunts him. The finale sees the Creature and the windmill engulfed in raging flames that stand out prominently against the nighttime setting. In the sequel, there is a segment in which Inspector Krogh and Baron Frankenstein discuss his father's actions in the background while a fire roars in the fireplace in the foreground, as if they are being consumed by the flames. The camera repeatedly cuts to a view of a large window, outside which an ominous storm occurs. It is interesting how these violent forces of light visually tie together protagonists as well as the Creature, echoing how the significance of lightning and nature evolve throughout the novel from forces of inspiration to sources of foreboding and danger.

Susan J. Wolfson explores the multifaceted nature of lightning in both literature and film, pointing out that it "charges Romantic-era imaginations with this complex potential...with shocks to the frame, from the mild and subtly modal, to the fevered, to the

terrific and catastrophic” (755). As lightning works in the novel as both “dazzling light and utter destruction” (767), it becomes a vital visual image. Wolfson credits Whale’s film with creating an “operatic sublimity,” drawing attention not only to the lightning itself but also to the very nature of film as Whale “stages Frankenstein’s laboratory as an operating theater, gesturing to the movie-house theater” in its brilliance and aweing light (769).

The laboratory scenes, specifically in Whale’s iteration, are especially interesting because they place a visual emphasis on the means and moment of creation. While lightning in the novel is used as a symbol of destruction, inspiration, and as a signal for the Creature’s appearance, its role in the Creature’s creation is noticeably left undiscussed. While Victor admits that the “dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of [his] materials” (36), he declares outright to Walton that he will not share his exact methods of animating the Creature: “I see by your eagerness...that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be” (35). It is therefore fascinating that, despite the novel’s lack of specifics on how Victor bestows life upon the Creature, we have developed such a prominent idea of that infamous dark and stormy night, with lightning being furiously conducted into the Creature’s body in a creepy, secluded tower’s laboratory. Film has brought this disguised factor to the forefront. In Whale’s *Frankenstein*, the viewer is overwhelmed with thunderclaps and flashes of lightning as the chaos of Henry and his assistant Fritz running amidst the whirring instruments unfolds. In this iconic scene, the medium of film brings the stormy atmosphere to the surface along with what novel Victor tries to suppress: lightning as a key component of his experiment.

Whale’s emphasis on electricity goes beyond exposing the hidden action in the novel by strengthening the film’s connection to

emerging technologies. Kenneth S. Calhoun points out that the image of the Creature's creation through electricity "literalizes and renders monstrous the shock that attended the reception of the earliest experiments in cinematic animation" (145). The scene in which Henry faces off against the Creature in the mill, leading to them confronting each other on separate sides of a barred piece of machinery, not only provides a poignant moment of reflection upon the two characters but also recalls the zoetrope, a "nineteenth-century invention whose principle was crucial to the eventual development of motion-picture photography and projection" (146). By aesthetically calling attention to the very technology behind film, these early adaptations happen upon one of the most central themes of the novel, which is scientific invention. Just as Victor experiments with new scientific processes, these early films toy with the bounds of what their technologies can do on the screen.

Pirie maintains that Whale's films are not effective iterations of the Gothic genre (402). I believe this is a narrow view given that his argument focuses on later films that diverge from the source material as far as having a female creature (whose soul is fused with that of a man) stalk and kill those who were involved with her earlier death (407-408). While themes like the mix of horror and sexuality may be related to the Gothic, they stray from Shelley's original concept, which places more emphasis on the act of creation amidst grim, tumultuous natural and emotional atmospheres. While the black and white films can also diverge in plot, they at least translate many of the same themes and hold true to the aesthetics of the novel, a loyalty made easier by the inherent prominence of shadow, darkness, and light in this era of the medium. Pirie fails to give serious thought to Whale's "stunning expressionist photography" (402) as it relates to genre, illustrating how the actual imagery within a

film is often an untapped source of critical thought when it comes to the faithfulness of adaptations.

As much as the first film adaptations of Shelley's *Frankenstein* may stray in their conception of plot elements, they hold a wealth of critical potential in the way the black and white medium effectively translates aspects of the novel into a visual format. The manipulation of shadow and the brilliant contrast of light as well as violent forces such as storms and fire enhance the atmosphere that the novel creates in words. The shadows force us to inspect the imposing, phantasmic shapes of the objects in these films' *mise en scène*, just as Victor anxiously observes his surroundings for signs of the Creature. Too often, we tend to overlook how the visual techniques of films can illuminate and explore themes from their source material. The early *Frankenstein* films even go beyond what is solely presented in the novel by utilizing its ideas to comment on film itself. Given this abundance of critical possibilities, I maintain that Whale's and Lee's films most effectively translate the novel and its Gothic nature into a visual format. Like Henry and the Creature coming face to face in the mill, we as the audience are led to confront all that daylight exposes as well as what lurks in the shadows just beyond.

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Judge’s comment: The essay offers a thoughtful analysis of how the early black and white film adaptations of the Frankenstein narrative actualize the novel’s metaphors, themes, and tropes.

THIRD PLACE

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A Mission From God: *The Blues Brothers* as a Crusade Epic

For almost a century, filmmakers have tried to capture the essence of the Crusades on the big screen. Christian knights and Muslim warriors have clashed countless times in theaters around the world, and have met with great success at the box office; however, all of these films simply fall short where historical accuracy is concerned. It seems as though history and entertainment are mutually exclusive, as far as Hollywood is concerned. One film, though, deserves the distinction of being the most accurate Crusader film of all time. That honor belongs to John Landis' *The Blues Brothers*.

At first glance the 1980 film is the story of two brothers, Elwood (Dan Aykroyd) and Jake Blues (John Belushi) who embark on a quest to “get the band back together” and raise enough money to save the orphanage they grew up in, all while avoiding the clutches of policemen, rednecks, and Nazis alike. But beneath the outrageous humor, outlandish stunts, and outstanding music lies a deeper truth, one that authentically captures the zeal and religious fervor of the Crusade period and places it almost seamlessly into a modern setting. Though the case may be made that the film lacks certain elements that are thought to be essential to a Crusade story, it cannot be denied that, at its heart, *The Blues Brothers* comes closer to embodying

the true spirit of this time period than any other motion picture, before or since.

The Surface-Level Connections

The most obvious connection between *The Blues Brothers* and the Crusades is, of course, that maxim that the brothers repeat throughout the film: that they are “on a mission from God” [*The Blues Brothers*]. It is no small stretch of the imagination to imagine Rev. Cleophis’ (James Brown) sermon as a modern retelling of Pope Urban II’s message at the Council of Clermont, (Madden, 7–8), or of Bernard of Clairvaux’s preaching of the Second Crusade (Madden, 52), or of Fulk of Neuilly’s promotion of the Fourth (Villehardouin, 5). After all, it is this message that sets off the events of the film, and given Jake and Elwood’s reactions when they “see the light,” one can easily see them as Crusaders in their own right, with St. Helen of the Blessed Shroud orphanage as their Jerusalem.

The Crusader connections do not stop there, however. Several events throughout the film harken back to this period in history. For instance, the extended sequence where the brothers hunt down their old bandmates and recruit them to their cause echoes back to the early stages of nearly every Crusade—especially the preparations for the Fourth, and the request for Marquis Boniface of Montferrat to lead the pilgrims after the death of Count Thibaut of Champagne (Villehardouin, 13–14). Another thing the Blues Brothers Band seems to share with the Crusaders is their money troubles, and just as the Fourth Crusaders came to doge Enrico Dandolo of Venice to order a fleet they could not afford (Villehardouin, 19–20), the Band came to Ray (Ray Charles) to get instruments and equipment on IOU. Further connections can be drawn between Elwood and Jake’s wildly successful advertising of the concert and the waves of

new recruits that Bernard of Clairvaux's preaching brought to the newly-formed Knights Templar (Madden, 46). And who could watch the scene where the Blues Brothers play a hugely successful concert at Bob's Country Bunker, yet failed to receive payment due to their own carelessness, and not be reminded of when the Crusaders accomplished the extraordinary feat of capturing Constantinople, and yet failed the ultimate goal of the Fourth Crusade? (Madden, 114). It is moments like these that tie *The Blues Brothers* to the Crusading history of centuries past, and reaffirm the spirit of the Crusades that lies at the film's heart.

The Core Divergence

Despite the numerous connections with the events of the Crusades, it must be pointed out that certain elements often thought integral to a Crusading story are absent from *The Blues Brothers*. For instance, a key component of every Crusade was the opposition of Muslim influence in the Holy Land. After all, it was the successive loss of a series of land holdings to Muslim hands that formed part of the impetus for the First Crusade to begin with (Andrea & Holt, 28). This is why, in the minds of many, the Crusades consisted of Christian soldiers hurling themselves against the amassed "armies of Islam" (Madden, 28), or vice versa, with Muslim warriors riding into battle against the "tyrants of polytheism" (Lindsay & Mourad, 73). *The Blues Brothers*, on the other hand, has no monolithic enemy to rally against, no great evil to be subdued, no godless heretics to vanquish. Indeed, the kind of deplorable activity that one might associate with the Crusades, that of persecuting a people on the basis of belief or race, is actually parodied in the film in the form of the Nazis, who are repeatedly mocked and humiliated by the narrative. The film does have more than its share of antagonists, surely, in the form of the

police, the Good Ol' Boys, and the Nazis. However, these groups serve not as targets to be eliminated, as one might expect from a Crusader film, but as hurdles to be overcome. To the Blues Brothers, however, the one true goal is to secure enough money to save the orphanage—or, in the Crusading sense, to take back their own Jerusalem. No bloodshed is necessary, no war is needed. This might not be what the audience expects from a Crusading movie, but this does not make the film's embodiment of the spirit of those times any less real. This core ideal, removed from any unnecessary violence, is the heart and soul of what a Crusade should have been, what it was meant to be when St. Augustine laid out his guidelines for holy war and made it clear that warfare was not to be a tool of the Church (Madden, 2). Somewhere along the way, that ideal became lost in the blood and the war-loot, such that the Christians became lost as well and began attacking each other. Modern audiences have been led astray as well, to the point that it's difficult even today to find the real heart of what the Crusades were. But against all odds, *The Blues Brothers* has found it.

The Deeper Connection

These certain trappings that one might expect from a Crusader film, those of righteous bloodshed or war against the infidel, are noticeably absent from *The Blues Brothers*. This is because, in reality, these concepts are not crucial to a Crusading story either. Rather, the one truth that is central to the idea of a Crusade, the kernel that the whole endeavor was built around from the start, is the idea of penitential pilgrimage. From the moment Urban II called for the First Crusade, noblemen across Europe were taking the cross—not out of hatred or fear of the infidel, but out of piety and spiritual duty (Madden, 12). St. Bernard took this one step further, and

preached the Second Crusade as an act of penitence in itself, offering indulgences to anyone who would take up their cross and embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Madden, 52). And in his *Audita tremendi*, Pope Gregory VIII calls for acts of penitence from all Christians, whether they be able to take up the cross or not, to atone for the great sin that led to the loss of Jerusalem to the armies of Salah al-Din (Madden, 77). This holy war was not one for the damnation of the enemy, but for the salvation of the self. And it is that spirit of salvation that is captured perfectly in *The Blues Brothers*. From the moment Sister Mary scolds the Blues brothers for the sins they've indulged in, and tells them "Don't come back until you've redeemed yourselves" (*The Blues Brothers*), Jake and Elwood Blues are on a penitential pilgrimage. Their destination is not a physical place, but the Promised Land of Rhythm & Blues which they had left behind. And though they lose their earthly freedom at the end of the movie, the spiritual freedom they gain is so much greater.

Though it may not be what audiences would expect from a Crusader film, *The Blues Brothers* exemplifies the core values of the Crusade in a way that no other film has been able to do. The choices made by the characters and the events that happen to them mirror the events of the Crusading period, this much is true. But beyond that, *The Blues Brothers* fully embodies the spirit of Crusade by exemplifying the concept of penitential pilgrimage. There is no war, bloodshed, or infidel in the film, because these ideas are not central to the Crusade. *The Blues Brothers* fully realizes the idea of war for the salvation of the self, not the damnation of the enemy. This is the way that Christian holy war was meant to be, and this is why *The Blues Brothers* is worthy of the title of the Greatest Crusading Movie of All Time.

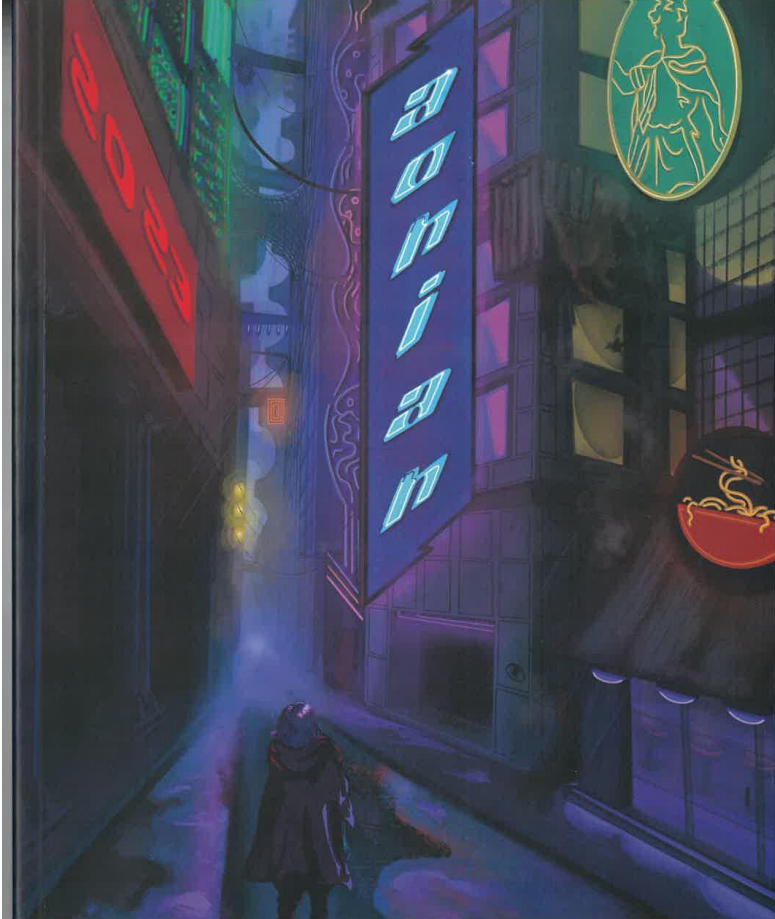
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- Madden, Thomas F. *The Concise History of the Crusades*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.
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Judge's comment: Written in an engaging prose style, the essay persuades the reader to see more in *The Blues Brothers* film than cop car crashes and satire. It makes a persuasive argument that Jake and Elwood's quest is one of epic proportions.

Literary Magazine

FIRST PLACE
Aonian
Hendrix College
Phillip Powell, Editor



Judge's comment: *Aonian's* cover art prepares you to enter some sort of nightclub, theater, or plex from a steamy alley. I felt anticipatory fluttering in my stomach—opening this journal was like walking through a dark doorway. I was immediately moved by editor-in-chief Phillip Powell's opening letter, which directly addresses the convergence of rapidly escalating political, social, environmental, and economic crises we face today, and the cynicism his generation holds: "that we won't be promoted to conductor until it is far too late. And it's not like we started the train." He distills what he's found through *Aonian* as "an unyielding insistence on speaking truth through art," naming what the editorial team and contributors have created together through this issue as "our most powerful act of defiance yet." Like any strong introduction, Powell's letter gave me a vital, compelling lens through which to approach the work that followed. There were countless pieces of strong poetry, prose, and visual art throughout the issue, and I appreciated the dynamic use of color across the layout, which (along with the published work) made good on the cover's promise to immerse you in some sort of dark, night-steeped container. Reading this issue of *Aonian* felt like being sucked into a black hole—in a good way.

SECOND PLACE

Castings

Christian Brothers University

Lara Stearsman, Chelsea Panameno, Anna Grace Barrett, Hobson Wodsworth, Ethan Tatom, Genevieve M. Baddorf (Flynn Bates), Strega Black, and Cameron Ireland, Editors



Judge's comment: I was immediately drawn to the documentary style cover art and sturdy square shape of *Castings*. As I ventured into the issue, my eyes lapped up the striking photos and devoured Chelsea Panameño's powerful prose piece, "The Lamb Leads Itself to Slaughter." I explored further, delighting in the juxtaposition between the cloud-reflected, placid waters in Jessica Moore's photograph "A Spring Swim" and the playful, grumpy-sheepish roleplay in Luis Artega's persona poem "Interrupting the Homo-Erotic Master of Evil." The thread of queer, campy sensuality continued unspooling throughout the issue, in Lara Stearsman's "Choke Me, Chicken," Anna Grace Barnett's "Conversations with a Caterpillar," and others. The vision, energy, and movement of this journal caught and held my attention, and the stark, minimalistic design made it easy to linger.

THIRD PLACE

The Switch: Literature & Fine Arts

The University of Tennessee at Martin

Ryesa McGehee, Editor

THE SWITCH



Judge's comment: When you encounter a print literary journal the size of a standard magazine, the invitation feels embodied: "pull up a chair and stay awhile." There's a spaciousness to the layout of *The Switch*, and, at the same time, a palpable sense of containment (attributable in part to black borders around the edges of many of the magazine's pages). The result of this tension is counterbalance, which brought pleasure to my eye and brain, and also propulsion—I didn't have to "endure" the magazine's layout in order to move through its contents and enjoy the writing and art featured. In fact, I especially enjoyed the thoughtful and intentional interplay between the writing and art, that issue-long unfolding of conversation between the two. There was a sophistication to the choices made in creating this issue of *The Switch*, and I'm glad I got to stay awhile.