Southern Literary Festival 2026 Anthology

2026 Festival Hosted *by*
University of tennessee at Chattanooga

2026 Anthology Designed *by*
University of Tennessee at Martin

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2026 SOUTHERN LITERARY FESTIVAL MEMBERS

Blue Mountain Christian University

Christian Brothers University

Columbus State University

Harding University

Hendrix college

Middle Tennessee State University

Millsaps college

Mississippi State University

Mississippi University for Women

Motlow State Community College

Tennessee Tech University

University of Arkansas Fort Smith

University of Mississippi

University of North Georgia

University of Pikeville

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

University of Tennessee at Martin

2026 SLF WRITING COMPETITION WINNERS

Poetry judged by Christian Gerard

1st Theodore Lopata, University of North Georgia
2nd Emma Field, Harding University
3rd Locklyn Wilchynski, University of Mississippi

Short Story judged by Leslie Lachance

1st Saige Jackson, University of Tennessee Chattanooga
2nd Ainslee Davenport, Tennessee Tech University
3rd Nate Donohue, University of Mississippi

One-Act Play judged by Mcadoo Greer

1st Ashley Tunnell, University of North Georgia
2nd Jessica Pruitt, Middle Tennessee State University
3rd Daniela Guedez, University of North Georgia

Creative Nonfiction judged by Mary Collins

1st Carolina Kelley, University of Tennessee Chattanooga
2nd Hailey Winningham, Tennessee Tech University
3rd Sarah Keen, Tennessee Tech University

Formal Essay judged by John Mark Adrian

1st Savannah Flowers, Columbus State University
2nd Elena Harman, Mississippi State University
3rd Katie Nelson, Tennessee Tech University

Print Journal judged by Tomi McCutcheon

1st *Castings*, Ashlyn Arnold, Baridakara Meneh, Israel Rusch, editors
2nd *Arden*, Elizabeth Woods, editor
3rd *The Switch*, Elle Edwards, editor

Online Journal

1st *Applause*, Ari Long, editor

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POETRY

ATTACHMENT STYLES

by Theodore Lopata, University of North Georgia

if i try to touch, there are thimbles on every one of my fingers.

i press metal instead of your face;
you smell iron instead of my skin

i am afraid to be pricked,
but grieving your film-covered eyes, mourning my hands
which you will not feel

it feels like needles near my pupils:

i will be destroyed if i blink or tremble,
so there is no appropriate way to cry.

this is the closest i can get to intimacy.
i am killed by these steel, latticed parents.

BOTTLEFED

by Emma Field, Harding University

i latched onto nothing
mouth open
waiting
but she was hollow
her love curdled before
it met my lips

she left me hungry
hollow ribbed with want
aching for a lullaby
i learned how to cradle
myself and whisper
in a voice i hope sounded like hers

hunger taught me patience
emptiness taught me need
loneliness taught me to rock
myself in a chair too big
i tucked myself under the sheets
with the weight of an absent touch

i mixed the formula myself
measured each ounce with care

so i fed her
wiped her lips
held the bottle steady
when she called me mama
with the innocent voice of a new born
i only sighed and let her drink
as if love could be learned in reverse

BAMBI

by Locklyn Wilchynski, University of Mississippi

The South raised me gently.
It welcomed my brother and me
into its heat and June bugs,
into afternoons thick with sunlight,
and the scent of gardenias
hanging low in the air.

I thought God lived beneath
the wallpaper of my great-grandmother's trailer—
floral, peeling, patient, lingering.
I think He still does,
in quiet corners of the world,
in the spaces between our heartbeats.

I was knock-kneed and doe-eyed,
a wild child, a fawn,
full of wonder and too young to worry.
And though the treeline held its patient watch,
with teeth in its belly and hushes in the air,
I ran.

I ran barefoot through the overgrown yard,
swallowed the wind,
exhaled my youth,
and carried the certainty
that things would unfold
exactly as they were meant to.

And even then,
I carried a certainty
I could not name:
that life would bend toward me

in ways I could not yet see,
that the sunlight always returns,
that the path will open
where I am meant to go.

SHORT STORY

A MOTHER'S MIDNIGHT DIARY

by Saige Jackson, University of Tennessee Chattanooga

M got her shots today, and it feels like–even now, at night, as the dishwasher hums beyond this door and her nightlight creates its own silence–it feels like at any moment, my chest will sink to the floor. Everything vital to me, the beating things, the expanding things, will compress themselves into the head of a nail and drag me to the carpet, to the earth beneath, where I will have no choice but to wait, not breathing and with no blood, just weight, for the hammer to drop. I'm too tired to think of who is holding it, the hammer, ready to beat my heart for me.

I couldn't look at her, which was the worst part. The last thing I remember seeing was Ryan's face, soaked with grief, before everything became the hardwood floor and the screaming.

I dressed her this morning. I whispered to her. She woke up in one of those grasping moods, her hands opening before her eyes. Each of her eyelashes, I love. I'll remember how they look tomorrow, when I remember to breathe. Her fingers fluttered around her ears, tangling in the curls there. I told her it was time to get up, goodmorning, time to get ready, and I wish I would have known to apologize to her then, while her eyes were still soft, while she held the crook of my elbow as I held her, on the edge of the bed. I took more time than usual undoing each of the velcro straps on her leg braces, the little globes of her knees trying to relax. I knew. She didn't fuss as I brushed her teeth, pulled her sweater over her head, fastened her boots over her tennis shoes, more velcro. That's

the sound of love, velcro. I wish she could move without so much restriction of movement. I can't cry for her ankles anymore.

She asked where we were going and I said the doctor. She asked who and I said a new one. I didn't say it was a doctor with needles. Some mornings must go undisturbed.

Ryan drove us to Nashville. The drive was a quiet one, for her. She slept for the whole two hours and Ryan played the CD he burned for our 10th. I don't know if he skipped to "Landslide" for his nerves or for mine, but I love him, I do. I could tell how much he wanted her to wake up by the way his eyes kept shifting to the rearview mirror. There was no traffic at 5 in the morning, he just likes to hear her say "snow-covered."

The doctor's name was Sharp and I didn't like the oil of his hair. It gleamed in the room's sterile light, and I was afraid it was going to leak onto her, the way certain sadnesses have a way of flowing and sticking. She sat with her legs swinging over the edge of the patient table, ripping holes in the tissue paper and smiling to herself. Sharp made her walk down the hallway, demonstrating for him, "let's see what we're working with" in the smug way all doctors speak. I watched him watch her legs and I wanted to tell him about the time she first took a step, holding on to the dog, clinging onto the world, but his eyes stopped me. They saw a problem to be fixed and

none of the miracle and I can't believe a doctor delivered her into life and now a doctor will force her into pain.

The wheels of her walker made a whirring sound across the floor. When she turned around, she asked if she was doing good and I said heel, toe, baby and Ryan said so good.

I don't know why I couldn't praise her. I will tell her she is beautiful tomorrow, when I kiss her fingers. Then, maybe she will forgive me.

When we got back into the room, Sharp started saying things about Botox and muscle spasms and the number nine and something about each leg and "it will help" something. It will help his eyes rest. I don't know what.

She started to squirm when the nurses came and swabbed the back of her calves with alcohol wipes. I could hear the tissue paper crin-

kling. They wore purple scrubs and kind smiles behind their masks, I'm sure. Ryan wrung his hands. I didn't touch him, and why?

The first shot I won't forget. The nurse was efficient, and Sharp was insistent. It's just a pinch, sweetheart, it'll be over soon. There was oil in his voice, too.

She screamed, she screamed. It opened up the room it lodged behind my eyes it wracked her small innocence. She screamed. "Mr. Wells! Mr. Wells! You're going to have to hold her still so we can do the rest!" She kicked and whined. Her hair fell loose around her eyes, sticking to her tears and snot. I looked here and no farther.

I watched as Ryan stood up and lay on his back on the table next to her. He picked her up and wrapped her in his arms, bear hugging her to his chest. Immediately, she relaxed. Her legs quieted, those defiant things. She was home, she could smell it. Her nose nuzzled into his shirt like an eskimo kiss. He stroked her hair. The brown of his beard blended with the brown at the crown of her head. She is of him, she is, I thought, and each twist of his mouth, stifling a sob, echoed the same.

I imagine the second needle pierced her right as their heartbeats sank in rhythm, beating together like they did that first time, four years ago, in a different hospital room, one framed in early morning orange, when I was the one on my back, sweating and tearful, and

it felt like love, so big I could taste it, would never stop ripping me open. When she was a bald, pink, new thing with dark, dark eyes, and Ryan held her in one arm to his bare chest, tethering her, telling her he was her daddy, again and again.

Just a little pinch.

DADDY MAKE HIM STOP PLEASE MAKE HIM STOP DADDY HE'S HURTING ME PLEASE MAKE IT STOP DADDY!

He held her to him, he held her there, so that this medicine might make her legs stop fighting her. For a time.

The floorboards, the floorboards. I can't sink there, again.

We have another appointment scheduled in six weeks.

I thought it would help to write this down. It hasn't. I still hear her.

I carried her to the car while her eyes were still things to be afraid of. I felt her hands clasp around my neck, the velcro of her boots

snag on my shirt, her legs fell around my middle. I felt these things but didn't see them, like the tears in my eyes. I made it out of the door, somehow. She said something felt wrong, and said it softly, and I didn't ask what but I knew it was Ryan's heart. He left it there on the patient table, bloody and in jagged pieces, and no one else seemed to notice. I thought he would turn back for it, after everything was over, but he left it there, unwilling to pick it up after she reached for me to hold her, searching for a safer place. His embrace meant pain, all of a sudden, and he knew it.

When we got back home, I gave her a bath, thinking I needed to wash the oil from her hair. The little round bandaids on the back of her calves curled under the water. She sang to herself. I didn't know the song. I remember the way she said I love you, goodnight to Ryan as we walked by him through the den. Her feet were bare. She said it in the crook of his neck, with her arms around him, like normal. He pressed his lips to her ear, to the side of her face, for maybe two moments longer.

I think we'll be alright if we can just remember what we made.

After I put her down, Ryan went into the guest bedroom and shut the door. He didn't speak to me. I sat with my back to the wall next to the door and listened to him sob. It sounded like a Psalm, muted and broken. I heard him plead with God for forgiveness. I heard

him demand mercy for paying the price of love. The only words he said were "I'm sorry" over and over and over.

I couldn't open the door. All I echoed was please. It sounded low.

FREE FOR THE TANKING

by Ainslee Davenport, Tennessee Tech University

Madeline spent the afternoon before the 4th of July as she had spent the rest of her summer: roaming around Aunt Rebecca's property, snaking through the trees, and weaving in and out of the shallow creek, CJ dogging at her heels.

"Is your aunt making banana pudding for tomorrow?" CJ asked. Her long, frizzy brunette hair was pulled back in a ponytail on account of the muggy air. A stick snapped beneath her.

Madeline pushed a wet, leafy branch out of her path and ignored the way CJ squealed as it showered her with droplets when she let go. "I don't know," Madeline said, after a moment. She regretted wearing a rain jacket. It had stopped raining, and the heat made the material stick to her sweaty skin where her tank top didn't cover. At least she was wearing shorts. CJ was dressed more sensibly in a graphic t-shirt and blue athletic shorts, though her threadbare crossbody bag kept getting caught on low branches. Madeline also regretted not pulling up her hair or bringing a hair tie. CJ probably had one in her bag, but Madeline didn't want to ask.

A bad storm had come through yesterday, the remnants of which still dripped from the canopy above. Fallen branches littered the familiar path. It made Madeline a bit sick to see that this much could change overnight. She had the urge to pull out her phone to take a picture to have something that wouldn't change, but she pushed the feeling away. Why take a photo that she knew would make her sad to look at later? Why get attached to something you couldn't keep? They say if you love something, then let it go, but Madeline preferred not to get attached in the first place. That way she never had to let things go. She didn't let herself get too close to CJ, either, among other reasons. Madeline might not even be able to come back next summer, and even if she did, the time between

summers was long. CJ, or Madeline herself, could change far more in a fall, winter, and spring than a forest could change in one night.

CJ would probably change for the worse, too, becoming even more annoying than she already was, if that was possible. So really it was better if they stayed acquaintances. For CJ's sake of course.

As much fun as this summer was, it couldn't last. Madeline only had a couple more days before she had to go home and then it would be over and done with.

"Well, if Rebecca's not going to make banana pudding, my mom will."

Madeline paused, balancing on a thick tree root a couple of feet from the edge of the water. She wobbled when her worn-out sneakers, damp from the creek water and mud, threatened to twist on her feet. She should have tied them tighter to keep them secure, but, loose like this, Madeline could just slip them on and off at Aunt Rebecca's doorway.

CJ was frustratingly steady in her flip-flops, even slick with mud as they were. As much as Madeline was familiar with their surroundings, CJ was doubly so. Madeline wished she would trip. "Cool," Madeline said, continuing towards the edge of the tree line. CJ followed.

Early in the summer, after a few times of stumbling across a strange girl roaming around her aunt's property, who had introduced herself as "Cara Jean, but call me CJ," Madeline had asked Aunt Rebecca if they should report her for trespassing. Aunt Rebecca had just laughed and laughed. Apparently, CJ had free reign over Aunt Rebecca's land as well as her own family's and had made good use of that freedom for years. CJ knew her way around better than Madeline ever could. The only reason Madeline didn't recognize her already was that Madeline hadn't been around in a couple of

years, instead spending her summers at home and at various summer camps.

CJ was bubbly, annoying, and, worst of all and as much as Madeline hated to admit it, CJ was kind of fun to hang out with. She was the type of person to grow on you. Like mold. And CJ was somehow able to put up with Madeline's surly personality that put most people off. Madeline's mom said that the reason she had no friends was because she couldn't fix her attitude.

"Great. Oh, and I'll make cupcakes." CJ liked to bake. Madeline was glad it was a hobby and not a career aspiration. CJ's baked goods always came out flat and dense. Madeline suspected it was because CJ did not have the patience to let the oven pre-heat. Aunt Rebecca and CJ's mom always fawned over CJ's homemade food, which Madeline thought was stupid. No use giving CJ a delusional ego. She could manage that herself.

"Are you going to bake anything for the party?" CJ asked.

"I don't think so." Madeline didn't bother with baking. She didn't like doing things she didn't have to. Besides, if Madeline were to make awful treats, no one would fawn over her, surely. The last time she tried to make brownies, her dad had said they tasted like dirt. CJ was allowed to get away with stuff Madeline never could. She refused to be jealous. It was better to be told the truth. "I'll probably just help Aunt Rebecca with whatever she's making."

CJ made a noise of consideration. "Oh! Can you text me if it turns out your aunt is making banana pudding? So I can tell my mom to make something else?"

Madeline angled her face away from CJ and rolled her eyes. CJ had been vying for Madeline's phone number all summer. "I guess I could email you." As a concession to CJ's constant pestering—and a mild attempt to not look like a total jerk—Madeline gave her an

email address. Not her main one, which was saved for important things like school and clubs, but one she used for things that would probably get it put on spam lists, like signing up for discounts on websites. It turned out that was a good idea. CJ had sent her several pictures of her living room, farm animals, and a cake in many stages of being baked and decorated. In four different emails. On the first day. Madeline had never responded and had stopped checking that inbox soon after.

"Oh, okay. I'll make sure to check my email, then!" CJ didn't even sound disappointed. She was cheery like that.

The girls exited the trees into an open field. The sky was still overcast. The forecast for tomorrow did not bode well for parties or fireworks, either. Walking along the fence that marked the boundary between her aunt's and the neighboring property, a curious cow ambled toward the wire fence. Madeline had learned by now that it wasn't any affinity for her that drew the cows to snuffle at her hair and run rough tongues over her fingers. They were just hoping that she had food to give them. Aunt Rebecca didn't have cows anymore. They were too expensive and too much work for one woman, especially a borderline elderly one. Now she just kept a small patch of crops by the house. Madeline refused to feel guilty for being glad they were gone. It was always a hassle helping out with them under the hot summer sun. She also refused to admit that maybe she missed them a little. Cows were cute, sue her. The cows currently gazing at the girls with large, black eyes belonged to CJ and her family, the Wilsons.

Another neighbor, a stocky man named Glenn, had his property beside the Wilson's and catty-corner to Aunt Rebecca's. He didn't have any farm animals or crops except for a small garden near his house. He seemed to only use his land for joyrides on his four-wheeler. Aunt Rebbecca had said he only moved in a couple

months ago, shortly before Madeline had come to stay for the first half of summer, and she already didn't seem fond of him.

As Madeline and CJ neared the intersection between the three properties, a quiet bark sounded out from the direction of Glenn's house, and a small blur raced towards them. Even if CJ was as unbearable as Madeline pretended she was, Madeline would still hang out with her and not just because it made Aunt Rebecca happy that Madeline had made a friend. Madeline would still hang out with CJ because of Tank.

CJ fished a leash out of her bag and kneeled, letting Tank jump on her and lick all over her face. She clipped the leash to the ring on Tank's dirty, red collar. Madeline wasn't sure what the leash was for, since Tank seemed content to follow CJ without any incentive, and Glenn let her free roam. It probably just made CJ feel responsible. The first time Madeline had met Tank, CJ had simply pulled her along towards her house, saying "You've got to meet my dog, Tank! She's around back, eating some of my leftover lunch."

With a name like Tank, Madeline had expected a big, mean-looking dog, like a Pitbull or a German Shepherd. A Great Dane, maybe. Tank, however, was a sweet, quiet little thing. A caramel-colored Cocker Spaniel. Tank also wasn't CJ's dog, no matter how much she pretended otherwise. Tank was Glenn's dog, though you could hardly call him a responsible owner. Tank had thick, matted fur and usually showed up so grimy that Madeline sometimes didn't even want to touch her. CJ had no such qualms, running her hands along Tank's back and scratching around her ears. Tank just wiggled, turning around in circles excitedly, and licked her fingers. CJ's voice was usually mildly annoying, but it was even more so when she pitched up her voice and spoke in a baby voice for Tank's benefit. "Do you want to go play? Do you want to come play with us?" Madeline looked back toward the trees that lined the creek and rolled her eyes. She thought the whole act was stupid, but Tank seemed to enjoy it, so whatever. "Let's go play!" CJ and Tank

took off running towards the creek. Madeline wished she didn't like dogs, sometimes. She followed them, regardless.

*

Madeline felt a bit like a child digging in the dirt, instead of sixteen. CJ kneeling beside her, grinning widely and happily scooping up bits of mud and grass for Tank to sniff, didn't help the feeling. Tank had apparently buried a rubber ball by this particular tree a couple days ago while playing with CJ when Madeline had been busy helping Aunt Rebecca reorganize her basement. CJ had decided that they should find it.

Madeline had been surprised to learn that the other girl was almost a year older than her when CJ had her seventeenth birthday party in early June. She acted much younger. Madeline gave up on digging and wiped her muddy hands on her shorts. She had given up on keeping her outfit clean a while ago. CJ was even worse, muddy pawprints traveling up and down her legs and arms and bag dragging in the dirt beside her. Despite being the one to initiate the search, CJ didn't seem too concerned with finding the toy, instead choosing to wrestle Tank with her hands. Tank was absolutely nasty at this point, mud getting caught in matted fur. Madeline hoped CJ was at least planning to hose her off before she let the dog go

home.

"I don't think we're going to find it," Madeline said after a moment. CJ didn't look up from where she was playing with Tank.

"That's fine. I've got some other balls at home that she can play with." Madeline felt a twinge of annoyance at that.

"Do you want a dog?" CJ asked, suddenly. Madeline hummed. "We used to have one. His name was Brisket. He got hit by a car a couple years ago."

CJ shuffled awkwardly. "Sorry."

Madeline avoided the hand reaching to pat her on the shoulder. "It's fine. It was a while ago. I'm over it. My mom wants a new dog, though." She snorted. "She said if we ever found one on the street

that we could keep it."

CJ was uncharacteristically quiet. A glance at CJ revealed that she was grinning wildly again. Freaky.

"But you do want one? Because I know a dog that looks like she's been on the streets."

Madeline regarded her suspiciously. Maybe CJ was stupider than she thought. It wouldn't be too surprising. "You do know that Tank's not actually your dog, right?"

"I know. But—"

"You can't just give away somebody else's dog."

"I'm not trying to give away somebody else's dog. I'm saying we should steal somebody else's dog. So you can have a dog."

Madeline stared at her in disbelief. "I think that's worse, actually."

"You have to admit it would be better for her. You know Glenn doesn't take care of her."

Madeline's knee-jerk reaction was to just leave. Go back to her aunt's house and ignore CJ for a few days until she could leave to travel home and never return. Maybe return. There was next summer, of course, but there was also summer camps and traveling from dad's house to mom's house and back again. Things that made it hard to carve out time to visit Aunt Rebecca. But then she thought about it. Really thought about it. It was fun playing with Tank and CJ, but she often found herself pulling away. This wasn't something she could keep. She couldn't take anything home from this summer but memories. She would leave, but Aunt Rebecca would stay here. CJ would stay here. But what if she could keep Tank? Whether she was able to return to this place, Aunt Rebecca,

and everyone else might still be up in the air, but if Tank could leave with her… And Lord knows that Madeline deserved Tank more than Glenn did.

"Won't Glenn just call the cops?" Madeline asked. "Don't dogs have microchips? I don't want to go down for dognapping."

CJ laughed. "I don't think Glenn cares enough to call the cops. I asked him once, and he said he's never bothered to get her microchipped. Apparently, Tank was his mom's dog before she passed, and he felt obligated to keep her."

"Why don't you just take her then?"

"Because he'll know it's me, silly. I'm the only one he's ever seen playing with her. Just because he doesn't care enough to call the cops, doesn't mean he won't walk to his neighbor's house to take her back

again."

"So you want me to take her because I'm leaving in a few days."

CJ smiled and dragged Tank into her lap. "Exactly! And you can tell your mom you found her on the side of the road while you were driving home or something."

"That's such a stupid idea."

CJ's face fell.

"How would we do it?" Madeline continued, reaching out to pet Tank.

CJ grinned.

*

Madeline had been in CJ's room a few times over the summer, and it always looked vaguely like a kindergarten classroom and a rainbow had been thrown in a blender and then plastered onto the walls. Ripped out pages of magazines stuck to the walls of CJ's bedroom, held up by jagged pieces of Scotch tape. Brightly colored clothes were strewn about the floor haphazardly. It wasn't dirty, exactly, but it definitely wasn't neat. Madeline's own room in her aunt's house looked the same as it did when she arrived at the beginning of summer, log cabin quilt on the bed and Aunt Rebecca's spare sewing supplies on and around the desk. She hadn't bothered to unpack her suitcase, instead keeping it unzipped under the bed so she could grab things as needed. The room would look the same when she left, too. CJ's room, on the other hand, was wholly her own. Even if she took all of her belongings out and cleaned up for

once, there would still be paint chipped off the walls and scribbles on the baseboards.

CJ picked her way across the floor, avoiding stepping on clothes and other miscellaneous items. Madeline didn't bother, instead choosing to hover in the doorway. CJ pulled something out from a plastic tub underneath her windowsill and held it aloft. "I stole my brother's electric razor. Don't worry, he won't miss it. He bought it to shave his head once and then forgot about it."

Madeline really didn't care if CJ's brother would miss it.

CJ continued. "We can use it to shave Tank when we get her. She'll look so different without all that hair."

"I think a shaved dog will still look suspicious if someone is looking for a stolen dog."

CJ pouted. "Whatever. Tank needs to be shaved anyway. Her hair's all matted."

Madeline was suddenly hit with how absolutely annoying CJ was. Aunt Rebecca was always going on and on about how great CJ was. About how kind and good she was. It was just so… annoying to hear about how perfect CJ was. It didn't matter to Madeline's aunt how CJ was cringe and childish and annoying sometimes.

Madeline crossed into the room abruptly and began to rummage through the closet. "You wouldn't mind if I borrowed something

for tonight, would you?" It was a request meant to annoy, to finally get a reaction out of her.

However, when Madeline turned to look at CJ's face, hands still grasping hangers, CJ was grinning widely. "Of course! I have some 4th of July stuff!"

Oh. A miscalculation.

"We can even match! My mom got my sister and I some matching T-shirts for 4th of July a few years ago, and they both ended up in my closet," CJ continued.

That was how Madeline ended up beginning her criminal career as a trespasser and dog-snatcher in the dorkiest looking vinyl red, white, and blue T-shirt imaginable. She didn't see how wearing matching clothes helped CJ's case against being an accomplice if they were caught, but as long as Madeline didn't get caught, everything would be fine.

*

Glenn's house was different than Madeline expected. Madeline had only been to the edge of the property before, waiting for Tank to come running or for CJ to return with Tank leashed by her side. The yard was well-trimmed and broken tree branches from the previous day's storm had already been dragged into a neat pile. The porch was clear except for a solitary rocking chair. A shiny, cherry red vintage car sat in the driveway. It looked well cared for, despite its age. Madeline wondered if he put it up in his garage for the storm and then took it out immediately after, just on the off chance someone might see it and be impressed. It seemed like it would have been scratched up by fallen debris during the storm if he had left it out. Dark clouds rolled overhead, making Madeline worry

that Glenn might return sooner than expected to protect his car from the weather.

Madeline and CJ had hashed out the details of the plan yesterday. Glenn would be at the 4th of July party at Aunt Rebecca's house, along with CJ and her family, and some other neighbors and people from Aunt Rebecca's church. Even though Aunt Rebecca didn't like Glenn, she had felt obligated to invite him out of neighborly politeness. CJ would keep Glenn busy and give herself an alibi since Glenn would know she was at the party the whole time if she wouldn't stop talking to him. Madeline was tasked with the actual heist. Madeline suddenly regretted not giving CJ her number. Now she couldn't even call to warn Madeline if Glenn was coming back. Well. Karma and all that. Madeline would have to make do.

She trekked past the front of the house and around back, where a set of wooden stairs led up to the back door. Glenn kept it unlocked, apparently. She didn't really want to know why CJ knew that. It was probably because Glenn trusted CJ to get Tank when she was inside, but Madeline couldn't help but hope CJ was hiding a secret evil side under her bubbly exterior. CJ was so nice all the time that it was creepy. There had to be something wrong with her.

It was almost too easy to ascend the old, rickety stairs and reach for the handle. No loud alarm bells rang, and Glenn didn't suddenly come shouting around the side of the house. If this was a movie, she would probably be chased through a field by Glenn with a shotgun. But it wasn't a movie, and Glenn was still at Aunt Rebecca's 4th of July party, hopefully still being pestered by CJ. She was good at that. Pestering people.

Madeline's heart caught in her throat when the door didn't open on the first pull. Was CJ wrong about it being locked? Tank scratched

at the door on the other side. She gave another sharp tug, and the door opened. She let out a sigh of relief. It was just jammed.

Tank jumped at her, paws scrabbling at her denim shorts. Madeline was halfway afraid she'd jump her little body right off the porch. Madeline reached down and lifted Tank into her arms. Tank didn't make it easy. She was always a wiggly animal. "Hi," Madeline whispered. She felt stupid as soon as the word left her mouth. She didn't talk to animals like they could understand human speech. That was the type of thing CJ did. After glancing around for an angry Glenn to appear and seeing nobody in the vicinity, Madeline hurried down the stairs, clutching Tank to her chest. She was still gross with her matted fur, even with the quick bath CJ had given her yesterday. Madeline almost tripped on the second to last step when Tank licked across her chin and mouth. "Ew," Madeline grouched, smiling. "Gross little dog." Tank just wiggled happily.

When Madeline returned to the house, the party was in full swing. Kids chased each other with sparklers, and somebody's uncle was setting up fireworks. The sky was dark and cloudy, but it hadn't started raining. Nobody seemed to notice her as she approached. Still, she felt as if she had DOGNAPPER written across her forehead in thick sharpie. As planned, she had stashed the mutt in an abandoned cow pen in the barn, plied with as many old towels to lay on and toys to play with as CJ could find in her house. The barn was far enough away that any noise Tank made would not be audible to the partygoers. Tank usually didn't bark loudly or much at all anyway, and the loud country music playing would surely cover it up if Tank had a change of personality. As soon as the party was over, they were going to put CJ's brother's electric razor to good use. They were just lucky the barn still had working outlets. They had already talked to CJ's parents and Madeline's aunt, and CJ was going to stay over for a sleepover, as long as they agreed to actually sleep, so Madeline could be well-rested for her drive home. Made-

line doubted they would get anything more than a nap, too busy worrying about their grand theft canine hidden in the barn.

Madeline climbed the steps to the porch and slipped inside the front door. A group was settled on the couch in the living room, watching some sports game, paper plates resting on their knees. She scurried into the kitchen. She needed to get some food, so she could pretend she had been there the whole time. She snagged a paper bowl off the counter and scooped some of the first thing she saw: banana pudding. Picking up a plastic spoon and shoveling banana pudding into her mouth, Madeline forced herself to relax. Nervous people looked guilty.

CJ stood by the kitchen table, cornering Glenn, who was quickly downing a beer. Madeline blamed Glenn for a lot of things—mostly animal neglect—but she didn't blame him for needing a drink when talking to CJ. Madeline saw the moment CJ recognized she was in the room, because she started waving and beckoning her to come over. Madeline wanted to scream. *Please don't call attention to me. I just kidnapped this man's dog.* Since it would be more suspicious to run, Madeline was forced to cross the room and join the two.

Glenn gestured towards her with his beer bottle. "Who's this?"

Madeline felt a wave of relief. If Glenn didn't recognize her, then that meant he hadn't ever noticed her hanging around Tank. She probably wasn't on his radar enough to ever make it on the list of suspects when he realized Tank was gone.

CJ pulled Madeline against her side. "This is Madeline. She's my best friend!" she announced cheerily.

The banana pudding turned sour in Madeline's stomach. She couldn't be CJ's best friend. That was just horrible. Madeline felt hot. Angry, maybe, that CJ would feel entitled to say that, to think

that Madeline was a good enough friend to say that. Didn't she have any other friends?

"Good for you," Glenn said sarcastically, then finished off his beer. He wandered off, probably to find a new one. What a jerk.

Madeline could practically feel CJ vibrating with the need to ask about Tank. Madeline elbowed her before she could speak. To be totally honest… Madeline didn't have another friend, either. She didn't talk to any of the other teenagers that lived near her aunt's house, and she certainly didn't have any friends back home.

Oh. CJ was Madeline's best friend, too. That sucked. Well, they had just stolen a dog together. That had to count for something.

*

The next morning rolled around, and the clouds moved on, the sky clearing to a baby blue. Madeline should have slept. She had a long drive ahead of her. Instead, she had stayed up all night with CJ, switching between playing cards on the floor of her bedroom and going out to the barn to check on Tank. Tank was a good sport about it, wiggling happily when they arrived and laying back down in her makeshift bed of towels when they left.

"This would have been great weather for yesterday." Aunt Rebecca peered up at the sky in disdain. "Let me help with your bags."

"No, thanks. I've already got everything loaded." Madeline wanted to keep her aunt as far away from her beat-up grey car as possible. Madeline and CJ had decided on one of their trips to the barn that they had to find a way to get Tank into Madeline's car without Aunt Rebecca seeing. Aunt Rebecca wasn't a snitch, but they weren't taking any chances. They had loaded Madeline's suitcase and the few other bags she had brought while the sky was still purple as a bruise. Sleeplessness had cast a hazy film over the whole

thing, and they couldn't stop giggling when Madeline had accidentally dropped her makeup bag in the dirt by the mailbox. Neither of them had wanted to leave Tank in the car alone for any longer than they had to, so while Aunt Rebecca and CJ's mom were finishing up breakfast, the girls had snuck out once again to ferry Tank from the barn to Madeline's backseat. It was time to leave. Tank was hidden underneath a towel, and the windows were cracked. CJ loitered by the car under the guise of waiting to say goodbye. Her family were further up the driveway, talking with Aunt Rebecca. They had already given Madeline their well wishes and goodbyes. Madeline was just glad that Glenn didn't feel neighborly enough to say goodbye. She doubted he was even awake yet, with how many beers he drank at the party.

Madeline gave Aunt Rebecca one last hug. "Bye." She paused, before forcing out, "I'll miss you."

"Sweet girl. I'll miss you too. It's not fair that you're leaving halfway through the summer," Aunt Rebecca griped. "You'll just have to visit next summer to make it up to me."

A slight smile pulled at Madeline's cheeks. "Sure."

Aunt Rebecca patted her shoulder, then pushed her towards the car. "You better get going if you want to be home any time soon."

Madeline waved as she made her way towards her car and ducked inside, moving to sit behind the wheel. The bundle of towels in the backseat exploded into movement, Tank peeking her head out of the pile. CJ quickly leaned against Madeline's car door, hiding the

motion inside from view of the group in the driveway. She was oddly hesitant. "Could we maybe email each other?"

"Yeah, maybe." Madeline pushed Tank's head down and out of sight, pretending to adjust one of her bags in the back seat.

"Are you thinking of coming back next summer?"

"Yeah," she said, rolling up her window. "Maybe."

As CJ's waving form disappeared from her rearview mirror, Madeline told herself that it didn't matter if CJ ever found the little scrap of paper with a phone number that Madeline had snuck into her ugly bookbag. It didn't matter if she never saw any of these people again.

Tank wiggled in the back seat. Madeline had something to keep from this summer.

BABY TEETH

by Nate Donohue, University of Mississippi

After they pull my tooth they put it on a tray and on the way out I stop and look at it and Mom says TJ come on but I guess I'm still sleepy from the medicine because I just keep on looking. It's one of those fat teeth. Bumpy. A little yellow. Mom is always telling me I don't brush very good so looking at it I think maybe she's right. The tooth has these two long tails on the bottom, probably where it stuck in my gums. It's laying on this folded paper towel that's all wet and spotty with blood and beside it are these sharp silver things which look like forks except they only have one poky needle on the end instead of four. After Byron died Mom told me Santa and the Easter Bunny aren't real. She said she didn't feel like keeping it a secret anymore and I guess that's a shame because it never bothered me much but I did wish Byron would have gotten a chance to know. Maybe God told him in heaven, if that's where he is. Whenever I ask Mom she pretends like she doesn't hear so I don't really know. Anyway she never said anything about the tooth fairy and I never thought to ask her till now, because if the tooth fairy is real then I need to take this tooth home and put it under my pillow.

Then the dentist-guy, he's wearing light blue long sleeves and pants and a mask, he comes and takes the tray and the poking forks and walks off down the hallway. I want to say something because after all the tooth is mine. But my cheeks are all tingly and my mouth won't work and then Mom stands over me and snatches my arm and pulls me away.

Another dentist-lady with a mask comes over to help. They take me out through a back door. The dentist-lady is on one side and she's holding my hand real tight but still friendly and on the other

side Mom's dragging my wrist and I don't want to look at her face because I know she's mad.

Mom buckles me in the car seat and shuts the door. I hear her talking to the dentist-lady. She keeps doing the fake laugh she does around other grownups and the dentist-lady probably thinks she's sweet.

Then Mom goes around the car and gets in the front. She's not smiling anymore.

Ma, I say as we pull out of the parking lot. Just Ma, because there's something soft and fuzzy in my mouth which makes it hard to talk.

What.

I ask her if the tooth fairy is real. My face is thick like peanut butter.

What?

I ask her again.

Of course it isn't real, she says. I told you that.

Nuh yuh din't, I say.

She looks at me in the mirror. Excuse me?

I try to explain that she told me Santa and the Easter Bunny aren't real but that she never said anything about the tooth fairy but my chin is still heavy and I can't really think straight and I forget what

I'm saying halfway through.

She laughs in that mean way which means she doesn't think anything is funny and looks back at the road. Stop trying to talk, she says. We'll be home soon. You can have some Advil then.

So I give up and lay back. Even though my mouth doesn't move right my mind feels all light and jumpy and I start thinking about where all our kiddy teeth go if there isn't a tooth fairy. I don't really know what stuff you're supposed to throw away and what you're supposed to recycle so I don't know what you do with teeth. I wonder if Mom keeps them all in a baggie maybe. Or her purse. Maybe she takes them out and looks at them whenever she misses Byron. At first that seems a little weird but then I think some more and decide maybe it isn't. See, Byron used to play with dominoes. Whenever Mom took him to the hospital she'd let him hold his dominoes and that calmed him down more than any of the rattly toys the nurses gave him. Of course when the doctors brought the loud machines and put tubes inside of him he still cried but his little hands never let go of those dominoes.

Mom took all his toys to Goodwill when he died. She said we had too many toys in the house and this way other kids would have something to play with, kids who weren't spoiled like me. But I hid Byron's box of dominoes under my bed. Me and him always liked playing with them together. I used to stack them up in rows and curves 'cause he'd get the shakes so he couldn't do it and I'd let him flick the one at the end and he'd clap and cheer when they all fell over.

Sometimes I take them out of the box and I just hold them like he did and it's kind of like holding his hand. So I don't think it's weird if Mom does the same thing with his baby teeth. I really want to ask her but by now my gums and tummy are hurting and the sun is bright and sharp so I just sit looking out the window and I think about tooth-fairy land where all the teeth have wings and halos

and live with their families in mouth-shaped houses. I hope that's where my tooth ends up. I hope it's happy when it gets there.

ONE-ACT PLAY

WARD

by Ashley Tunnell, University of North Georgia

Characters:

Augustus Ward, *Ambitious man—early 30s*
Stephanie Ward, *Wife of Augustus ward:—early 30s.*
Silas Greene, *Hedge fund manager—late 30s to early 40s.*
Cordelia Vane, *Tech CEO and self-help author—mid 30s.*
Cain Flint, *Founder of a controversial supplement company—late 20s.*
Roux Marlowe, *Erotic novelist—late 20s to early 30s.*
Lola Swann, *Social media influencer—mid 20s.*
Ellis Stillwell, *Apathetic woman—early 50s.*
Gavin Knox, *Luxury real estate broker—late 40s.*
Lucien Black, *Mysterious man—late 50s to early 60s.*
Orderlies 1 and 2, *Staff*

Setting: *An office with warm amber lighting. A mahogany desk dominates upstage center. A large, crimson-black abstract painting looms behind and leather armchair sits in front. Stage right: a wooden door. Stage left: a wooden door. Upstage left: a bar cart with*

untouched crystal decanter.

Augustus Ward: *sits at a desk, surrounded by scattered financial records and files. He scribbles notes, eyes darting between spreadsheets and invoices. A haunting piano melody plays gently.*

Ward:: *(muttering)* Overhead's bleeding. People want miracles. Patients want to get better. And I…I need a good night's sleep. *(Rubs temples).*

The sound of footsteps—heels clicking against hardwood—echoes through the room. ward: doesn't look up. He smiles faintly.

Ward:: *(without turning)* You always wore those heels when you wanted something.

Stephanie Ward: *enters through door from stage left, bathed in a soft red light. She is elegant, poised, dressed in a flowing black gown. Her presence is unnerving—her voice carries a faint echo.*

Stephanie: And you always played this song when you were thinking.

Ward:: It helps me focus.

Stephanie: Mistaking ambition for purpose again. You are quite good at that. (*She leans in close*) The face that will launch a thousand ships.

She touches his cheek. He flinches slightly, then relaxes. The piano melody swells.

Ward: I miss you.

Stephanie: *(smiling)* I'm right here.

The piano melody halts, replaced by a low, pulsing heartbeat—barely audible but felt. The lighting shifts subtly. LUCIEN BLACK *enters from stage left, wearing a tailored, black suit and bathed in a red spotlight.*

LUCIEN: I trust I'm not interrupting, Augustus.

WARD: *(startled, rising)* Lucien. No, please. Sit.

Lucien moves to the leather armchair, crosses one leg over the other, and gestures toward: the papers on ward:'s desk.

LUCIEN: You've built something remarkable here. But "remarkable" doesn't pay the bills, does it? You're chasing miracles with a calculator.

WARD: I'm chasing sustainability, Lucien. This place could change lives.

LUCIEN: *(smiling)* I think it already does, Dr. ward:. But I think that you want more than that, don't you? You want power. Wealth. You want the world to whisper your name in reverence. I can help you achieve all of these things.

WARD: I just want this place to last.

LUCIEN: Then let's make it last. I'm offering full financial backing. Guaranteed success. You'll have reach. Influence. This won't just be a retreat. It'll be *the* retreat. The kind of place talked about in circles that matter. Booked out years in advance. Your name won't just be on the building, Augustus. It'll be in every mouth that matters. A generation from now,

they won't ask *where* to go. They'll ask *how* to get in. Your name will be synonymous with *(beat)* salvation.

Stephanie watches silently.

Ward: A holy shape becomes a devil's best.

Lucien: *(chuckles)* Already seeing devils, Augustus. (*He leans forward:*) There's always a cost, but not the kind you'rethinking. No blood. No scandal. Just a little sacrifice here and there.

Stephanie: *(echoing)* Sweet Augustus, leave off this damned pursuit. Wealth and fame are shadows. Fading things. Why wade through fire for a crown of smoke?

Ward: And…if it all falls apart?

Lucien: Then let it fall with your name etched in stone. History will remember the architect, not the rubble. You'll be the myth they chase and the standard they fail to reach.

Stephanie: *(sadly)* Immortality sealed with a kiss.

Lucien: Say yes, and I'll make sure they never forget you. Say yes, and you'll never be ordinary again.

Ward: *(after a long pause)* I accept.

Lucien *smiles as they shake hands.* Stephanie *and* Lucien *exit stage left, closing the door behind them. The heartbeat fades. Lights dim to black. A brief silence, followed by the sound of hushed conversation. Spotlight on ward:. Upstage left—the bar*

cart has been replaced with a refreshment cart. Closed wooden doors at stage left and stage right.

WARD *paces slowly before the desk, clipboard in hand. He pauses, then sinks into a folding chair with a quiet exhale. One by one, patients enter through the door at stage right, each carrying a folding chair, their voices low and conversational as they settle in.* STEPHANIE *enters from stage left and stands behind* WARD.

WARD: Ladies and gentlemen! I am Dr. Ward, and it is my honor to welcome you to the beginning of something exceptional. Let's begin with a check-in. No pressure. Just introduce yourself to the rest of the group, and if you feel ready, what called you here. *(Looks at clipboard)* Silas? Would you like to start?

SILAS: I run a hedge fund. High risk, high reward:. I was killing it *(beat)* until I wasn't. Lost half my portfolio last quarter…I just can't stop obsessing over my ranking. Every time I check my portfolio's standing, I feel like I'm reading my own obituary. I just want to stop feeling like I'm stuck envying everyone who still has what I lost.

CORDELIA: Well, if half your portfolio vanished in only one quarter, you didn't do too good a job of building it up…I'm Cordelia, by the way. I started a tech company a few years back and sold it for eight figures. Wrote a book about it, too…it hit number three on the bestseller list. Not quite number one, but hey, humility's part of the journey, right? *(clears throat, glancing around with a hint of theatrical embarrassment)* My keynote last year bombed, though. I came here to find my voice again.

ROUX: I'm Roux. I'm also an author but different genre—erotic fiction. It's supposed to be fantasy…fun, provocative, *(beat)* even a little dangerous. But my editor said my latest book felt too… intimate. *(her eyes linger for a moment on Silas)* It's called *Tempt Me Evermore*. I guess I let more of myself slip into the sto-

ry than I planned. But my editor said to leave it the way it is, and I've never been great at saying no. Especially when saying yes feels so much better.

LOLA: Ooooh! I *devoured Tempt Me Evermore* in one sitting! Did you see my review on BookTok?

ROUX: No...but now I'm curious. *(leans in slightly)* You'll have to show me. I like knowing how my words touch people.

LOLA: Well, you *have* to check it out! Lola Swann, by the way. I'm kind of a big deal online. Mostly wellness stuff. I've tried every cleanse out there…even the ones the FDA would rather pretend don't exist.

CAIN: Name's Cain. FDA is bullshit. They made my life hell when I took over my brother's supplement brand after he died. Made FlintX bigger than he ever dreamed of, but I hate every damn part of it. I hate the numbers, the branding, the stupid phone calls about people blacking out or having seizures. They come threatening to sue like it's my fault. Do they think greatness comes without risk? If you can't handle the heat, get out of the damn gym.

GAVIN: Hi! I'm Gavin, and I'm an alcoholic.

(He bursts into laughter. Cain scoffs and rolls his eyes. Everyone else chuckles along politely).

GAVIN: Anyway. I sell real estate. Lucky for me, I'm good at it… because I've been told I've got a bit of a gambling problem. Three homes, two marriages, one reputation...all gone at some point. I usually win them back. Well, except for one of those marriag-

es. *(pauses, smirks)* Make that one and a half. I guess I'm here because I'm starting to think luck doesn't last forever.

WARD: Looks like we just have…Ellis?

ELLIS lifts her gaze slowly, her chin still nestled in the palm of her hand

ELLIS: Hmmm?

WARD: Would you like to share anything with the group? Wife of a senator! That sounds interesting.

ELLIS: I suppose.

She lowers her eyes again, returning her chin to her hand, drifting back into bleary silence.

WARD: Okay…well…that's okay! Maybe you'll feel up to sharing some more once you've gotten more comfortable. Alright, this was productive! Let's take a short break—say, fifteen minutes—and then we'll pick things back up. There are refreshments, please feel free to help yourselves.

The sound of a low, barely audible heartbeat returns. CORDELIA, SILAS, and CAIN walk over to ROUX. LOLA and GAVIN walk over to the refreshments. ELLIS stays seated. WARD: picks up his clipboard—begins pacing and muttering to himself.

WARD: Seven voices. Wrath wears muscle. Pride wears heels. Lust wears perfume. Are they mine? Are they mine?

He shakes his head a few times.

CAIN: *(checking his phone)* Well, damn. I did an ad for this month's newest line of supplements and just got the numbers. *(beat)* Sky-

high engagement. Comments, shares, conversions. Guess even the marketing clowns managed not to screw it up.

Roux: If you keep showing off, I may have to find some things to show off, too.

Silas: The walking protein shake gets a viral ad, and I can't even get my stocks to stop gasping for air.

Cain: Maybe if you stopped sitting around and sulking… you can't wait for the world to notice you. You have to *move*… take what you want. People want power, not pity.

Ward: Cain…that's not—

Silas: *(Interrupting Ward)* Of course it blew up. You toss out a few buzzwords and suddenly you're some kind of prophet. Meanwhile, I spend months trying to fix my damn portfolio, and it disappears into the void. But sure, let's all worship the guy selling powdered ego in a bottle.

Cain starts to rise from his chair. Roux stands between Cain and Silas.

Roux: So angry, Cain. If you keep puffing your chest like that, I might start wondering what else you're compensat-

ing for. *(Touches Silas's arm)* Though I suppose powdered ego *does* have its market.

Cordelia rolls her eyes and gives an exacerbated sigh.

Cordelia: Well, this is boring.

Roux: There are plenty of empty chairs—go read the thing you call a book. You seem like the type who would actually like your own writing.

Cordelia: I write books that get reviewed in *The Atlantic*. You write little daydreams for women to hide under their pillows. Some of us get taken seriously. Others just get taken.

Roux: Oh, darling. You write for critics—I write for readers. *(walks away, unbothered)* And unlike yours, my work actually gets people off.

Ward shakes his head and mutters to himself.

Ward: No…No this isn't right…

Silas, Cain, Roux, Cordelia, Lola, Gavin, and Ellis, talking over one another.

Silas: He was talking about me. He always is. I see the way you all look at me.

Cain: I don't look at you at all, idiot.

Lola: I posted a video last night. Me crying. I didn't even know why. But the comments were beautiful. They said I was brave

and raw. I think I believed them. Then I drank three bottles of essential oils and threw up in a crystal bowl.

GAVIN: I wonder how much I can bet on myself? How high can I stake my own skin before the odds turn against me?

ELLIS: I watched a spider build a web in the corner. It was beautiful. Then I brushed it away. I didn't feel anything. Not guilt. Not regret. Nothing.

STEPHANIE: You're losing control again, Augustus.

WARD: Yes, you're right. We're spiraling. Let's re-center ourselves and remember why we're here.

ROUX: Who's right? Spiraling can be fun. (*winks at Silas)*

WARD: No. We are here for wellness and healing.

CAIN: Wellness? Healing? People need to stop whining and deal with their pain. Growth doesn't come wrapped in a blanket. It comes with pain and leaves bruises.

WARD: Pain isn't the goal, Cain.

CAIN: What do you know of pain? Or of me?

CAIN lunges aggressively at WARD. WARD *stumbles backward: away from* CAIN, *stumbling over* CAIN's *chair. The chair splinters violently, wood cracking, fabric tearing.* CAIN *kicks the remains aside, breathing hard. The sound echoes through the room like a*

warning shot. The lighting shifts—red pulses through the space. The heartbeat distorts. Ward *buries his head in his hands.*

Ward: *(muttering)* Broken chairs…broken people…I picked them. I picked them all.

Cain: This is pathetic. You all sit here, bleeding your little stories into the carpet. You think that's healing?

Ward: Cain—

Cain: You think this room is safe? You think your little circle of breathing exercises and pity parties is heaven? (*pauses and shakes head)* This is far from heaven, and you are a fraud!

Ward: *(climbing to his feet)* Cain—please.

Cain: It's obvious that you don't believe in any of this stuff you're preaching. You just want to be admired. You want people to look at you like you're the only one who can fix them.

Ward: No—

Cain: You're not helping us…you're *enabling* us. You wrap people's pain in poetry and call it progress.

(He steps toward Ward*)*

Cain: You think healing comes from your little breathing exercises?

Stephanie: (*stepping closer to* Ward*, voice echoing*) Maybe he's right. You're not the man I thought you were.

Ward *flinches when she touches his arm.* Roux *steps closer to ward:, slow and deliberate, her gaze lingering.*

ROUX: Looks like someone's touched a nerve.

WARD: Let's just take a few deep breaths and try to calm down.

ROUX: Calm? You wear calm like armor, Augustus.

(She tilts her head, voice low and intimate.)

ROUX: And I think it's melting right off you. I see you. I see every part of you. Where we are isn't a wellness retreat. Where we are is hell.

STEPHANIE: *(echoing)* And where hell is, there must we ever be.

ROUX: What's the name of your hell?

STEPHANIE: Say it, darling.

WARD: Stephanie.

The room falls silent...Patients stare at WARD.

SILAS: Who's Stephanie?

WARD: She was my wife.

CORDELIA: Was?

WARD: She…died…three months ago.

STEPHANIE: I was the sin you tried to bury...but hell remembers what the earth forgets.

ROUX: You keep her imprisoned here.

STEPHANIE: Tormented with ten thousand hells.

ROUX: You're here to escape your grief…your guilt…your shame… but I think it followed you. It seeped into the walls and curled up beneath the floorboards. It's in the foundation now…warm and waiting. You didn't bury it. You built around it. And every time you walk these halls, it breathes with you. It knows you. It touches everything you touch. You didn't escape it. You made it your lover.

WARD: No! I built this place to help people.

STEPHANIE: You built nothing. You're here to be worshipped, and your altar is burning.

WARD: You're not real.

STEPHANIE: Oh, sweet Augustus. Is anyone real?

SILAS: Hey! Why does Augustus get all the attention?

CORDELIA: This is what happens when you let weak men lead. You built an empire on broken glass and called it a sanctuary. You were never the architect. You were the exhibit.

ROUX: (*slinking toward: ward:*) Sweet Augustus. Let me whisper something worth remembering. (*leans close*) Make me immortal with a kiss.

STEPHANIE: *(echoing)* Make me immortal with a kiss.

WARD *sinks to his knees and begins to mumble incoherently. Piano music swells—disjointed and unsettling—before sound is cut entirely. The sound of footsteps. Two orderlies—dressed in white uniforms and* LUCIEN*—dressed entirely in black enter from stage*

right. Spotlights are on Orderlies, ward:, and Lucien*—other characters are in shadow.*

Ward: *(rising slowly)* Thank goodness. I need some assistance with… *(The orderlies approach him carrying a straitjacket)* Wait—what are you doing?

Orderly 1: You're okay, Augustus. Nice and easy, now.

Ward: *(stepping back)* No. No, I'm not the one who—This isn't protocol. This isn't how this ends.

Orderly 2: Sir, please. This will be easier if you just cooperate.

Ward: No! This is mine! I built this!

Lucien: No, Augustus…you are a patient here. I am the head psychologist, Lucien Black.

Ward: Lucien? What is this? You're no psychologist! What's going on?

Lucien: You've been saying a great many things lately, Augustus. Delusions of grandeur. Paranoia. Bargains with shadows.

Ward: You—you were there! We signed an agreement for you to fund this place!

Lucien: Did I? Or did you imagine that part too? Memory is such a fragile thing, Augustus.

Ward: You lied to me!

Lucien: He's regressing again. We need to proceed.

The orderlies step forward and grab Ward *by the arms.* Ward *re-*

sists. Silas stands. Roux follows. One by one, the others rise. Their faces are calm as they move toward Ward

Ward: No! No, not you! You're my patients! You came here for my help!

Roux: One of your patients? Oh, sweetie! You're one of us!

Cain: You're all of us.

Silas: We're all of you.

They surround him. Hands grip his arms, shoulders, legs. ward: thrashes, wild with panic.

Ward: No! I'm fixing you! Let go of me! Silas! Cain! Help me!

Orderly 1: Easy, now!

Orderly 2: There is no one else here, Augustus.

Orderly 1: The delusions must be getting stronger.

Lucien: He needs sedated

Ward: Stephanie!

Lucien: You murdered Stephanie, Augustus.

Ward: Liar!

Lucien: Yes! That is why you are here.

They drag him stage left. The door opens to reveal a glowing red light. His feet scrape against the floor. The lighting shifts, deep crimson floods the stage. The heartbeat sound returns.

WARD: No! She's right there! Stephanie! Stephanie, please—don't let them take me!

STEPHANIE: You brought this upon yourself, Augustus. The hour is upon us, and there are debts to be paid.

WARD claws at the air, reaching for her. She does not move. The others drag him through the door. Just before it closes, he screams:

WARD: Please! I take it back! All of it. Let me take it back! Please! I didn't know the cost! I didn't know it would come for me. Please!

The door slams shut. Silence. A long beat. The red light fades to black. Then a single spotlight on STEPHANIE, alone on the stage.

STEPHANIE: *(echoing)* Was Augustus ward: truly mad? Perhaps. But madness is only one name for the hunger that drives a man into places no soul should walk alone. He didn't stumble into darkness…he pursued it. Ravenous. Eyes gleaming with ambition. Fingers twitching to unseal what was never meant to be opened. He tried to peel back the skin of the world, layer by layer, until he reached the raw, pulsing thing beneath. Perhaps he found it and couldn't look away...or…perhaps it found him. Let his story be a warning. To the curious, who mistake mystery for a door left ajar. To the brilliant, who believe knowledge is a shield. To those who think they can outwit darkness…tame it, name it, bind it with reason and light. There are depths that do not care about cleverness. They are older than meaning. Older than mercy. And once you touch them, you're marked. You will owe them a debt—one they will always come to collect.

A long silence. Spotlight fades to black. Heartbeat returns.

End.

(THE SPACES) BETWEEN THE FIREFLIES

by Jessica Pruitt, Middle Tennessee State University

Characters:

Sara Milton, *Female. Mid 40s. Music teacher.*
Dan Milton, *Male. Mid 40s. Sara's husband of over 20 years.*

*Dan and Sara's den/family room. A couch and a large, wicker or wooden trunk/chest are in the middle of the room. There are bookcases and shelves, and off to the side, an ottoman that opens up for storage, along with other miscellaneous furniture pieces, such as end tables and lamps. The ottoman is entirely concealed under a blanket. The shelves are filled with family photos, old trophies, and books. Nothing in this room is packed, and the room looks disheveled. There are piles of boxes in each corner, all sealed and labeled. The boxes in one area are labeled "*Sara *," and the boxes in the other area are all labeled "*Dan*." Additionally, empty boxes without labels are scattered around the room.*

Time: Late morning.

Note: Many components of this play are inspired by various stories written by Keith Pilapil Lesmeister. Quotation marks indicate Lesmeister's own words and are not meant to affect delivery. The stories are from "Nothing Prettier Than This", "Lie Here Next to Me", "Between the Fireflies," "A Basketball Story," "Blood Trail," "A Real

Future," "Feral Cats," and "We Could Have Been Happy Here" by Keith Pilapil Lesmeister.

Thank you, Keith P. Lesmeister, for such beautiful stories.

(AT RISE: Sara *enters holding a sealed box labeled "*Sara *" and sets it in her box pile. She takes a deep breath.* Dan: *enters with a box labeled "*Dan *" and sets it in his pile.)*

Sara: Hey. What time did you say the movers are coming?

Dan: 2 o'clock. *(*Dan: *looks at his watch.)* It's just past 10 now, so. . . are you sure you want to do this?

(Silence. Sara *walks away from* Dan: *.)*

Sara: Yes. It's better this way, so our things can be separated, as we agreed. Gosh… This room… I've barely been down here in years, since the boys took it over.

Dan: Yeah, they definitely took it over. It looks like they took all their stuff, though. I don't see any of their games or anything else… just… old stuff.

(*Silence. They look at each other for a moment and then* Sara *looks away.*)

Dan: (*Continued*) Alright. Let's start with this bookshelf.

(they begin packing, slowly, mostly books at first, deciding what is whose, with silent gestures and nods. They mostly agree, but when

they aren't sure, they just set things back down. This continues throughout the dialogue unless otherwise noted.)

SARA: It's funny. Well, ironic, that's for sure.

DAN: What is?

SARA: That we agreed to do this. This last room, together. It's what we do best. Agree to do what's painful but necessary.

DAN: Yeah, I suppose.

SARA: You suppose?

DAN: No. You're right. We're doing what's painful and necessary.

SARA: You don't think this'll be painful?

DAN: It's starting to be.

(Pause. DAN *smiles at* SARA.*)*

SARA: "I'm glad to see you still have your sense of humor."

DAN: But is this really necessary? I don't mind...you can have all these things.

*(*SARA *stops and puts her hands on her face.* DAN *stops.)*

DAN: (*Continued*) What's wrong?

SARA:I don't know. I just… I feel like… you're just going to have a new place and new shelves and… they'll be just empty with nothing to remind you of us.

DAN: No. I just…

Sara: And I don't want to decide for you. I want *you* to want these things.

Dan: I was just trying to help. I didn't mean to upset you. Let's just pack. I'll work over there.

(Dan *takes his box and walks to the other side and packs.*)

Sara: I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. It's just— I just can't help thinking this whole thing just sums up the majority of our marriage.

Dan: Yeah. I see the irony. Let's just keep at it. (*After some silence,* Dan *finds an old trophy.*) Oh wow. Look at this! Gosh, this has to be one of the boys' first trophies.

Sara: Aw, probably Gabe's.

(Dan *looks at the trophy for a moment, then packs it in his box.*)

Dan: I already miss playing ball with them.

Sara: Aw. I'm sure they'll let you come practice with them when you visit.

Dan: Ha! They'd tell me to get lost. They barely let me help them move into their dorm. (*Pause.*) Still can't believe the twins are playing on the same team as Gabe.

Sara: I know! I still can't believe they're still not in high school… and now— Well, I know they'll miss the court you made them out back.

Dan: Eh. It's just a slab of concrete.

Sara: Well. They spent most of their hours on it!

DAN: Hey, you painted it!

SARA: I was tired of hearing them argue about the mid-court, three-point, and free-throw lines.

*(*SARA *and* DAN *laugh.)*

DAN: Well, you made it look official.

SARA: Thanks...I was always better at painting than basketball. (*Pause*.) But… it's all faded now anyway.

DAN: Yeah. I guess it is. *(*DAN *uncovers the ottoman and opens it. Inside, it is full of music books and papers.* DAN *begins picking them up, and a small book falls out of a larger music book.)* What's this?

SARA: (*Not looking at Dan:*) What's what?

*(*DAN: *reads the cover)*

DAN: It says "We could've been happy here" by… Sara Milton.

(SARA *gasps*. DAN: *begins to open the book*. SARA *quickly snatches it from* DAN: *'s hands and puts it inside a box*.)

SARA: It's nothing! Oh god! I forgot that the boys took this old ottoman from my music room. God, I forgot about this being in here… but. It's nothing.

DAN: That's not nothing. What is that?

SARA: It's just some old writing experiment. It's ancient.

*(*DAN *stares at* SARA, *who continues packing.)*

DAN: Sara? Did you write a book and not tell me?

Sara: *(Laughing)* No. No, nothing like that... It's (*sighs*), it's just some therapy stuff I did. (Sara *stops*.) You really want to know what it is?

Dan: Yes.

Sara: Okay. Well…It was towards the end of …well, you weren't even showing up anymore, and the therapist, Dr. Lou, she, well, she suggested that I should write. She said it would help. Which was weird for me because, you know, I've only ever written music. But yeah, she said, write it all out, but not to show it to you, just to get my thoughts out. (laughing) I honestly thought I threw it away or something… It's just a bunch of words like, *Oh my heart hurts* and stuff like that, I'msure.

(Sara *resumes packing.)*

Dan: But it looks like a real book…

Sara: Yeah. I had a crazy idea at the time that I might publish it, but then I decided I couldn't go through with it, and I'm glad I didn't - trust me, *it's awful.* I'll probably burn it tonight, actually.

Dan: Okay then…Okay. (Dan *resumes packing*) Well... did it? Help, I mean?

Sara: Well. In some ways, yes, I suppose it did. At least for a time.

Dan: Why that title? "We could have been happy here." Were you never happy here? With the boys, at least?

Sara: Well, yes. I was always happy here with the boys. (*Looks at* Dan) The boys aren't the *we* I referred to in the title.

Dan: Okay. Alright, I get it. I'm not sure why I asked you that. (*Silence*) I guess it's just... You always seemed so happy... despite,

well, you know. When they were still young, you "used to bake a cake from scratch, every Friday night" and play piano and sing songs with them.

Sara: That *was* fun! I was doing what was necessary for our children, and for me, that was staying busy and trying to be

happy for them. You know that. But if you think I was happy with you sleeping in the guest room for 12 years, no.

DAN: Well, I guess I...I just...Never mind.

SARA: Someone had to be happy for the boys.

DAN: Well…yeah. You just seemed…

SARA: We both agreed.

DAN: I told you I needed time.

SARA: Are you really going there? Now?

DAN: Well, I don't know. When else? I guess I finally have some things to say.

SARA: Okay. Yes. (SARA *stops packing*) When Jake died, you told me you needed time, and I gave you time. That's all I've ever given you is time! Until now. I carried out my sentence.

DAN: Please don't say that.

SARA: I'm sorry, but that decision– you know that wasn't what I wanted. It was just what was best for the kids. Why do you want to talk about this now?

DAN: I don't know. I just thought you were still happy.

SARA: No! I had already accepted things weren't going to change for us, so I guess I just settled into it. What are you not understanding here? It's been 12 years! We've barely talked—

DAN: Well. The house has been full of kids.

SARA: You worked all the time! I handled the bills! I did *everything* —

DAN: I told you I needed time.

SARA: Yes, and you kept saying that over and over, and I—

DAN: I *did*, though!

SARA: And honey, that was understandable! But then, weeks turned into months, and months into years. And nothing was helping and—(*Pause*) You know. I was really there for you. I tried everything. You just—you shut down. You mustered up energy for the boys, and I'm grateful for that. But not for me, never for me.

DAN: I know. I'm sorry. I tried. I couldn't muster up anything, really. (DAN *walks to the window and looks out.*) I shot a lot of hoops with them back then, especially back then. You know, that helped me blow off steam at least. And, well, the boys didn't need much from me back then. Not like they did from you.

SARA: I needed you. *I* needed you!

DAN: I know! But I was empty! Dammit. Depleted! I felt like I was ripped in half. Jake was part of me. You don't know what it was like!

SARA: How could I know?! But I was trying! I was there for you, and you wouldn't let me help! You built a wall, and it kept growing and growing, until you were in your own house!

(*Pause*) Eventually, you became this "quiet man who blended into the background of my life."

Dan: I... just. couldn't. feel. anything.

Sara: I just couldn't pay any attention to it. To you. Anymore. I had to be strong for the boys.

Dan: I felt like I couldn't breathe. Like I was choking on water, and my heart ached every time I looked at you, because you made me feel. You bring it out of me. Always.

Sara: And I couldn't take the boys and leave you because I was afraid that you'd meet the same fate as your goddamn brother!

Dan: There it is.

Sara: Well! (*Sigh*) You know that's how I felt. (*Pause*) I'm sorry. God. You know, Jake was like a brother to me, too. Not my twin, but you know… I lost him, too. And then it felt almost like I lost both of you.

Dan: Don't you get it? I *also* did what was necessary to take care of my family! I couldn't feel. I couldn't *allow* myself to. If I let myself, I wouldn't have been able to work!

Sara: I *know*! All these things… this is all the same shit we talked about for years in therapy! Around and around. So, what is ityou want? What are you —Things are in motion! The boys have known for years we would sell the house when they went to college! This has been the plan! So, what in the world are you

doing right now? Do you not want to move? Do you not want to sell the house now? This is about the house, isn't it?

DAN: I do love this house.

SARA: Dammit. . . Dan!

DAN: You're the one who wanted to move!

SARA: You can't put this all on me! That's not fair.

(Pause. SARA *paces.)*

DAN: You're right. I don't know what I'm trying to say. . . It was finding that book, I think. I just started thinking about how you—you just—after a while you seemed fine, and I—

SARA: I seemed fine. When? What are you saying?

*(*SARA *and* DAN *look at each other.* DAN: *laughs.)*

DAN: Yeah. You were right.

SARA: About what?

DAN: This is painful.

SARA: What do you mean, I seemed fine?

DAN: You seemed happy, and the boys were happy and… yeah, you're right. I did shut off, and I was quiet, and then I stayed quiet, and eventually, I...I thought you stopped loving me! I figured you found someone else.

SARA: No! There was no one else, ever! God, even if I wanted to, I was too busy. I... I guess I just had to build my own wall, too. *(Si-*

lence. After a moment, Sara *walks to a shelf of framed photos and albums.* Sara *picks up a framed photo and stops.)* Oh wow. This is the one from when we first moved in . . . I *will* miss this house. Remember what my favorite thing was when we moved in?

Dan: I remember. It was being away from the city lights where we could see, really see the stars.

Sara: Remember that night? We hadn't been here more than a week, and we had finally unpacked everything. We got Gabe to bed, and we stood outside, just looking at the stars. It was so quiet. It was so perfect.

Dan: Yeah. "Moonless sky. . . Stars so thick it looked like a smear of vanilla frosting."

Sara: And after a few moments of blissful silence, I turned to you and I... I whispered to you like I was telling/ you the—

Dan: Like you were telling me the secret of the universe. Your eyes were so big and intoxicated, and you said Dan:, there's "nothing

prettier than this."(*Pause*) It was like you were drunk off the clean, country air.

Sara: I was! And you... Remember what you said?

Dan: Oh yeah... I laid the blanket down on the ground, and I said, We have "a real future" now. So, "lie here next to me," and let's create another future for that extra room we have now!

(*They both laugh.*)

Sara/Dan: God! / The twins! Surprise!

Dan: Ah... that night was special. Many nights were like that.

(Dan *opens the large wicker chest and starts pulling things out.*)

Sara:Yes... Many nights were... Until they weren't.

(Sara *wraps the photo and places it in a box. Meanwhile,* Dan *finds a letter-size treasure box. It looks old, with chipped paint. The name "JAKE" is carved into the wood.* Dan: *freezes with it in his hands.* Sara *stops.*)

Dan: This is… These are his poems.

Sara: I didn't know that was in there. I thought we found everything back when. I'm sorry.

Dan: It's okay…(Dan *clutches the treasure box and sits down on the couch.)* Why did he do it? Why did he have to go that way? I still

feel... I don't know. Betrayed. He wrote all this damn shit, but he couldn't write one last note.

(DAN *breaks down.* SARA *sits beside* DAN *and comforts him.)*

SARA: I wish I could answer that for you. I really do. But... (*Pause*) One thing I've learned through all this is that some things are meant to be mysterious, left in the darkness, in the silence. You know, Jake said to me once, it was so long ago. You know, he had that deep way of thinking about things, and I'll-never forget it. He said, "Life is beautiful like the darkness between the fireflies." And I remember thinking that was kind of odd, but pretty, and after he... Well, years ago, you remember when I was taking all of those music workshops before I started teaching, and one of the professors sat us down... and he said, the difference between noise and music is the spaces between the notes, it is the silence between the sounds that makes it into music. And it made me think of what your brother said. And... I don't know. I just think, well, maybe that's where Jake is. If he's in the darkness, it's okay because it's beautiful and

surrounded by light. He's in the spaces between the sounds. So, it's like… he's part of the music.

Dan: Oh Sara.

Sara: But, honey, we have to be the light for him. We have to play our parts, fill in the notes to make into music, and… we have to be the fireflies. . . that's cheesy, I know / but I—

Dan: Oh god, no. It's not. It's beautiful. You're beautiful. God, I'm a fool. You're all I need.

Sara: I never stopped.

Dan: Never stopped what?

Sara: Loving you.

(They look at each other. Dan: *embraces* Sara *.)*

(LIGHTS FADE.)

(END OF PLAY.)

THE NATURE OF DECEIT

by Daniela Guedez, University of North Georgia

Venice, Anno Domini 1572. Rain falls as though heaven weeps for the sins of men. From the flooded streets above, small streams creep between stones and seep into the dungeon below. From there, each drop falls from the ceiling with a cruel precision into a narrow cell of Palaso Dogale. The taper burns low, gnawing its wick like a rat at bread. Chains mutter when the prisoner shifts. Iago *sits with his back to the wall, his gaze vacant as the black water pools at his feet. Then, amid the storm's brief silence, another light enters; It burns without flame, without smoke. From it steps the spirit of* Socrates*, pale as carved marble, drawn from the quiet of Elysium to the restless noise of mortal guilt. The ghost's feet stir no ripple as he crosses the wet stone. He regards Iago long before he speaks, and when his voice comes, it sounds like reason remembered from a better world.*

Socrates:
Good even, sir. If sleep be kind, it finds thee not;
for conscience keeps a sharper watch than guards.
Iago (without rising):
Conscience? Why, that thin dog that whines at doors?
Bid it lie down. We've sterner beasts tonight.
Socrates:
I know them. Beasts that keep their first full moon
within the marrow. Friend, I seek thy mind.
Lend me one hour, and I shall pay with truth.
Iago (dryly):
Truth for time? A dear exchange. Sit, then.
The gallows keeps no calendar but dawn.
Socrates:
Dost call deception art? What law attends it?

Art heals the broken thing and makes it whole.
What mends thy falsehoods, save a wider wound?

Iago:

Art hath a thousand faces, Grecian.
The painter flatters where the flesh is coarse;
the poet gilds; the lover lies for sport.
Why should not I, who know men's pulses well,
compose their fevers to my chosen tune?

Socrates:

Because the tune thou play'st unstrings the heart.
Say: what is truth?

Iago:

A beggar in poor hose.
He knocks; none open. I lend him my cloak,
and straight he struts, a lie in richer cloth.

Socrates:

Thou answer'st not. The wretch in borrowed silk
remains himself, though vesture court his back.
Truth is not raiment, nor the wearer's gait,
but that which is, though all men blink thereat.

Iago (rises):

What is, is what is taken. Power is.
The rest, fine cobwebs in the storm's wild breath.
I weigh'd men's words and found their hearts too light.
A rumor fell as lead, dragging honor down.
This craft, if craft it be, revealed them plain:
each wore the face he feared to wear by day.

Socrates:

Nay, thou didst paint that face, then cried'st, "Behold!"
A mirror warped confesses every flaw
in those that gaze; yet who condemns the man
for bowing crooked to a crooked glass?

Iago:

I hold no glass. I am the wind. I pass,
and roofs, if rotten, sag and show their bones.
Should I be blamed the rafters were unsound?

Socrates:
If wind be guiltless, thou art not the wind.
The wind knows not itself, nor measures fault.
But thou count'st the nails, the timbers' rot,
and choose'st the hour when sleepers trust their beams.
Thou call'st it art: to enter at the hinge,
to oil the creak with whispers, pry, and pry,
till structure, not thy hand, is called the cause.
Iago:
Thou speak'st as if my touch were sorcery.
No; I but showed the world its appetite.
Men hunger for the tales that damn their betters.
I fed them what they craved, and called it meat.
Socrates:
The cook that salts with poison cannot plead
the diners' lust for savor. Tell me, then:
if falsehood like a surgeon's knife reveal,
what hand shall guide the cut? There lies the art,
not opening flesh, but healing it.
Iago:
To heal is but to gild decay with law.
They lov'd their bandag'd lies. I show'd them blood;
they swoon'd and call'd it truth.
Socrates:
They swoon'd at show, not truth.
Thy business was the thunder, not the rain.
Iago:
What boots this husbandry of words? Thou com'st
to mark my tally: lies, deceits, and plots.
Add this: my ledger stands well kept;
a whisper here, a hint there. See how neat,
and men, like columns, toppled in their sums.
Socrates:
The neatness damns it more. Craft that makes grief

with careful hands hath no alms.
Thy god is Order, order of undoing, styl'd necessity.

Iago:

I learn'd their grammar, how men speak by halves
when they would say the thing they dare not say.
Between the syllables there lives a worm
that eats the fruit of meaning from within.
I nam'd the worm; the fruit fell into rot.

Socrates:

Thou taught'st not tongue but appetite,
a dialect of hunger sleek with fear.
If speech serve only want, what is man
but the articulate mouth of his own void?

Iago:

What else? Dost hold him lightning, pure?
He is a purse with fingers and a face.
He counts, he eats, he lusts, he sleeps, he wakes,
and dreams he's more than he is,
and hates the man who tells him otherwise.

Socrates:

And thou didst love him for that hatred's sake?

Iago:

I lov'd him as a hawk loves open sky,
for sport, to prove my talon true.

Socrates:

Here speaks the falcon, proud of stoop and kill,
forgetting both the hand that loosed the hood.
Art thou thy own first mover? No.
Desire unhooded flew; thou call'dst it I.

Iago:

Thy gods are questions. Mine walks the market,
trades men's souls for gain.

Socrates:

Then name thy god Advantage.
Art saith, Be measured; deceit saith, Be quick.

Art builds the form that frees; falsehood, the snare
that tightens as it's seen.

Iago:

Yet lies reveal. The mask once worn transforms the man.
A timid man, in Hercules' brave helm,
will swagger till his knees learn courage's trick.
Thus falseness tutors truth.

Socrates:

A borrow'd helm guards no head in war.
To mimic virtue may prepare the heart,
if mimicry confess itself as school.
But thy school was night; thy pupils learn'd
to call their shadows self.
A man who lies to be a better man
already honors truth; but he that lies
to unman other men unmakes his own.

Iago:

Words. Death knocks at dawn.
What logic binds when breath is gone?

Socrates:

The same as life: what we have lov'd becomes
our master at the reckoning.

If thou lov'd deceit, expect a city
built of crooked streets where ev'ry door lies.

Iago:

If there be such a city, I shall thrive.

Socrates:

Thou wilt be thirsty there.

Iago:

Thirst sharpens wit.

Socrates:

Wit, lacking water, eats its tongue.

Iago (quietly):

I set the snare where pride would step.
Call it cruelty, I call it choice.

Socrates:

Thou gav'st him ground wherein to misstep most.
The butcher's mercy leads the lamb to knife.

Iago:

And yet he came. Thy truth makes cowards bold;
mine makes them honest cowards, nothing more.

Socrates:

To show a man what he is, and nothing more,
denies what he might be.

Iago:

He that is born to drown will find the river.

Socrates:

He that is born to drown may learn to swim,
if one cry Live! But thou didst cry How deep!

Iago:

Thy pity hides disdain.

Socrates:

If pity be a cloak, may it be warm.

Contempt is naked, and devours the face
that looks upon the world to rise thereon.

Iago:

I will not yield my craft to living altars.

Socrates:

Then own thy altar built of living men.

Iago:

I own it. The world is ritual.
We offer one to quiet ten.
My work but reckon'd what that smile cost.

Socrates:

What good survives thy reckoning, Iago?
A city taught to listen at keyholes;
a friend made stranger, these be thy coin.

Iago:

The scales were fair. I weigh'd as weigh'd.

Socrates:

Thy weights were whispers, damp and ill.
Call not that justice, call it weather
that sickens wheat and blames the field.

Iago:

Say on. The night is shiv'ring to its end.
What comfort hast thou for the uncomforted?

Socrates:

No comfort, truth.
Comfort feeds the wound; truth sears, yet heals.
When thou didst pluck a man from trust to doubt,
didst thou grow greater, or more alone?

Iago:

Alone is large enough.

Socrates:

A kingdom of one voice, the echo's.

He that would reign there feeds on sound
and calls it feast. Thou art hungry still.

Iago:

If hunger be my nature, I embrace it.

Socrates:

Nature's a harp. Untun'd, it frets;
tuned, it sings honest wind.
Deception plucks till all it knows is twang.

Iago:

And yet men dance.

Socrates:

Aye, till their feet are blood.

Iago:

Part-curtain, this. The last act hurries on.

Socrates:

The question haunts us still:
is thy deception art that shows men truth,
or truth's undoing, where the roof caves in?

(Iago silent.)

Socrates:

Attend. Deception hath two children, wit and ruin.
Art gives life, but thine makes all seem hollow.
I once said the unexamined life is shade;
now I see the life examin'd falsely is hell.
Thy eye saw flaws and call'd them truth entire.

So gods have jest: the liar seeking truth
finds but himself.

Iago:

And what finds truth?

Socrates:

Pain, yet peace thereafter.
Falsehood is sweet, but kills the tree that bears it.
I have drunk both draughts.
Thou tast'dst honey, and know'st not thirst.

Iago:

If truth brings peace, why bleeds the world for it?

Socrates:

Justice whispers still.
The diff'rence lies not in scaffold's height,
but in the heart unmask'd.
I drank my hemlock for my city's law.
Thou go'st for bonds unmade.
Thy gallows is thy silence, not thy death.

Iago:

Thy tongue would make a sermon of my breath.

Socrates:

Then be still. The truth thou wilt not speak,
speaks through thy silence.
When light is spent, what yet remains?
Only the warmth it gave to others.
Thine burn'd cold.

Socrates:

Look on thy works: they stand like bones.
Othello's honor, Desdemona's faith,
all truths thou show'dst and slew.
The plough that breaks must sow again;

thine broke for sound alone.
The soil remembers. No seed will take.

Iago:

Thou speak'st of spring as though it comes again.

Socrates:

And yet within the frost a single bud,
small and green, contends with cold.
That bud is truth. Hadst thou knelt but once,
thy cunning might have warm'd it.

(A guard appears.)

Socrates:

Name one deed that left the world more whole. *(Iago silent.)*
Thy silence is an echo of the truth.

Guard:

Dawn is up. The cart stands ready.

Socrates:

Men go forth with prayers. I ask not for words,
but memory. For though my tongue be sure,
my heart laments. There is no joy in wisdom
that watches ruin.

(Iago rises, exits with the guard.) The rain had not ceased by dawn, Venice lay shrouded in a pale mist. The Gallows waited upon the square, and when the rope drew tight, the storm gave no applause.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

ONE FOOT IN A DITCH

by Carolina Kelley, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

I was born with one foot on a mountain and one foot in a ditch. Fingers entangling Georgia, but clawing at Tennessee. I was told, if looking through binoculars or careful eyes, you could see seven states. But I often found myself on top of Lovers Leap squinting, heels hovering, not looking for states at all. Instead, I would think of those lovers who lept, and I would wonder if things would have been different if the states had been able to see them back.

This mountain is scattered with fairytales and shrouded by religion. Though these two things overlap, cohabitate, and I would stumble from cottage to church wondering what made God real yet Peter Pan fake.

My infancy was spent on Wood Nymph trail, a crooked, yellow-hued street, shaded by trees, haunted by fairies. This house is blurry when I grasp at its image, but sometimes when I stare too long at a printed picture I can feel my feet, bare and small, creeping over the black and white tile of my kitchen. I would creep and listen to the whispered conversations of my parents, though they were wary of this, and would often spell words rather than speak them.

"Maybe it wasn't her fault, maybe it was an accident."

I interrupted the overheard conversation this time, and as I stood at the edge of the kitchen, I felt the unrelenting urge to defend this nameless woman to my parents.

Earlier that night, my dad brought me and my sister to shop for groceries at the base of the mountain. It was cold outside, rainy,

and the thunder shook the mountain's wet roads as if they were made of jello.

There was a car that night, a clumsy car, and it threw us into a ditch.

"Is everyone okay?" My dad turned his head around slowly, as if he was scared to check.

"No. I'm not okay actually", I said sarcastically, holding up my finger, injured with a paper cut from the day before.

I did not yet understand why this was not funny. I did not yet understand the reason for the shake in my dad's voice, and only knew I should try to steady it with a joke. Later, my bare feet clinging to the cold kitchen floor, I heard my parents whispering profanities, cursing the woman who pushed us into that ditch. The concept of blame was foreign to me, and I knew the woman never meant to hit us. At that moment, I felt in my bones an urge, a need to defend this woman, so I spoke up.

"Maybe it wasn't her fault, maybe it was an accident."

Their whisperings cut off, their heads turned to me. My mom's mouth opened, though she hesitated, as if weighing my childlike opinion with her own. "It was her fault. You're just too young to understand something like this."

I know now, this woman was at fault. But I lived in a world where blame was not mine to give, where fault was left to the rain, not the driver.

I had yet to realize my foot remained in that wet and muddy ditch, not making its way up the mountain with the rest of me.

My mom left the mountain soon after that, though she could not take me with her, as half of me still belonged to my dad. So I re-

turned to the mountain every week, residing in a cottage now, a small cottage that to me, seemed to be the previous residence of Hansel and Gretel. I did not like this cottage, as its walls scratched me as I ran past, and its air smelled of dust and fireplace ash. I spent most of my time by the creek on which it stood, dipping my feet in the cold water, whispering stories of witches and fairies into my sister's ears.

We often visited a neighboring castle, eating under a portrait of Peter Pan. He was carved in stone, and I would fear that he was trapped. Forever holding a flute to his lips, but cursed to never play. I would sit under him and listen to my grandparents tell stories of enchanted forests and garden gnomes, of Judas and Adam and Eve. I would sit under poor Peter encased in stone at night and poor Jesus crucified on the cross in the mornings and they would mutate together in my mind, blending fable and doctrine, until I could no longer decipher the lines in which they divide.

I returned to the mountain every week, every time a little older, and a little more cynical. I began to feel like a robot, built by environment, not being. My parts were faulty, and they were rusting and crumbling under my touch.

The day I found my foot in the ditch was a beautiful one. I was again, in the car with my dad and sister, driving down the mountain. There was a bike race that day, a long one, and its path went up over three mountains. At the start of our descent, I gazed out my window, locking eyes with one of the bikers. He was younger than my dad, but not by much, and was wearing a blue so bright that its vibrancy could be seen from several cars away. As we began to drive, he began to pedal.

"If he keeps going that fast, he's going to crash," Dad said warily, though his words lacked the seriousness to cause alarm. But I knew the crooked and treacherous turns of this mountain too well,

and I was beginning to trust my thoughts over the voices of those taller. As we turned the corner, the biker had vanished.

We found him in the ditch, twisted and bloody.

"Don't look. Please close your eyes. Please pray." My dad pleaded with us as he jumped out of the car and into the ditch. I did not close my eyes. I did not pray.

Praying, to me, was just a story, a fable, as I had never been able to tell the difference.

I did not close my eyes, I did not pray, I watched. I watched as my dad paced in the ditch, his phone pressed tightly to his ear as he conversed with 911. I watched as a stranger gave the bloody biker CPR, and I watched as his limp body failed to move.

My sister did pray, desperately, frantically. Her praying annoyed me, it frustrated me. I wanted her to look too.

The ambulance came shortly after, and my dad returned to the car, pale and trembling. He did not look back at us.

"He didn't make it." He said quickly, his voice hoarse, and we drove away silently.

It was here, that I had finally realized the grossness of life, and it came down on me with the quickness of a guillotine's blade. And it was here, that I found my foot and I knew that I had to accept it. I knew I had to stand, two feet on the ground, no longer dangling, hovering, clouded by fairytales. I never walked up that mountain again. For that mountain dissipated, dissolved. In place stood a new one, and this mountain no longer shook, no longer trembled.

BUT MARY COULDN'T READ

by Hailey Winningham, Tennessee Tech University

The Hills' house was one of those squat little concrete homes folks around here called "government houses," though nobody ever said it out loud when Ann or Laurie was around. It sat at the end of a gravel drive that dusted up my jelly sandals, with a porch just wide enough for two lawn chairs and a folding table stacked high with knickknacks for Mama's yard sale. I was nine, barefoot by now, knees scraped from playing outside that morning, sitting cross-legged on their sagging couch with a paper plate of store-brand cookies and a Disney Channel Original Movie flashing across the screen. I can't remember which one, maybe Cars or High School Musical, but I remember Mary sitting beside me, her thin knees pulled tight to her chest like she could disappear if she tried hard enough.

Mary was older than me, maybe twelve or thirteen, but she looked younger, her pale freckled face framed by a sharp black bob that looked like something a mom would cut with kitchen scissors. She was sweet and soft-spoken, nothing like me. I was the kind of girl who talked loud, ran fast, and volunteered to carry desks when the teacher asked for boys. Mary was the opposite, fragile and quiet.

I lasted an hour on the couch before I felt like I'd burst. "I'm bored," I said, setting down my plate. "I'm gonna see what Mama's doin'."

Mary just shrugged.

Outside, the late afternoon sun beat down on our yard sale spread: a line of faded Tupperware, mismatched shoes, and old VHS tapes nobody would buy. Mama sat hunched on a folding chair, deep in conversation with Miss Laurie, Mary's aunt. Their voices were low,

but I caught the edge of Mama's words: "I just can't believe they'd pass her on like that, without her even knowin' how to read. How's she supposed to make it in life?"

I froze in the doorway, and my head cocked. They weren't talking about me, I knew that much. Mama had me reading before I ever set foot in kindergarten; she said she'd never let anyone call us white trash. I'd been reading chapter books since I was three, and by now I could sound out the longest words in Harry Potter. Ev-

erybody could read by now, at least a little. Even if they stuttered through every other word, they could still read. So who couldn't?

"Who don't know how to read?" I blurted.

Mama's head jerked toward me. She plastered on that tight-lipped smile she wore in front of company—the one that meant, *Hush up, Hailey.*

"How'd you feel about tutoring somebody?" she asked, ignoring my question.

My eyes lit up. "Yes, yes, yes!" I loved helping kids in class, showing them how to spell their spelling words. Tutoring sounded like fun.

Mama chuckled softly. "Alright then. We'll get y'all together soon."

Laurie gave Mama a nod. "Sounds good. I'll get supper started." She disappeared inside.

"So, who is it?" I pressed.

"Who is what, baby?"

"Who am I tutoring?" Mama sighed, like she was bracing herself.

"You're gonna be tutoring Mary. She don't know how to read yet."

I stared at her, stunned. "What do you mean she can't read?"

"Now, Hailey, don't be rude. It ain't her fault." Mama's voice was firm, but not angry.

"She's got to learn, though. High school's comin' fast."

I wasn't trying to be rude. I just didn't understand. Even my grand-

pa, who quit school in third grade, could read a newspaper. I'd seen kids get held back for struggling with reading. How had Mary made it to seventh grade without knowing her ABCs? "Why didn't she get held back so school could teach her?"

Mama's face softened. "She aged out, honey." She pointed toward the porch. "Now go `fetch my shoes." I stomped off, before turning around.

"What do you mean she aged out? Why didn't her mama teach her? Ann's always home."

Mama's shoulders hunched forward, like they bared the weight of the world.

"Baby, Ann probably don't know how to read neither. Not everybody's lucky like you."

I didn't ask any more questions.

That evening, when we loaded the unsold yard sale boxes back into the trunk, Mary sat on the steps, twisting her fingers in her lap. She smiled shyly when I offered her a cookie from the plate I'd carried out. She didn't know I'd overheard. She didn't know I was supposed to be her tutor. She didn't know I was turning over in my nine-year-old head how someone older than me couldn't read a word.

Years passed, but I never forgot that afternoon—the gravel drive, the soft hum of the TV inside, the weight in Mama's voice when she said *Not everybody's lucky like you*. Back then, I thought luck had nothing to do with it. I thought being smart was something you earned.

A decade later, I sat in a college lecture hall, staring at a journal article full of words that looked like Spanish. I'd been near the top

of my class in high school—a 4.0 student. Teachers back home said I was "gifted." But here, it felt like that meant something different. My classmates tossed around theories I'd never heard of, cited philosophers like they were old friends. They'd been reading things I didn't even know existed. They'd grown up in schools with libraries that stayed open after hours, with Wi-Fi that didn't cut out every time it rained, with teachers who had master's degrees instead of second jobs.

I'd been proud of where I came from, proud of being the kid who worked hard and made it out. But sitting there, I realized how much "making it out" had already left me behind. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work—it was that I was still learning the language everyone else already spoke. Back home, I'd learned to survive. Here, they'd learned to succeed.

Mama's words echoed again: *Not everybody's lucky like you.* I used to think she meant lucky to be smart. Now I understood she meant lucky to have a chance at all. Luck that Mama could read. Luck that she cared enough to make sure I did, too.

In that lecture hall, I kept thinking about that dusty summer afternoon—the smell of yard sale plastic warming in the sun, the grit of gravel under my jelly sandals, Mary's thin knees pulled tight to her chest. I wondered if she'd ever learned to read, if someone took the time Mama thought I could spare. I wondered how many other Mary's there were—kids who slipped through the cracks because nobody had the time, or patience, or privilege to pull them back out.

I stared down at the article again, the words blurring on the page, and whispered to myself, *But Mary couldn't read.*

It wasn't pity anymore—it was perspective. The difference between

us had never been effort. It had been access.

JUST, THE ADVERB

by Sarah Keen, Tennessee Tech University

It's just a frog.

This is a lesson you learned early. This is a flaw you'll be told is your greatest for the rest of your life.

You're five. It's your earliest memory and it's one of guilt, of regret. Your mom carries out the skeleton of a toad to your backyard, where you're playing with your siblings underneath the trampoline. She cradles the small thing in the palms of her hands and lowers it to your young face, the little being is made of hardly more than dust, its eyes are shut tight to the world.

You know why she's showing you this toad. It's the same toad, you remember, finding underneath the porch and keeping in a wheelbarrow, thinking you could bring it bugs every day. You could care for it.

You forgot.

You killed it.

It would be alive if you had not caught it, not tried to keep it. It's a crippling sight to five-year-old you, a sickening feeling that bursts inside you suddenly; an ugly, festering guilt that sinks low in your gut and sticks thickly for several days, covering your insides wholly.

You cry, of course, for the first many nights after you committed this heinous murder.

That's what you are. What you tell your parents; a desperate confession you only wish could bring back the tiny innocent life you selfishly took. A murderer.

In turn, you're titled with your greatest flaw: You're too sensitive.

Because it's just a frog.

But *just* is a funny word.

It's an adjective that holds a standard. A standard of morality, of equitability, and fairness. It is everything the world isn't, yet it is the standard for humanity. To be just is to be human, a good human, at least.

Just is also, perhaps, one of the most minimizing adverbs in the English language.

This toad, *just* a frog, the image of his dead, dust-diminished body, will stick with you for years. Maybe it will never leave you, just as your newly given title will never leave you. Because you will never be less sensitive than you were at five, crying in your polka dot bed sheets, stricken with your first guilt.

You will never be less flawed. Only more so. Flaws will gather on your shoulders, your chest, as if patches earned or medals won. Not only will you be too sensitive, but you will feel too deeply. You will be too empathetic. You will care too much.

You'll be too sensitive when you're fifteen and getting mad at your brother for purposefully squashing spiders on your parent's back porch. When you sit outside admiring the furrow orb weavers, memorizing their webs, to be sure you'll know when your brother

messes with them. Their round bodies, furry legs; they're admirable to you, and especially peaceful. They'll become your favorite spider species. They're what you most look forward to seeing when the weather cools and the leaves begin to fall.

Your parents will tell you as you stake your spot on the porch, a vicious voice releasing from your throat when your brother begins eying the weavers, that it is not worth the arguing. Because he's your brother and he's just a boy. He's not harming anything.

Because they're just spiders.

You'll be too sensitive when you're nineteen and a bird swoops in front of your car as you head east on I-40. It's a sharp *thud* and, just like that, you're a murderer again. Its feathers explode over your windshield for only a second, sweeping past you, gone just as quickly as the bird's life you've taken. You pull off at the nearest exit, just making it to a gas station as guilt, sticky and thick, coats your stomach again and releases as tears in your eyes. You sit, parked, crying for twenty minutes before you can get back on the interstate.

Because it's just a bird.

You're too sensitive when you're twenty and pulling off onto the side of a dirt road in the middle of nowhere in southern Ohio. When you hop out of your car and run into the woods, calling for the puppy you saw wandering the edge of the trees, when you're certain this won't be a stop you'll ever be telling your parents about. It passed just at the edge of your vision as you drove, a flash of meandering gold, clumsy limbs carrying its puppy body so close to the road. Of course you pull off at the nearest possible spot; of course you call for it. A car slows next to you, and a woman asks if you're okay; if you need a ride, and you tell her you're looking for a dog. The woman gives you an odd look and sees, piled onto your shoulders, those flaws. You'll eventually stumble back to your car, defeated, and drive away, and ask whatever deity or god will listen

to watch over that puppy. You try not to reason this with the way you were raised, because to do this is to inherently understand that nothing will watch over that golden puppy.

Because it's just a dog.

Children, who are incapable of regulating their emotions, feel too much, therefore they are too sensitive. Just like you used to be, just like you still are. It's a childish trait you never grew out of. You understand better now their outbursts and tantrums than you ever did; much more than you understood it when you were a child yourself.

When you walk through a grocery store, you listen to the horrific screams of a child throwing a tantrum. Rounding an aisle, you watch a young boy, his face red and tear-streaked, as he hysterically babbles about something, his head tilted upward toward his mom. The only words you make out from his frantic screeches are, "It's not fair."

It's not fair. *And no one cares.*

You want to agree with this boy, tell him just how much you understand.

No one is listening. What is he supposed to do but sprawl onto the disgusting grocery store floor and scream and cry as though Armageddon has arrived?

Children, still learning their modes of communication, must do what they can to get their point across. It's tiring and absolutely

infuriating, speaking when you cannot speak clearly, to something you know is important, *you know it*.

You begin forming a picture of the killer of humanity. The murderer of decency and kindness, slaughtering young empathy at its core, plucking it from its roots.

This graphic picture is of a parents' face, kneeling to look at you, at your small, child level, an impatient smile plastered on their face to meet your desperate tears, as they tell you that *you're just too sensitive*.

You don't understand, staring back at them. This is important and despite your screams, your tantrums, your tears, you may as well be silent.

Often, you'll wonder if this is a shared experience. A shared plea. Not by other people, you already know the tantrums of children, begging to be heard.

By animals. The small lives so often taken without a second thought. The frog you forgot about in a wheelbarrow, the spiders your brother purposefully destroyed, the bird that flew in front of your car, the puppy on the edge of the road.

But this is important. Listen, now, I matter.

They don't get to sprawl onto grocery store tiles and scream. They don't understand at all the spot they've been placed on the human hierarchy of worth. They do, however, know they are alive. And this should be enough.

You're too sensitive when you're six. When you're hysterical, begging your brother to stop catching toads, to stop throwing them in the air and hitting them with a baseball bat. When their round bodies splatter, a high-pitched ting as they make contact with the

metal. When guilt, familiar now, floods your insides for the little lives you did not end, but that you could not save.

Because, again, they're just frogs.

Maybe you're just flawed. Maybe you're just childish. Maybe you're just, the adjective.

Maybe they were never just frogs.

They were toads.

You kill me, for fun, and you do not even know who I am, what I am.

You're too sensitive, still, today. However, you understand that this is not a flaw. You have a voice, though some may call it childish, and you can use it to speak—to yell, to throw tantrums, to cry—for those who cannot. You've settled on the biggest flaw of humanity, you know it better, more confidently, than your parents kneeling in front of a younger you, telling you it was empathy and sensitivity. Really, it's a lack thereof. It's the human tendency to dismiss life only because it is not human. It's the application of the adverb *just* to diminish the most humane of responses.

It's November and you're stumbling down the steps of your apartment early in the morning, your dog running ahead of you. In a month, you'll graduate college, but you're still childish, your empathy hardly shifted from your five-year-old self. At the bottom of the steps, you squeal in your childish manner as you spot a toad, sitting just there, as though waiting for you. Gently, you take her in your palms and raise her to your face, her deep rust color bright in the morning sun. Her green eyes, you feel, study your blue eyes, and she does not attempt to hop down from your hand, as if she

understands you only intend to admire her. But she does not do any of these things.

Because she is just a toad.

And you are just a human.

And that is enough.

FORMAL ESSAY

MISGUIDED MASCULINITY IN THE WORKS OF WILFRED OWEN

by Savannah Flowers, Columbus State University

Much of Wilfred Owen's poetry is critical of idealized and valorized masculinity, especially as it relates to war.His poetry demonstrates how thesocial expectations of masculinity are detrimental to the men experiencing them and to society at large. As Caryn McTighe Mucil writes in her paper "Wilfred Owen and Abram," "Owen was not merely railing against the carnage he witnessed; he was, finally, profoundly opposed to the patriarchal culture that seemed to make war such an inevitability" (49). Owen contrasts the misguided perception of war as a heroic and worthy endeavor with the reality of grueling, miserable battle experiences. He is critical of the social perpetuation of these myths, often focusing on how they are passed from father to son. He also criticizes attempts to use Christianity to justify war, for example via the false presentation of dying at war as a Christ-like sacrifice. Further, he highlights the ways these cultural ideas surrounding masculinity isolate the men experiencing them, as the ideas create scorn for display of "weakness." Owen seeks to display ways in which these masculine ideals inevitably lead to suffering, disillusionment, and the opposite of the glory that was promised.

In the poem "S.I.W.", an idealized, misguided perception of masculinity has led the father, and by extension, the culture, to value the honor of war above its own children's lives. Because of this value, as the soldier's family is saying goodbye, they "pat" him and talk of the "brave face" he will display, rather than truly experiencing and expressing the intense feelings that would be more appropriate for a farewell that might be final (Owen, lines 1-2). The line "Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace," establishes early in the poem his father's commitment to hegemonic ideals surrounding masculinity, and his imposition of those ideals onto his son (line 3). The work shows that even the soldier's sisters valorize the idealistic

masculinity of warfare, saying, "Sisters would wish girls too could shoot, charge, curse" (line 10). Thus, the expectation is clearly set that should the soldier fail to measure up to the masculine ideal of a brave soldier, he will be scorned by not just his family, but society broadly. It becomes clear later in the stanza that while the soldier's family (and society) upholds this idea of masculinity, they do not understand the true cost and trials of warfare that come with it. His family writes him letters, picturing him "sheltered in some Y.M. Hut,"while in reality the soldier is constantly tormented by near misses with death and is suffering immensely (line 18). Owen's wording in this part of the poem is sympathetic to the soldier, making it clear that the text of the poem does not agree with the values of society that would label him a coward. Owen writes, "Courage leaked, as sand / From the best sandbags after years of rain" (lines 22-23), implying that the man has withstood all that can reasonably be expected of him. Though Owen may describe a society that is scornful and unsympathetic to these soldiers, Owen's own sympathy is clearly with those soldiers.

We can see how harshly the man has internalized the values of his father and culture by the way he looks down on other soldiers he has seen give themselves self-inflicted wounds. Despite the fact that the man is currently wrestling with the horrors of the war, his knee jerk reaction is to think of these men as "vile" (line 29). The lines "'Death sooner than dishonour, that's the style!' / So father said," are reminiscent of a child repeating something a parent has drilled into them(Owen, lines 30-31).And in the end,when the soldier could withstand no more, he still held true to his father's value – he in fact chose death over dishonor. As Musil writes, "The ethics of the father demanded the son's suicide" (55). Going further, the poem points out that his fellow soldiers informed the family that the man "died smiling" (line 42). While this could literally describe the way the man had to hold his teeth with the gun in his mouth, it could also mean that the soldier finally found peace from both societal pressure and the horrors of warfare with his decision. The poem therefore exposes this misguided

virtue, by presenting the story of a young man who adhered to it completely and without fail to the end,resulting in only misery, suffering and tragic loss of life.

Another of Owen's works, "Disabled," presents these same themes of misguided, propaganda-fueled belief in the warrior myth (as Musil refers to it) contrasted with the gruesome and sad reality that myth produces, from the perspective of a soldier who survived, yet with a severe disability. In this poem a young veteran has returned from the war disabled and mentally broken down. In one case, the poem uses the image of blood from a wound, from two different scenarios, to illustrate this contrast. First, the man recounts a major war injury, at which point "leap of purple spurted from his thigh" (Owen line 21). The poem immediately compares this with an earlier instance in which the sight of blood on his thigh was a good thing, after a soccer match: "One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg, / After the matches carried shoulder high" (line 22-23). This is followed directly by the man's initial reasons for joining the war, showing the man expected war to be another way to prove masculine prowess, just like a soccer game.

His reasons for joining reinforce this. The man was told he'd "look a god in kilts," and he wanted to please a girl named Meg (line 26). In the next stanza, the veteran thinks of romantic symbolic images of war: "He thought of jewelled hilts / For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes" (lines 32-33). The poem juxtaposes the naivety of the veteran's initial hopes with the bitter irony of his current situation. Instead of heightening or exemplifying his masculinity, the war has stolen that masculinity from him. The line "Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer goal" illustrates that the man's experience was nothing like winning a soccer game. Now, women do not look at him with desire, instead only looking at able-bodied men. Women now "touch him like some queer disease" (line 13). The veteran, being disabled, has lost both masculine athleticism and sexual prowess. As Musil puts it,"For Owen, traditional notions of manhood included two important rites: initiation into the

warrior myth and sexual initiation. The two intertwine and Owen refuses both" (54).

Owen presents the same disillusionment from unfulfilled promises of glory from yet another perspective in the poem "The Dead-Beat," which also illustrates the way these distorted convictions are reinforced by the soldiers amongst themselves. It tells of a soldier who becomes emotionally unable to continue to bear the war. However, his fellow soldiers feel no sympathy for him. The speaker's disdain for the man is palpable in his description of him as laying "stupid like cod," and "heavy like meat," (Owen line 2). The soldiers kick him, and the speaker points a rifle at him. When the man says, "I'll do 'em in," he could simply be referring to the Germans, but as another one of the soldiers points out in the next stanza, he could be thinking of "blighty" or England (lines 7-10). The speaker of the second stanza asserts that the fallen man is "Dreaming of all the valiant that aren't dead: / Bold uncles, smiling ministerially" (lines 11-12). The "bold uncles" in question are the men back home, and the word "ministerially" implies that this speaker is especially talking about politicians and leaders. These are the men that are responsible for the war and thus the soldiers' situation. The fallen man's frustration, at least according to the speaker of the second stanza, is with the way his own culture has thrown him away. Looking at this more broadly, these "bold uncles" also represent the masculinity of the culture that looks down on men for shying away from war, like the father from "S.I.W." and once again touches on the perpetuation of these ideals spreading from father to son. The speaker goes on to imply that the man's wife may have even been unfaithful to him while he's been away, which by cultural standards, is deeply emasculating. The fallen man feels cheated that he was promised glory, only to end up disempowered and weaker, much like the speaker of "Disabled."

The misguided masculinity of the "bold uncles" back home has created pressure on these soldiers to pursue honor in war more highly than life, just as the soldier in "S.I.W." had been indoctrinated to

do. However, these soldiers are also experiencing the same kind of ongoing suffering, and constantly face the temptation to pursue a "blighty," or as "S.I.W." calls it ,a "safe wound," as a way of escape (Owen, line 6). Therefore, the weakness displayed by their afflicted fellow soldier represents a temptation for them. Internally they are faced with a choice–either allow themselves to experience the healthy, normal human responses to suffering of a colleague, such as compassion and concern, or close off those emotions and choose instead a response that is in line with their indoctrination, and which helps them continue to fight their ongoing temptation to escape. They choose the latter, which explains the inhumane way in which they respond to their fellow soldier's struggle.

In fact, even the low-voiced speaker of the second stanza clearly sees through the lies from their culture back home, as evidenced by several clear usages of sarcasm. He refers to the "valiant" who are not dead, and the "bold" uncles – these are people back home who are not faced with a need to be "valiant" or "bold" as they are safe from the dangers of war. He repeats this sarcasm when suggesting the soldier's wife is cheating on him, calling her his "brave" wife. This sarcasm shows the speaker has seen through the deception pervading the culture back home. Yet, in spite of this awareness, the speaker also chooses to close off compassion and opts to respond with brutality and scorn to the fallen man along with the rest of his comrades. Like the soldier in "S.I.W.," this speaker finds himself unable to stop living out his culture's masculine indoctrination even when he sees the falsity in it.

In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," Owen presents a modification of the biblical story of Abram and Isaac, positing that the older generation of men is betraying the younger through their proliferation of the war. Just as in the original story, Abram is preparing for a sacrifice. However, there are some notable differences between the poem and the original text that illustrate Owen is using the sacrifice as a metaphor for the war. For example, the preparations for the sacrifice in the original story are fire and wood: ""The

fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (NIV Bible, Gen. 22.7). Whereas in the poem this has been changed to fire and iron: "My Father, / Behold the preparations, fire and iron, / But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?" (Owen, lines 5-6). Iron is not a material one would expect to be used in an animal or human sacrifice, but is extremely relevant for the construction of tools of war. Additionally, in the poem Abram builds parapets and trenches, common WWI constructions that have no relevance to a traditional sacrifice. The most significant deviation from the original text is that, when told by the angel not to harm Isaac, Abram disobeys, and proceeds to sacrifice him anyway. The biblical story is often interpreted by Christians as a story demonstrating the merit of unshakable faith and obedience to God. Therefore this choice instead constitutes disobedience, an immoral human sacrifice, and a horrific, brutal murder of one's own son. This choice by Abram serves as a shocking metaphor intended to compel the audience to understand how an entire generation of men is doing the exact same thing to their sons by sending them to war. Owen scorns the idea of the war having any kind of religious justification, framing Abram's act (and in-turn the older generation of men's act) as a defiance of God. Additionally, in Owen's parable, the substitute animal presented by the angel is called the "Ram of Pride" (line14). In the original story,theanimalwasmerelya ram. In Owen's metaphor, if Abram were to sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac, that would symbolize the "smiling uncles" sacrificing their own nationalistic, toxic pride, and thus making the choice to allow their sons to live while allowing the war itself to cease. A parallel can also be drawn between Abram in this poem and the father from "S.I.W." The father from "S.I.W." prioritizes his pride over the safety of his son, when he insists on death over dishonor. Here Owen argues that the sacrifice of sons to the war is not a holy or necessary one, but a senseless one motivated only by misguided masculine pride.

Owen's version concludes with the last lines of the poem: "But the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Eu-

rope, one by one" (Owen, lines 15-16). This again makes the parallel to WWI obvious, but the term seed is also a reference back to original story, which ends with the angel telling Abram:

> By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine onlyson: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." (KJV, Gen. 22.16-18)

Here, Abram is promised that his descendants will be numerous, prosperous, and a source of blessings. By contrast, Owen's version of the story points out that "half the seed of Europe" have been sacrificed to the war. The end of Owen's parable implies that Abram's decision will lead to ruin, rather than the blessings given in the original story. Therefore, these toxic ideals surrounding masculinity are ruinous for society at large.

In "Soldier's Dream," Owen continues to leverage this image of the fathers opposing the sons to denounce the older male generation of his day, this time by presenting a conflict between Jesus and God the Father.The poem describes a dream in which "kind Jesus" destroys the war machines: "And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts; / And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts; / And rusted every bayonet with His tears"(Owen,lines2-4).However, God is vexed by this, and repairs everything, ensuring the war can continue. Owen is condemning yet another father figure – in this case God the Father – as he did Abram, the ministerial uncles from "The Deadbeat," and the father from "S.I.W." These figures are a representation for patriarchal, traditional masculinity. Owen

portrays the passing down of these toxic values as a sort of violence in itself.

In the poem "Greater Love," Owen employs an ironic use of imagery common to romantic love poetry, contrasting it with horrific war images. The first example appears in the first lines of the poem: "Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead" (Owen, lines 1-2). The beauty of red lips are idealized in many love poems, and thus the audience is placed into the frame of mind to expect a warm, pleasant image evoking happy feelings. Instead, the poem follows with the image of an English youth bleeding out bright red blood from a fatal war wound. Later in the same stanza, the pattern continues with "O Love, your eyes lose lure / When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!" (lines 5-6). Love poetry often adores the beautiful eyes of the fair maiden, but in this case, the poem follows with the image of soldiers whose eyes have lost their sight. In her paper, "Wilfred Owen: 'Greater Love' and Late Romanticism," Jennifer Breen asserts that "Greater Love" is a parody of a love poem, statingthat "Owen reveals that the circumstances of war contradict and mock the language of love poetry" (177). In fact, she goes on to say, "Earlier tentative titles, in order of their composition, were 'To any Woman,', 'Beauty,' 'To Physical Beauty,' 'To any beautiful Woman,' and 'To anyone beautiful'" (Breen, 177). She explains that these titles were eventually discarded by Owen in favor of "Greater Love." These earlier titles serve as further evidence that the poem was written with love poetry in mind, and is a parody.

James Najarian, in his paper, "'Greater Love': Wilfred Owen, Keats, and a Tradition of Desire," reads this poem as an earnest celebration of the bonds between soldiers, however there are a number of problems with this interpretation. The title "Greater Love," is taken from the Bible verse, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (KJV, John 15.13). Thus, Najarian claims that "the men he [Owen] praises have achieved a 'greater love' because they have sacrificed themselves for each other.

This devotion is the 'fierce love they bear'" (Najarian, 33-34). When read alongside "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" it is difficult to read the poem as a genuine celebration of the sacrifice of the lives of these young men. Owen makes clear in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" that this sacrifice is pointless and ruinous. For Owen to now praise this sacrifice as Christ-like would be inconsistent with significant themes he emphasizes elsewhere. Additionally, Owen is suspicious of the propagandistic exaggeration of the bond shared by soldiers, as he demonstrates in several works. In "The Dead-beat," the soldiers immediately begin treating their impaired fellow soldier in an inhumane way. In "S.I.W.", the soldier labels the men giving themselves self-inflicted wounds as "vile." These examples illustrate that in Owen's poetry there is a culture of suspicion among soldiers, who display a fierce disdain for any sign of vulnerability or perceived weakness. Thus, Owen depicts these relations as being plagued by the very toxic values motivating the war in the first place. Were Owen now praising the soldier bond for having a transcendent, near-divine purity, this portrayal would contradict his other works. Additionally, Owen often opposes the claim from pro-war propaganda that Christianity justifies war, as he did for example in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." For Owen to extoll a biblical brotherly love as an emergent outcome of the war would almost transform the poem into something aligned with this pro-war propaganda. Instead, Owen uses the title "Greater Love" in a similar way as "Dulce et Decorum est,"the title of another one of his poems. That poem references the phrase "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*," (translating to "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country"), and there Owen is in obvious disagreement, explicitly calling it "the old lie" (Owen line 27). Owen is doing something similar with the title "Greater Love"–he is scorning the idea of this "greater love," described in the Bible, or at the very least its use as a justification for the war. Instead, "Greater Love" is another scorning of the warrior myth. It uses the form of

a love poem to mock and draw attention to the ridiculousness of society and romanticization of the violence of the war.

After shedding the flawed interpretation that "Greater Love" venerates the virtue of the soldiers' bond and sacrifice, a more accurate paradigm emerges – "Greater Love" lambasts the patriarchs of Owen's day by presenting them as lusting for violence against their own sons the way one might lust for a beautiful woman. While the line "eyes blinded in my stead," could be read as a soldier describing the sacrificial protection of another soldier, it could also be read from the perspective of the father figure. The son is sacrificed, in this case blinded, in the stead of the father and the older generation of men. From this perspective, the entire love poem could be seen as the fathers and "ministerial uncles" espousing their perverse lust for the war. They actively lust for the gruesome misery they are eagerly inflicting on their sons in a misguided pursuit of valor. Like the excitement that Abram feels in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" as he eagerly kills his own son in direct disobedience to the angel, these men experience excitement and lust over the horrific suffering, disfigurement and death of that they have inflicted on their own sons, so much so that they are depicted as voicing a love poem to celebrate it. The result is a scathing critique of the collective societal blindness that could choose so eagerly to perpetuate such misery.

Throughout many of his works, Owen presents a picture of misguided masculinity that leads to the continuing repetition of a cycle of human misery. The cycle begins with a culture of masculinity that idealizes war as the ultimate sport in which males can display their valor and strength in pursuit of an honorable cause. These myths of masculinity then offer false promises of glory, honor and success, while also minimizing or ignoring entirely the misery and damage that war inflicts on its soldiers. As a result, soldiers and their families choose war too flippantly and expect outcomes from it that are nothing like what it delivers. Because this cultural paradigm is so fundamentally misguided, the cycle then culminates

in misery, disillusionment, and often, death. And yet, even when individuals late in that cycle come to see through the falsehoods of this cultural belief system, it has been so ingrained into them that they are often unable to break free and think differently. Thus, the cycle repeats.

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MOTHERHOOD AND SUBORDINATION IN MORRISON'S SULA

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Throughout *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores different kinds of mothers, their role in their society, and the social and emotional consequences of motherhood. Through characters like Eva and Hannah Peace, Morrison challenges conventional maternal roles, illustrating that defiance of these norms can secure personal freedom and survival but often results in alienation from their community. Conversely, characters like Helene and Nel, who adhere to traditional gender and maternal expectations, find public acceptance at the expense of their individuality and emotional autonomy. This duality reflects broader themes of sacrifice and agency that remain central to the struggles faced by Black women in navigating societal pressures. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* provides a foundational lens for understanding these dynamics, arguing that the conventions surrounding motherhood often enforce women's subordination. In this light, *Sula* exemplifies the tension between maternal expectation and personal agency, showing how societal norms dictate the lives of mothers and their acceptance into their community.

Much of the criticism on motherhood in *Sula* focuses on Eva's defiance of traditional maternal roles and the social hierarchies and institutions that reinforce maternal norms in the Bottom. Although many critics claim Eva's sacrifice of her leg demonstrates an adherence to the typical maternal role that demands self-sacrifice, Laura Vickroy argues that "though she has given up part of herself, she has taken control of her own and her children's lives" (29-30). Similarly, Trudier Harris suggests that "Eva…starts out as a traditional mother. Her redefinition of role begins with her depositing her three children with a neighbor…. She chooses self over sacrifice, borders on immorality, and therefore becomes free" (133). Andrea O'Reilly also asserts that Eva contradicts traditional mother roles by contrasting her with the conventional "nurturing

mother," or as she describes it, one given to "sensitive mothering," defined as "the natural, normal motherhood experience" (123). Further expanding on this idea, Ane Ribeiro argues that the system of traditional motherhood prevents Eva from being able to take care of her family in the wake of BoyBoy's abandonment, thus she must escape these conventional roles to care for her family: "it is clear that Eva has found a way out of the patriarchal and racist system that denied her the means of taking proper care of her family" (73). Similarly, Gregg Santori argues that Eva's killing of Plum is an example of her escaping the patriarchal system, stating, "Eva reasserts her power in the face of its own usurpation by a father figure. She does this by reclaiming her son from the same Uncle Sam who introduced Plum to the morphine he is addicted to" (para. 32). Ultimately, these critics identify Eva as an unconventional mother figure, suggesting that by rejecting typical maternal norms, she asserts her agency and redefines what it means to be a mother, embracing a form of maternal power that prioritizes pragmatic action over sentimental ideals.

In sharp contrast, other critics explore how traditional maternal roles suppress Eva's agency, arguing that she adheres to these conventional maternal norms. Desiree Lewis, for example, suggests that the traditional role of women as mothersties Eva to a subordinate position within patriarchal structures, emphasizing how women are often cast as nurturing figures while being confined to roles that reinforce male dominance and societal hierarchies. Lewis argues that as a "strong mother," Eva assumes an authoritative position in relation to Plum, making painful decisions that reflect societal expectations of Black mothers as both nurturing and self-sacrificial. However, this role also aligns her with patriarchal authority—Eva's controversial act of killing Plum to end his suffering asserts her control but also reinforces her subservience to harsh societal norms that limit expressions of maternal care to acts of sacrifice and survival. Lizabeth Rand argues a similar point, focusing on the sacrifices Eva is forced to make, thus emphasizing just how confined Eva is to this sacrificial role: "Eva, forced by terrible

poverty and despair, sacrifices her own leg to protect her family" (346). Debra Dudek also ties this idea of sacrifice to love, suggesting that Eva's only way of showing her mother love is through this self-sacrifice: "For Eva, the only available language with which to speak her love is the way in which she manipulates her own body and maintains the bodies of her children. Eva proves the success of her loving by displaying Hannah's undamaged body as evidence while sacrificially doing violence to her own body" (122). Such critics assert that Eva *does* subscribe to traditional motherhood roles of sacrifice, suppressing her agency within an oppressive system that allows her to do nothing else.

Overall, critics who address motherhood in *Sula* have had much to say about Eva and her relationship to patriarchal values, but they have overlooked the other mother figures in the novel and the broader range of motherhood the novel presents. While much existing criticism explores the subversive maternal roles in *Sula*, this paper will use Adrienne Rich's theory from *Of Woman Born* to examine how Eva, Hannah, Helene, and Nel either defy or adhere to conventional motherhood expectations and the social and emotional repercussions that come with their decision. Rich suggests that traditional maternal roles are instituted based on patriarchal values, which essentially forces women to align their identities with their children, erasing their personal autonomy and agency. As she explains, "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (55). This patriarchal system presents certain facts about motherhood that society has thoroughly adopted and pushed onto women, for example, "a 'natural' mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace turned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless" (22). In *Sula*, Morrison exposes how these patriarchal constructs of motherhood shape the identities and choices of her female characters, revealing both the allure

and the cost of compliance or defiance. By applying Rich's theory, this paper will illustrate how Morrison's portrayal of these women reveals the oppressive nature of patriarchal motherhood and the complex, often painful choices Black women must navigate to assert their agency within a system that demands their self-erasure.

In *Sula*, Eva Peace defies traditional maternal roles through her unconventional and often controversial approach to motherhood. Rather than embodying the self-sacrificing, nurturing figure expected by societal norms, Eva exercises a fierce autonomy and survivalist pragmatism. Although critics often use Eva sacrificing her leg to demonstrate how she fits traditional mother stereotypes, this instance is also Eva's way of gaining autonomy. After BoyBoy leaves her and Plum almost dies because of their destitute lifestyle, Eva decides to leave her children with Mrs. Suggs, and "eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin, which she rented out" (35). Morrison places emphasis not on the sacrifice of the leg as an act of maternal devotion, but instead on the profits of that missing leg, i.e., the new pocketbook, the ten-dollar bill she gives Mrs. Suggs, the new house she begins to build, and the cabin she rents out for more money. Her decision to lose her own leg to secure insurance money demonstrates her willingness to make extreme sacrifices—not solely for maternal devotion but to ensure her own financial stability and reclaim the autonomy that motherhood took from her. This money then allows her to live on her own without a dominant male figure and raise her children successfully.

Eva's treatment of her children also subverts conventional ideals of maternal care. The pragmatic, survivalist attitude that she displays shows up not only in her financial decisions, but also in the way she raises her children. For instance, when Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved them and Eva responds by saying she helped them

survive, Hannah says, "I know you fed us and all, I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (68). But this view of love, which is the same view of traditional maternal roles that supposes women to be the sensitive nurturers, does not work for Eva: "What you talkin' bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you" (69). For Eva, ensuring her children's survival is her primary way of demonstrating her love. This, however, raises questions of Eva's decision to kill Plum. Eva rationalizes her decision to Hannah, explaining, "After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well…I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back….I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again" (71). Plum's regression threatens to bring Eva back to the place she was at when Plum was young–a place where she had to beg for money and had no control over their economic position and no agency for herself. Although she sacrifices a leg to ensure her children's survival, Eva ultimately makes the decision to protect her autonomy, and in doing so, defies the selfless, nurturing maternal archetype.

Similarly, Hannah goes against traditional maternal norms through her sexual independence and detached mothering style. Unlike conventional maternal figures who find their "chief gratification" in their children, Hannah indulges in other pleasures, primarily sexual ones: "Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). In sleeping with many men, Hannah maintains a social and sexual identity outside of her role as Sula's mother, seeking gratification beyond the domestic sphere and challenging the notion that maternal fulfillment can only come from constant, selfless devotion to one's children. This act challenges the idea of maternal isolation as Hannah interacts with the broader community outside of the home and creates an unconventional family dynamic within the house. Hannah also displays this unconventional dynamic in her treatment of Sula. Rather than losing herself in her love for Sula,

Hannah admits that while she loves her, "she just don't like her," contradicting the idealization of mother love as this unconditional, all-encompassing maternal devotion with a candid but unsentimental admission (57).

Although Eva and Hannah obtain personal and emotional freedom by defying traditional maternal roles, this decision also results in their alienation from the community. Their nonconformity threatens the patriarchal values that structure the community, and their actions provoke fear and judgement from their neighbors. While the community never outright condemns Eva, she remains isolated in the upstairs of her house: "After BoyBoy's visit she began her retreat to her bedroom, leaving the bottom of the house more and more to those who lived there….after 1910 she didn't willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire" (37). Eva ensures her children's survival and maintains her personal autonomy; however, her lifestyle prevents her reintegration into the community—she is the "creator and sovereign" of her house, a position to which no other woman in the novel can relate (30). Similarly, Hannah invites the women in the community's outright judgement. Morrison writes, "Hannah exasperated the women in the town…because Hannah seemed too unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy" (44). Hannah's sexual freedom and rejection of marital constraints provoke resentment in the women who adhere to societal norms and are trapped in their marital roles; her nonconformity highlights the restrictions placed on the other women. Eva and Hannah are subjects of gossip and moral judgement because their independence, unconventional parenting, and rejection of societal expectations threaten the order established by traditional maternal roles.

Unlike Eva and Hannah, Helene fully adheres to the traditional maternal norms of the Bottom, embodying the socially constructed ideal of the morally up-right mother who raises her children to conform to those same ideals. Her behavior emphasizes respect-

ability and conformity to social norms, as seen in her strict control over Nel's behavior. Helene raises her to be "obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Ned showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). By suppressing her child's imagination, and consequently, her individuality, Helene ensures that Nel adheres to societal standards. She is the moral backbone of her family, upholding the patriarchal ideal of the mother who shapes her children into socially acceptable figures and submits to male authority. When she and Nel travel to New Orleans to see Cecile, she comes face to face with white male authority in the figure of the train conductor, and despite his disdain for her, she "[smiles] dazzlingly and coquettishly at [his] salmon-colored face….Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before" (21). Although the conductor represents an oppressive racial institution, this encounter provides a glimpse into how Helene reacts when faced with a higher authority that maintains its power through tradition.

Helene's identity is almost entirely defined by her roles as wife and mother, and she operates within the boundaries of patriarchal expectations that demand women's complete devotion to their family. After nine years of marriage, she becomes pregnant with Nel, who "was more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life" (18). In other words, Helene absorbs herself into motherhood by making Nel her only purpose. It is only natural then that the culmination of her life's purpose is when she hands Nel over to Jude in marriage. As Morrison explains, "Her only child's wedding–the culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world–had dragged from her energy and stamina even she did not know she possessed" (79-80). This is what Rich suggests society expects of mothers: a sacrifice of the self. Helene subsumes herself in Nel's development, and the wedding marks the end of Helene's maternal role and her storyline in the novel. This phenomenon is underscored by Eva's musings in the hospital after Hannah's death: "She remembered the wedding dream and recalled that weddings

always meant death" (78). Although Hannah never marries, she dies after dreaming of a wedding. And although Helene does not literally die after her or Nel's wedding, the culmination of her maternal role results in a metaphorical death of the self. The same happens to Nel, as her marriage to Jude marks the beginning of her metaphorical death. Helene and Nel fully embody the self-sacrificing mother whose worth is defined solely by her relationship to her children, leaving no room for self-expression or other facets of her identity.

Even though Nel initially rejects her mother's weakness, she eventually accepts Helene's teachings by marrying Jude and becoming absorbed in her children. Aside from her relationship with Sula, Nel "had no aggression. Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or sputter she had" (83). Because of Helene's instruction, Nel seeks her purpose in Jude, and eventually, her children. After Jude leaves her, it does not take long for Nel "to see what the future would be. She had looked at her children and knew…that they were all she would ever know of love. But it was a love that, like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off" (165). Here, Nel reflects on how the "syrupy" sweetness of her maternal love has deteriorated into something hard and unyielding, leaving only the residue of her sacrifices and the emotional toll they have taken. The idealized concept of selfless love has led to emotional depletion as the role that should have led to her fulfillment instead reveals the emptiness and lack of recognition in that role. Nel relates how "the mouths of her children quickly forgot the taste of her nipples, and years ago they had begun to look past her face into the nearest stretch of sky" (165). Her emotional labor and sacrifice have gone unnoticed as her function as a caregiver overshadows her identity and emotional needs. Nel fully invests her identity into her children, yet her resignation to this reality confines her to a singular, unchanging role that becomes stale and

empty as her children grow up and move away and her maternal role becomes obsolete.

By adhering to the traditional maternal roles, Nel cements her acceptance into the community, yet this decision comes at the steep cost of her individuality. When she returns to the Bottom and sees how Nel reacts to her affair with Jude, Sula recognizes this fact, lamenting that "now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall" (120). Nel belongs to the town because she has submitted to the social expectations and moral codes of the Bottom by internalizing the community's values and aligning her identity with their standards of proprietary and respectability. This "belonging," however, suggests a loss of autonomy, as Nel's sense of self becomes inextricably tied to the town's approval. She gives herself over to them and in doing so forfeits her agency and becomes a passive participant in her own life. This is the "self-erasure" of mothers that Adrienne Rich critiques, with Nel's adherence to societal expectations bringing her to a hollow form of security at the expense of personal fulfillment and emotional freedom.

Ultimately, Nel and Helene's conformity mirrors that of the broader community. Excluding Eva, Hannah, and Sula, the women of the Bottom assign themselves to the "natural," selfless maternal archetype. As Sula reflects on Nel and the other women, she observes how "those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets" (122). The image of women folding themselves into coffins suggests a self-inflicted confinement as their fulfillment of these rigid maternal expectations results in unfulfilled dreams and accumulated regrets. These women have given up their own dreams and aspirations in favor of carrying someone else's societal demands. They accepted the social expectations handed down to them, only to find that with those expectations

came the "skinned dreams and bony regrets" of all the women who came before them and conformed, only to find themselves in a coffin at the end. Sula goes on to contemplate how "their children were distant but exposed wounds whose aches were no less intimate because separate from their flesh. They had looked at the world and back at their children, and Sula knew that one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat's curve" (122). Although the women's children might be physically distant, they are still emotionally vulnerable or "exposed." The pain the mothers feel for their children's suffering is no less real, even if the children are not directly under their care or immediately near them; their emotional connections transcend physical distance. The knife near the throat's edge suggests the threat of personal destruction that the child's presence, or the hope invested in them, might be preventing. And hereinlies the significance of Eva's view of love: she survived for her children, made personal sacrifices for her children, and felt their pain as keenly as if it had happened to her. Ultimately, however, Eva manages to escape the fate of the other women, including Helene and Nel, by choosing herself when Plum's regression threatens to undo her.

In *Sula*, Morrison interrogates the complexities of motherhood through Eva, Hannah, Helene, and Nel, who either defy or adhere to the societal expectations of mothers. Eva and Hannah exemplify the subversive maternal figures who reject the traditional selfless mother archetype, securing their independence and survival at the cost of social isolation. Their choices challenge the patriarchal structures that confine women to sacrificial roles, asserting a form of maternal power that is both controversial and liberating. Conversely, characters like Helene and Nel embody the traditional maternal role, prioritizing social approval and conformity over personal fulfillment. Their adherence to these norms offers them a semblance of security and belonging but results in a loss of individuality and emotional autonomy. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* provides a theoretical framework for understanding these dynamics, exposing the patriarchal underpinnings of convention-

al motherhood and highlighting the sacrifices imposed on women who conform to societal ideals. Morrison amplifies these themes, illustrating how the societal construction of maternal roles limits women's identities and perpetuates their subordination. However, Morrison also reveals that neither defiance nor conformity offers a simple path to fulfillment or freedom–both choices come with profound consequences, either alienation or a loss of self, raising questions about the nature of maternal sacrifice and survival in a patriarchal society.

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THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND SEXUALITY IN PUNCH ME UP TO THE GODS

by Katie Nelson, Tennessee Tech University

Brian Broome's *Punch Me Up to the Gods* offers an engaging and sincerely personal exploration of the intersection of black masculinity and gay sexuality. By sharing his memoir, Broome highlights the challenges that come with navigating such a complex intersected identity. His narrative recounts growing up in a society where, in the black community, expectations were rigid and rejected any notion of queerness. Through deep reflections of abuse, shame, and complicated desire, Broome determines how these forces shaped his identity. Brian Broome in *Punch Me Up to the Gods* calls attention to how the intersection of race and sexuality intensifies internal conflict and feelings of displacement, ultimately revealing the lasting emotional impact of trying to find space for yourself in two separate social groups.

To preface, Brian Broome is an award-winning writer, screenwriter, and poet. He earned his MFA from the University of Pittsburgh and continues to work as an instructor in the university's writing program. Broome's memoir, *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, published in 2021, recounts his life through a series of sections, uniquely crafted around the poem "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks, with each section titled with the same lines from each stanza. He also plays with time by juxtaposing yet mirroring his own past experiences with a present observation of a young boy named Tuan on the bus with his father. Through his personal accounts of abuse, societal expectations, and romantic complications, Broome con-

veys how the intersection of race and sexuality contributed to his identity formation.

In his memoir, Brian Broome reveals how intensely the narrow heteronormative view of Black masculinity impacted the development of his own identity. Early in his memoir, he reflects, "White boys could just do whatever. But Black boys had to show through our behavior that we were undeniably, incontrovertibly the most male. The toughest" (Broome 8). Here, Broome stresses the contrast between the expectations placed on Black men compared to White men. Black boys and men were expected to be inherently stronger and tougher, while White boys and men were held to a much lower standard, noting "White boys could just do whatever," which is grounded in racism and historically speaking, how White individuals have gotten away with great atrocities against the Black race. Broome's inability to completely embody this masculine ideal for the Black male made him more vulnerable. Broome conveys, "I had not found a space for myself within the Black community, either, with all of its Jesus and rules regarding male behavior" (106). Broome explains that due to the predisposed views of Black masculinity, he experienced feelings of unbelonging. He also references the connection to religious beliefs, which Broome grapples with throughout his memoir, as the religious and societal perspectives were often connected. Alford A. Young in "Black Men and Black Masculinity" explains,

> While often crafting their arguments to address the black American condition more generally, these sociologists argued that black men had much to do in order to achieve stability in the workplace, in family life, and in civil society. Social remediation and social uplift were central tenets undergirding their research and would remain so in subsequent sociological research on black males. (para. 3)

For Broome, these particular ideals became a source of mental turmoil. Broome's decision to structure his memoir around Gwen-

dolyn Brooks's poem "We Real Cool" deepens his exploration of hypermasculinity for Black individuals. Brook's poem embodies the hard, defiant, "cool" but doomed masculinity placed on Black boys with her sharp language and intense imagery—dropping out of school, drinking gin, playing pool, and asserting their overall toughness as they stereotypically follow self-destruction. Broome structures his memoir around this poem because the boys it depicts reflect the same type of hypermasculinity that he was pressured into, regardless of how it affected his well-being. Like Brooks's characters, Broome was also expected to emulate strength and emotional detachment. Broome's *Punch Me Up to the Gods* relates this immense pressure as he struggles with self-acceptance and identity formation.

Moreover, Brian Broome powerfully depicts the internalized homophobia he carried through his youth into adulthood, exemplifying his internal struggle with his gay identity. Most notably, even in romantic moments, Broome often downplays and dismisses his sexual orientation, i.e., queerness: "Because we both know that, although we loved each other, there was absolutely no need to make a big spectacle of ourselves. We would never march in any Pride parade" (78). This moment is a clear representation of the internalized shame Broome experienced, which stems from the repeated messages that a queer idenity is shameful, indignant, and seperate from his Black identity. The particular phrase "spectacle" is telling of the worldview that queerness and the celebration of that queerness are embarrassing and wrong. While following this stance, Broome begins a journey to embrace his sexual orientation in line with his Black identity and break away from his internalized homophobia. However, it took him a great deal of time to have self-acceptance, considering the intensity of hypermasculine expectations from the Black community. This excerpt, in summary, reveals how Broome internalized the societal and cultural stigmas surrounding queerness. That being said, in "Shame, Internalized Homophobia, Identity Formation, Attachment Style, and the Connection to Relationship Status in Gay Men" Jac Brown and Robert Trevethan

write, "Thus, where coming out has been accepted by family and friends, this may be instrumental in facilitating identity formation in the sense that shame and internalized homonegativity may be decreased" (2). In Broome's memoir, the lack of acceptance instilled self-hatred and negatively affected his identity formation.

Foundational to this, of course, is Broome's painful experiences of rejection from within the Black community, specifically. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Broome was expected to align himself with a hypermasculine image—for any man who did not was subjected to abuse and feelings of disconnection and displacement in the Black community. In such a case, Broome shares, "He was pummeling the girl out of me. I took his disguised ass-whuppin's almost every day, believing that, one day, he would deliver the one punch that might change me" (9). This is such a violent reinforcement of the systemic issue that is gender norms in society, where men and women have certain, expected, separate qualities; discipline was a weaponized tool for gender correction and conversion. The phrase "pummeling the girl out of me" is such a chilling depiction that exemplifies the act of destroying queerness and, by clear association, femininity, emerging as an assault on identity. In another instance, Broome reports, "Any Black boy who did not signify how manly he was at all times deserved to be punched back up to God to be remade, reshaped" (16). The metaphor "to be punched back up to God" suggests that nonconforming identities are wrong in reference to the divine, implying that those with such identities should be returned to the larger creator to be "reshaped" and "remade." At the peak of his frustration, Broome relates, "Growing up, it didn't take me long to learn that my gayness detracted from my Blackness. Black, gay men are punch lines to the Black community" (81). This excerpt is especially important to the displacement he felt from the Black community in particular. His use of the word "detracted" insinuates his queerness took away from his Black identity, as if being gay meant less than being Black. This mirrors the widespread idea conveyed by Juan Battle and Anthony J. Lemelle Jr of "Gender Differences in African American Attitudes Toward

Gay Males," as they write, "African Americans are believed to have significantly less tolerance of homosexuality than Whites" (1). The evidence could be applied to Broome's memoir, where he faced extensive criticism from the Black community, leading to disconnection and self-hatred.

Uniquely, Broome in *Punch Me Up to the Gods* underscores the complex difficulties of living with an intersected identity, one that involves two marginalized groups: queer and Black identities, in turn forcing him to navigate the oppression of both racism and homophobia. In one painful account, Broome captures this complication:

> It had been suggested that, by having kept company with me, Corey was a faggot by association. This could not stand. And now I was being taken to go fuck 'some girl' to prove that Corey had not been hanging out with a sissy. I was to prove that I was not an insult to my race and gender. (11)

This moment is a standout example of the intersectionality of race and gender in Broome's memoir. In this instance, he is not only shamed for his sexuality, but he is coerced into sexual acts so as not to betray his race and gender, noting the line, "I was to prove that I was not an insult to my race and gender." In this vivid illustration, Broome was instructed to do such acts with a woman to preserve his social credibility as a heteronormative Black individual. The negative phrasing such as "faggot" and "sissy" belittles queerness and tells the reader of the general perception of one with a dual identity like Brian Broome: Black identity and gay sexuality—Such phrases also act as violent reinforcement, not only a slur. In this scene, Broome is stripped of agency, where his body controls narratives of race and sexuality, capturing the broader message that the intersection of black masculinity and gay sexuality creates complex challenges. In "Black, Gay and Thriving: Unveiling the Strengths Garnered by the Intersection of Black and Gay Male Identities," Shay Orielle Selden highlights the psychological

weight and turmoil of such a dual identity. Selden explains, "The identified challenges for these men involved microaggressions, negative stereotypes, and gender role strain, which may be conceptualized as minority stress" (2-3). Broome's account exemplifies the concept of "gender role strain" as he is forced into heteronormative and even homophobic behavior to avoid societal ridicule and embarrassment. His action of suppressing parts of his identity aligns with the analysis of the psychological turmoil. Additionally, "Initial Development and Validation of the Brief Internalized Heterosexist Racism Scale for Gay and Bisexual Black Men: A Measure of Internalized Heterosexist Racism" by Drexler James furthers this point in a similar examination:

> Sexual minority people of color, including gay and bisexual Black men, face complex and distinct challenges, often resulting from racism, heterosexism, and their intersections, as they navigate the interconnectedness of their racial and sexual identities. These challenges are shaped by interlocked systems of social and structural inequalities, leading to internal conflicts that may make them feel that their identity as a sexual minority person of color is devalued. (2)

This analysis aligns with Broome's internal conflict of needing acceptance and feeling alienated from both the Black and queer communities. Notably, from this excerpt, the "interlocked systems of social and structural inequalities" can be applied to those systems Broome faces. Through the character of the young boy Tuan, Broome creates power through his observational bus ride: "I can only tell myself that it has already begun for this Black boy. I am witnessing it. I am watching the whole world ready itself to tell him about all the things that he cannot be" (18). In this strong instant, Broome uses Tuan as a symbol of future generations— Black boys are taught that softness and emotional vulnerability are unacceptable. By interwining Tuan's experiences with his own, Broome highlights how deep-seated societal norms continue to shape young Black boys' identities. Ultimately, the intersection of Black

masculinity and queer idenity in *Punch Me Up to the Gods* reveal the layered oppression for those with multifaceted identities and reinforce how intersectionality is a real, lived, painful, ongoing experience for individuals such as Brian Broome.

That being said, Brian Broome's memoir enters a larger conversation about the complexities of intersectionality— identities compounded by factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. In *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, Broome's story provides a reflection of the widespread cultural struggle throughout history for Black gay men to feel comfortable and safe in their queer identity. While today's society discusses race, gender, or sexual orientation in a more nuanced and inclusive way, Brome's account is a profoundly personal engagement with his own intersected identity. His memoir is an acknowledgment of the neglected and painful identities that have been muted and unnoticed in the grand scheme of historical social justice. Though the world is beginning to make space for intersected identities, both in society and literature, Broome's work emphasizes how far we as a society have come, yet at the same time, how far we still have to go.

To conclude, Brian Broome's *Punch Me Up to the Gods* reveals how the intersection of black masculinity and gay sexuality even further alienates Black gay men. Through his personal and painful narrative, Broome illustrates the emotional toll of the prescribed ideas of Black masculinity and internalized homophobia. His memoir reminds readers that identity is impacted and shaped by cultural and societal expectations. Grounded in larger ideas surrounding race, gender, and sexuality, Broome exposes the importance of recognizing and validating intersectional identities, like his own. In doing so, Broome reclaims his own voice and allows others to do the same. Thus, as readers, we are encouraged to consider how

Black queer people continue to be impacted by both homophobia and racism.

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2027 SOUTHERN LITERARY FESTIVAL JUDGES

John Mark Adrian — Formal Essay

John Mark Adrian earned a Ph.D. in English Literature from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2005. Since then, he has taught at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, a small public liberal arts college in the mountains of southwestern Virginia. In 2011, he published Local Negotiations of English Nationhood, 1570-1680 with Palgrave, and in 2022 he published Feting the Queen: Civic Entertainments and the Elizabethan Progress with UMass. At UVA Wise, he directs the College's Honors Program and leads students on regular study abroad trips to England and Italy.

Mary Collins — Creative Nonfiction

Mary Collins is director of the Writing Minors at Central Connecticut State University, teaches for the Yale Summer Writing Program, and is the author of several award-winning adult and young adult nonfiction books, including American Idle: A Journey Through Our Sedentary Culture and Airborne: A Photobiography of Wilbur and Orville Wright. Prior to her work for CCSU, she taught part-time for 12 years at Johns Hopkins' MA in Writing-

Program and worked as an editor and writer for National Geographic and the Smithsonian.

Leslie LaChance — Short Story

Leslie LaChance is a writer, editor, and mixed-media artist whose work appears in magazines and journals such as The Nashvillian, The East Nashvillian, Stirring: A Literary Collection, Still: The Journal, and Birmingham Poetry Review. She has taught collegiate writing and literature classes, and she works as an academic portfolio consultant for students in the University Scholars Program at the University of Tennessee at Martin. Leslie serves on the board of the expressive arts teaching studio Art & Soul Nashville. Some excerpts of her work can be found on her website at leslielachance.com

Christian Anton Gerard — Poetry

Christian Anton Gerard builds hot rods, customizes vintage ski boats, works wood, and loves the 1980s and 90s. When he is not imaginatively touring the Caribbean islands and the European countryside searching for the vacation houses where he imagines writing more books and driving winding roads in vintage sports cars, he lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Gerard is a recent Artists360 grant recipient, and his two previous books are Holdfast (C&R Press, 2017) and Wilmot Here, Collect for Stella (WordTech, 2014).

McAdoo Greer — One-Act Plays

McAdoo Greer is an actress and alumna of The Groundlings—the improv troupe she credits with teaching her that she can write

her own lines and act at the same time. Plays include The First Human Impalement Act in These Here Parts(Dramatic Publishing Company), How Come That Blood (2016 National Playwright's Retreat in Creede, Colorado) and Ti**y Bars (Nashville Rep, Ingram New Works Festival). With Rebecca Reynolds, she has written the comedy UncleVodka, which received a recent reading with Jeff Daniels' Purple Rose Theatre in January of 2026 and will open at Theatre for the New City in New York as part of their 2027 season. McAdoo has been a featured performer at the Southern Literary Festival and the Tennessee Williams Festival in New Orleans, and her nonfiction work recently appeared in The Dramatist magazine and the New Madrid: Journal of Contemporary Literature. In 2023, the musical Ti**ty Bars, written with collaborators Sherry Landrum and Ned Paul Ginsburg, received a staged reading at the Brave New Works Festival in Chattanooga, TN. A former faculty member at Murray State University, McAdoo now considers herself (in this world of hyphenates) a soybean farmer-playwright.

Tomi McCutcheon — Literary Magazines

Tomi McCutchen retired from the UT Martin Department of Mass Media and Strategic Communication in July 2024 after 28 years of teaching journalism courses and advising the student newspaper. In her previous professional life, she was a daily newspaper copy editor, layout editor and feature writer. In her personal life, she is a wife, mom, grandma, cat person, and caregiver for her elderly mother.

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