SHIFT

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First Edition

Editor | *Jennifer Wachtel Kates*
Managing Editor | *Jennifer Chesak*
Assistant Editors | *Alexa Norsby and Jamie Schmidt*

Editor's Introduction

Nearly two years ago, Karen Alea Ford asked me to take the helm as director of MTSU Write, and as I learned more about the program, I realized that there was a real need to bring back a publication. (In its previous incarnation as The Writers' Loft, this program had published a journal called *The Trunk).* It isn't enough that a program help students learn to read and write, that we provide community and mentorship. In addition to helping writers find a voice, we also must make those voices heard. And so we decided to create a publication that would celebrate writing by completing its process.

I decided to call the thing *SHIFT*, largely based on the image Karen had adopted early on for the program's social media profile, the shift key from an old-school typewriter. I love old typewriters and the romance of creating on them. One must fully *commit* to every word when one punches those old keys. But I also like the sound of the word—shift—its mono-syllabic punctuation, the sibilance of the beginning and the thump of the ending. It uses the whole mouth: lips, tongue, teeth. Most of all, I like the concept of the word "shift." On the typewriter keyboard, the shift key is what makes things change. On old-school machines, the shift key literally shifts—moves—all the little hammers just enough that each key creates a totally different letter or symbol. And while the mechanics work differently today on my laptop keyboard, the key still says "shift," reminding me that one small movement can change everything. Shift can mean changing from talking in a regular voice to TALKING IN A LOUD AND ANGRY VOICE. Shift can mean counting: 123456789, or swearing: !@#$%^&*(.

To shift is simply to make a small change or movement. But the word itself is a wily changeling. The *OED* gives us no less than eleven different uses of the word as a verb and eleven different uses as a noun. It can work with or without an object. You can shift your body, shift the gears, or shift the blame. The winds might shift, the tectonic plates might shift, or public opinion might shift. "Shift" can stand in for "compute," "remove," "sell," or "deceive." It can name the aforementioned key on a typewriter, a straight-cut dress, a personnel change on a football field, or a way of arranging

bricks "so that their ends do not coincide." To shift can even be a devious thing (thus "shifty") or an act of self-sufficiency ("to shift for oneself").

Writers have the power of shifting, like drivers in sports cars. We can control speed and pace and rhythm and where we go and when. Writers have the power to shift perspectives, allow readers to experience those shifts, and thereby shift their own views. Writing creates paradigm shifts.

Shift is a dynamic word, the perfect title for what I hope will be a dynamic publication.

This first volume of *SHIFT* is impressive. We received over a hundred submissions of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and drama from all over the world. These twenty represent our favorites. They explore shifting family dynamics ("Choosing Us," "I Don't Want to Visit My Mother," "The Allins of Easter"), shifts in perspective ("Liver," "Footnote to Politics[1]," "The Secret Life of Garden Gnomes"), literal geologic shifts ("Last Days"), and shifts in opinion ("I Have Reconsidered My Decision"). We are pleased to be publishing some new and emerging writers as well as some more seasoned pros, some hometown folks from MTSU and some from across the country and across the ocean. In this first volume, we also offer a chat with one of MTSU Write's rising star graduates, poet Tiana Clark, who reminds us to write about what pricks us and to keep our own "wild engines."

We have taken our time creating this first issue, and I for one have learned a great deal about everything from screening submissions through online software (easy!) to contracting with a state institution (not easy!). It is, we hope, just a beginning. In future issues we look forward to continuing to shift—to grow, change, surprise, and challenge the status quo. But for now, I invite you to enjoy these selections, not only the joy in the reading—the words, phrases, images, characters—but also the joy in the change, movement, and serendipity that they effect in you.

— *Jennifer Wachtel Kates*
Editor
Director, MTSU Write

I Have Reconsidered My Decision

by Alvin Knox

I have reconsidered
my decision to be cremated.
Instead, I would like to be taxidermied—
well, sort of. I do not want to be stuffed,
but skinned, hollowed out and stitched back together,
sealed and pumped full of helium,
that amazing party gas of youth's balloon
which transforms all of us
into cartoon caricatures of ourselves.

Released from my back porch,
I will float, slowly,
toward heaven,
my arm waving a limp goodbye,
my head lolling side to side
with the rhythm of the breeze,
lifting to tumble among the clouds
until I catch a jetstream eastward.

During the day I will warm and rise
to an eagle's eyes' view of all I've left behind,
cooling and sinking at night to glide
above the treetops and mountain tops
and rooftops of some seaboard metropolis
where club-goers will see me, pointing
and declaring, "Look! It's a bird! It's a plane!
It's a naked guy!" and I will wave hello, goodbye,
continue my journey east into the coming sunrise
where perhaps I'll become the perch, the temporary refuge
of some wayward albatross, before eventually I will begin to leak
and, like so many shooting stars,
fall into the sea.

The Year My Father Was Born

by Matthew James Babcock

Marcel Ravidat wandered the cavernous dreams
of Stone Age graffitists at Lascaux.
The Nobel tolled no bells. January scorched
Australians while duck hunters froze
in The Mississippi on Armistice Day.
Howard Powell parked a Studebaker
on Lake Guntersville. Survivors laughed off hell.
Chaplin and The Stooges spoofed Adolf.
Every future shone like scrap metal.
In the heart of every housewife
an incendiary bomb. Who could sleep
with Panzers menacing The English Channel
like mechanical mice, with Soviet
icebreakers chewing through The Bering Strait?
Service began for millions at McDonald's
and Auschwitz, and the world wobbled
like a lollipop in the mouth of an angry toddler.
Flavor: gasoline. Welcome crooners
and cartooners. Welcome new weapons
roaring through comic book skies
like science fiction: *Helldiver, Corsair,*
Marauder. The word was peace or annihilation.
Gandhi going pen pal, a palace of puppets
in Norway. Where was the repeated prophecy?
The true debut? Think Bikers rumbling
youthful religion into Sturgis. Think
the carbon fourteen sunrise in the eyes
of a four-year old Dalai Lama, as pure
as penicillin. Some walked from Monterey
with Steinbeck and Ricketts to dabble
in The Sea of Cortez. Some could
fabricate everything but the fight in Joe Louis
and the Finns. What remains
of the small figures and big blows?

Bridge-busting gusts on The Puget Sound.
A shrinking vision the size of a Booker T. stamp.
Take the slapstick mugs of U. S. servicemen
muddied with M&Ms. All the synthetic smiles
and newsreel eyes. Take the rubble of Sheffield
and Coventry under the plutonium moon.
Exit Fitzgerald. Exit Trotsky, who took
a clubbing, scrapped back, and succumbed.
Exit Emma Goldman's utopiates,
Paul Klee and his reds as sober as rust,
paint-by-number phantasms of robust yellow,
mosaics of purple gauze and sulfurous orange suns.
Enter Chuck Norris and Havlicek.
Enter Lennon and Starr. Enter a conductor
in a railroad town, as common as congratulations,
his bride who took the southbound line
from Alberta on the coldest night
of the year, forty below, their second son
a Christmas surprise, a struck match
held to a cave painting, flaring in darkening eyes.

Liver

by Constantine Jones

It took Thanasi longer than usual to get home that day on account of everyone wanted to go see about Nicky's lizard. It was getting cold already for October, and they'd all pretty much given up on seeing any wild animals again till the summer. Last June Mr. Patterson, Jaime's dad, had caught one big nasty of a snake at the neighborhood pool party. Story goes he had to cut off its head in the dirt with a shovel, but all the mothers made sure the kids didn't get anywhere near him or the fence, so Thanasi couldn't be sure. He hadn't even gone to that pool party. Jaime hadn't invited him.

Anyway that one was old news by now, and today was looking like just another day at St. Barbara's. The little kids had already gotten picked up by their parents, and the first wave of middle school moms was starting to pull through the courtyard. But for Thanasi and the rest of the neighborhood kids, the big boom of the belltower meant more than just the end of the day—it meant the start of the Sweet Spot.

Matty Rosco had heard his older brother use those words before and thought it sounded like something secret, golden, grown-up somehow. So that's what they called it, that little slice of time between the end of school and when their mothers would expect them home. Most days they figured the Sweet Spot would last about ten, maybe fifteen minutes. But some days they'd try to stretch it out, make it go as far as it could before the neighborhood phones started ringing. One time Nicky got home so late his ma had called Mrs. Rosco and about half the other mothers in the neighborhood, *worried sick* she said. Even though they lived right there at the top of the hill, she'd driven down the road to pick him up herself for a month straight after that.

Today looked like rain though, and mostly Thanasi had figured he'd just give up on the Sweet Spot and go home. Nothing was gonna happen anyway, not in this weather. But then word about the lizard had gotten out to Matty Rosco, who naturally told the Mascia boys, and everyone knows how neither one of 'em can keep their mouth shut. Andreas, the moody kid from Religion class, had nearly bowled over the Immaculate Virgin statue in the courtyard out front for running to tell the news so fast. Thanasi could tell he was excited, but mostly he was excited about being the one to break it to everyone else.

"You'll never believe it!" Andreas had screamed.

"What's 'at racket," Jaime said all cool, pretending to draw something in the dirt that only he could see. Thanasi kept quiet. He'd only hung around 'cause he wanted to be around Jaime, though he didn't even really know why himself.

"It's Nicky, you guys gotta come quick and see it. Behind the library, that's where he found it. You gotta come see!"

"See what," Jaime asked, but Andreas didn't hang around to answer, he just dashed off back towards the Chapel. "Hey, come back here! See what!" Jaime dropped his stick and did a look at Thanasi that said *let's go*, so they hiked up their backpacks and ran through the Chapel yards after Andreas, staining their white socks with dirt the whole time.

Almost the whole neighborhood was there when they made it. Matty Rosco, Peter and Paul Mascia, Andreas, even Patrick and Tyler—two eighth-graders from up the road who only hung around 'cause they thought the Mascia boys' older sister was a bomb. They were huddled all in a half-circle between the back of the library and the woods behind the school, and Jaime and Thanasi joined in where they could. Thanasi wondered what all the fuss was about, but there was a weird quiet back there by the trees, so he kept his mouth shut and watched.

Nicky was crouched down in the dirt, staining the knees of his navy slacks. He had a big salamander caught in his fingers, one hand around its neck and the other holding the tail. It was big, Thanasi noticed—bigger than he thought a lizard oughta be, and slick like rocks in a stream. Its skin was shimmery black, and the tail faded out into purplish-blue. Its eyes bugged out in a way Thanasi didn't like but couldn't stop staring at. Actually there was something cool about it, he thought—something almost pretty, though he'd never say that to the rest of the guys. It just stayed there in Nicky's hand, blinking in that weird way.

"Where'd ya find it," Tyler finally asked.

"It scurried out the back of the library, *fwoom,* just like that," Peter answered. "Isn't that right Nicky?"

"No dingus," Paul chimed in. "He chased it *around* the library, but it crawled up out the storm drain. What, are you stupid?"

"Don't call me dingus, bozo."

"Ow!"

"Quit it!"

They roughed each other up like that till Matty finally told everyone to shut it. Thanasi just kept looking in the lizard's eye.

"Heard it from my brother," Nicky finally said, still kneeling. "These suckers are like magic. They've got superpowers."

"Do not," Patrick said.

"Do so."

"Yeah, like what then," Tyler sneered.

"My brother, he says these lizards don't die. Said if you pull off the tail it just grows another one right back."

"Like the hydra," Peter Mascia hollered, "from Hercules!"

"Exactly like the hydra," Nicky said, too quiet. The friends all gasped, but the older boys didn't seem convinced.

"Horseshit," Patrick said, leaning against a tree. "That's all a bunch a stories."

"Yeah," Tyler backed him up. "Remind me who's your brother again—I'll knock some sense into him."

"Just wait," Nicky said. "You'll see."

The older boys laughed, taking turns spitting into the grass. Thanasi didn't know what to believe. He looked to Jaime, who'd also been quiet the whole time, to try and see what he thought about the whole thing. But Jaime only stood there looking, same as him. Thanasi thought maybe he wanted to know what would happen, but at the same time he didn't wanna see it. More like he just wanted to know. The lizard opened its mouth, then closed it.

It didn't come apart all at once.

Nicky was pulling by the head but that started to give, so then he had to grab it farther down. Didn't help that the skin was so slimy too. Finally there was a big tearing sound, and when Nicky saw the juices on his fingers, he stood up quick, dropping both parts back in the dirt. Some of the boys hollered and made big noises, and even Jaime said something like *hell, check it out*, but Thanasi couldn't move. He looked around in the dirt and saw the tail first, a slippery purple cord, oozing like a slug in the sun. Then they all looked for the body. Nicky had flung it a little farther away. It was lying on its back, opening and closing its mouth real fast. They watched the little stump by its legs, waiting for the new tail to shoot out like the dragon after losing its head. But it just squirmed there, its slippery skin starting to cake with the dirt.

"Real cool, Nick," Patrick finally said to break the silence.

"Yeah," Tyler chimed. "Tell your brother he's an ass."

They both stomped out of the clearing, back up the little trail leading into the neighborhood from the Chapel yards. The rest of the boys felt like maybe they should say something, but Nicky just shrugged it off all quiet like. Thanasi couldn't even tell how it happened, but slowly the group split up. They all knew it too, that the Sweet Spot was over. They'd have to make it back home soon if they wanted to make dinner in peace.

So they all went their ways—the Mascia boys across the street, Matty and Andreas out to the cul-de-sac, and finally Nicky back up the hill, where probably he wouldn't say a word about it to his brother. At the split by the water fountain it was only Thanasi and Jaime left on the path, walking back in the direction of the pool house. Jaime's mom didn't get home from work till five thirty, but Thanasi knew that he was late. His ma wouldn't let him hear the end of it. When they got to their stop sign, where Jaime went left and Thanasi went right, they both stopped. There was something Thanasi couldn't figure out, didn't know how to say. Looked like Jaime didn't know any better either.

"You think it's alright," Thanasi finally asked.

"Huh?"

"The lizard."

"Don't be dumb," Jaime answered.

"Do you remember . . ." Thanasi started to say, but Jaime just looked down at his shoes, scuffed with dirt. He wanted to ask him if he remembered the snake and the summer party, and he wanted to ask if his dad really did it, and he wanted to ask him why he wasn't invited when the whole rest of the neighborhood got to go. Was it because of that night when you slept over, Thanasi wanted to ask, and we made a tent in my basement, and when you fell asleep I put my hand on your stomach 'cause I wanted to feel the hair on your belly since I don't have any of my own yet. He wanted to ask him, were you not asleep that night like I thought. Did you think that was weird? Do you think I'm weird now too? Is that why you didn't invite me to the pool party, 'cause you'd have your chest hair out and everyone would see I don't have any yet?

"Remember what," Jaime asked.

"Nevermind," Thanasi said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be dumb," Jaime said. "See you tomorrow."

That night Thanasi's ma had given him an earful and he was sent straight to his room after dinner. He stayed up reading that book of ancient Greek myths his *papou* had given him before he died—he always thought those stories were more interesting than the ones they made them read in Bible study. That night he read the story of Prometheus, who went behind the gods' backs to give fire to people who didn't know how to make it yet. And the gods were so mad that he did that, they chained him to a rock and made it to where an eagle would swoop down every day and eat his liver. But the catch was it would always grow back, the liver. So he'd have to get it pecked out again and again and again.

The next day, after the morning Chapel talks, Thanasi went around the back of the library to look for the lizard and its tail. But nothing was there.

Beaver Brook

by George Perreault

Our acres slid to a hushed grove with a sunlit stream
defining families of pine and hardwood, feathery birch
and a giant white oak which harbored an ancient wound
outlined in legends a man had sought to chop it down,

but the axe snapped and broke his leg, maybe snared
his soul—it might well have been my Irish grandfather,
the one who drank three girls into poverty, untold stories
the scars my mother wore under her bark—and then

beside the brook was an old elm, long dead, but still
holding a rope high over the water, inviting dare-
devil boys to swing, drop straight to a narrow pool,
green and safe if you released, not at, but just before.

Beyond the woods was a bridge between a farmer's
sprawling fields, hemmed with cement to form a bench
where a boy might sit with a neighbor girl, neither by plan
nor quite by happenstance, under a ceaseless sky where

everything's so otherwise empty that leaning to kiss,
in that sliver of hope just as your eyes slide shut, summer
beguiles so blonde and freckled it's forever impossible
to draw a solitary breath, try as hard as you might.

I Don't Want to Visit My Mother

by Jillian McKelvey

I woke up this morning with my heart pounding, convinced the phone was ringing—that Sunrise was calling to tell me my mother had fallen and hit her head again, or had struck a caregiver, or thrown a potted plant. But the phone wasn't ringing. Perhaps it was my decision not to visit my mother today that rang in my ears. I usually visit my mother on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Today is Wednesday. But I don't want to go to Sunrise today. I don't want to visit my mother.

I thought I would get better at this. I would learn all the correct responses, divert my mother's attention, take her on adventures, bring her joy, give her love, and get better at leaving. Instead it gets harder. It's harder to go, harder to stay, harder to leave.

I dread the thought of going to the fourth floor, of sitting in the dining room, the only common room, and listening to my mother and Irene and Margaret and Fred.

Margaret: "Can I go to my bed?"

Irene: "No!"

Fred: "Please help me."

Mum: "I want to jump to the sky, but not with you. We will never get along."

Irene: "Shut up."

Margaret: "Can I go to my bed?"

Irene: "Is somebody calling?"

Mum: "I am angry. That girl murdered her neighbour."

Irene: "Can I go to my bed?"

Me: "Mum, would you like liver or chicken?"

Mum: "Liver."

Me: "Would you like me to help you?"

Mum: "No! I can do it myself. Stop. Stop it. I don't want that. I want something nice. Get away from me."

Me: "Would you like some mashed potatoes with gravy?"

Mum: "I hate mashed potatoes with gravy. I have never like mashed potatoes and gravy."

Me: "How about some liver?"

Mum: "No."

Mum: "Can't you get me some liver? I said I wanted some liver."

Me: "It's right here, Mum. Here, there is some on your fork."
Mum: "I don't want it."
Me: "Okay, Mum. That's fine. You don't have to eat it."

Betty Graham, my neighbour across the street, leans into her husband. She supports him with the side of her body and taps his left leg with her fingers. Betty wants Vern to lift his leg over the threshold and step into their house. But Vern doesn't understand the instructions, or perhaps the hardwood floor inside the front door looks like a black hole.

Vern is eighty-eight. It was only a couple of years ago that he chugged across the street with his snow blower and cleared our driveway and the driveway of the neighbors' next door. He came over every time there was a big snow. He wore a red-and-black-checkered wool shirt and a red wooly cap pulled down over his ears.

Vern holds one leg in the air, uncertain. Should I run across the street and help? No. No. Betty's got him. He's in the door. She is holding both his hands, walking backwards across the living room to a chair where he sits most of the day.

The window in my home office lines up directly with the giant picture window in Betty and Vern's living room. I can see Betty bring Vern the newspaper. She opens the paper and spreads it across his lap. She pats his leg. Vern looks at the paper and looks back at Betty. Betty vanishes into the kitchen. She comes back into the room with some kind of drink and folds Vern's hands around the mug.

Vern's name is on a list. Betty told me she hopes it won't be too long before they take him into Sheridan Villa. She worries that if he falls down, she will never be able to get him up. But I know it will break her heart to let him go, and I imagine she will visit him every day, not every other day, or every few days like I visit my mother, but every day. And she will feed him lunch and play him music and drive back again for dinner.

Jacques, the Sunrise director, once told me I was their poster girl. I brought sunshine in the door and laughter to the fourth floor. I didn't fuss around playing nursemaid. I visited. I danced. I sang. I read books, made lemon tarts, dressed up, hula-hooped. I wasn't afraid to come and have fun.

But I am afraid. I was afraid then and I am more afraid now. I am afraid every time I drive to Sunrise. I am afraid of my mother's dementia. I am afraid of her pain. I am afraid of not knowing what to do, of not doing enough, of not making her happy. I am afraid of not knowing what to say, afraid of saying goodbye, because she hates goodbye.

The last time I went to Sunrise she said, "I hate you. I want to strangle someone with my purse!" She said I didn't care about her and she was going to throw herself off the balcony. She stomped off and came back and said she was sorry. "Everything I said was lies and I don't want you to be upset with me."

I told her I wasn't upset. That I understood people have down days, grumpy days, off days, and that I loved her.

She said, "Love is all well and fine."

So I told her I really *liked* her. I thought she was a *lovely* person.

And she told me I didn't say it convincingly.

I stand in the middle of my front lawn staring at nothing. I don't know how long I have been standing like this, but it feels like a long time. I cannot say goodbye to my mother today or cry in the elevator or sit in the car and stare out the window or hold my breath until I feel dizzy and sick and realize I am not breathing. And I tell myself I visited her two days ago. She will be fine. Ruth will paint her nails. Nellie will sing to her. Pam will play games. Patricia will read her a story.

Across the street, Betty and Vern have climbed over the threshold again. They are on the front porch, one step down from the front door. They sit in orange canvas chairs that match the orange shutters Betty painted. She said she liked orange, but it had turned out louder than she expected.

I always thought that if Alzheimer's were a colour, it would be orange. Vibrant. Outspoken. Anxious. It takes a colourful person to wear orange well, or paint their house orange, or drive an orange car. Orange, like Alzheimer's, has attitude.

Betty and Vern hold rocks glasses. Are they sipping gin martinis like they used to do at my Christmas parties when Vern played the piano from memory until one in the morning and everyone sang?

I wave and shout, "Hi Betty. Hi Vern."

Betty shouts, "Hello."

Vern waves a full-body wave and spills some of his drink in the flowerbed.

Last week my mother hated the soup. She hated her lunch. She hated Halloween. She hated parties because she had been at far too many of them. I think mostly she hated herself. She didn't want to be grumpy and she knew it turned people away, but she couldn't help it. I kept telling myself it was the disease. But the hard part for me was seeing other dementia residents laughing and dressing up and having a good time. It was so unlike my mother, the dancer of jigs, the roaring twenties girl.

At the end of the visit when I got into the elevator, she got in with me and wouldn't get out. She had never done this before and I didn't know what to do. "I have to go to school, Mum," I said.

"Can't I come with you?"

"No Mum, you have to have a student card to get in."

"Can't you get me a student card?"

"I'll try. Maybe you can come with me next time."

"Why can't I come with you now?"

I stepped out of the elevator. My mother stepped out too. I stuck my foot in the elevator door. It groaned and stuttered against my toes.

Tess danced over. "Come on, Frances. Let's go and have hot chocolate together."

"I don't want hot chocolate. I just want to be with my daughter."

"Come on, Frances. We'll put marshmallows in it. Jillian has to go to school now." Tess took my mother's arm. My mother stomped away.

Vern doesn't have many words now. But he is placid and calm as he has always been. Betty strokes his jaw with the back of her hand and says, "What's that, dear?" Betty drags the green garden hose across the lawn to a bed of wilted geraniums. She calls to Vern, "Is this a good place, dear?" Vern doesn't plant or water the flowers or mow the lawn anymore. He used to mow the lawn every week in the spring, summer, and fall. A few years ago he started mowing it twice a week, three times a week, every day. Betty said, "He enjoys it, and it gives him something to do, so why not?" One of the last times Vern got out the mower, he mowed a single strip across the middle of the lawn.

When did my mother notice her own odd behaviour? Did she think she was overtired? Stressed? Did it scare her? My mother laughs now about something being wrong with her brain. She said to me the other day as I rummaged in my purse, looking for the car keys, "Careful, or you will become Frances Harris." And I said, "I believe that is quite likely," and she said, "If I were you, I'd run the hell away."

Vern's bedroom light is on. I imagine Betty will be helping Vern with his shoes and socks, the zipper on his pants, the buttons on his shirt. She will brush Vern's teeth and place the soap in his hands. She will help him into fresh plaid cotton pajamas, fluff his pillow, and pull up the covers. Vern will snuggle under the comforter and look up at Betty. And Betty will say, "I'll see you in the morning. Hope you sleep well, dear. I'm right here if you need me."

Treasuresallaround

by John "Pigpen" Madigan

The fine, gray dust collecting
On the coffee cups,
Left in the sink, waiting,
Evidence of post-modern archeology

The long, drawn curtains, held in
Suspended animation, still with nary
A whisper of deliberate humanity

The pattern of the tablecloth,
Purchased on sale, patched
With the tacky fingerprints of
Hurried paramedics

Don’t Be Sad, Chrysostom

by Dmitry Blizniuk

Rural silence is a thick sandwich with butter
Generously sprinkled with the sugar of meadow dragonflies.
Nothing’s going to happen here in this century.
No one’s waiting for you in the Future Simple.
When the reddish, hemoglobin-high blueness of the evening sweeps over you,
Carnivorous stars start moving their nippers.
They are real and terrible here;
They are not sick city animals muzzled with smog.
You can gnaw on the candied nuts of constellations if you like.
The moon is screwed up to the skies for centuries
Like a basketball hoop,
An eagle-owl flies too high for a three-point shot.
A couple eat each other under a dark window:
The skin of the stumpy, thick-braided girl
Is covered in moon dust, which tastes of unwashed soap.
The kisses are rough and greedy, sweet and sickly, like Turkish delight.
Such an intoxicating stability reigns
That you can hardly tell day from night.
And during the daytime, the whole landscape, no matter which way you look,
Is a blue gauzy scarf with a sparrow caught in it.
A goat rests on the roof of an old kennel.
A proud rooster strolls around the yard, its comb sticking out like a naked brain.
At nights a persistent moth
Bangs its head against the illuminated glass
A loony angel in a motorbike helmet.

Revolutionaries hibernate like frogs here.
Here there’s no sense in saving up for a vacation in Egypt.
Here everything obeys the theorem of Rip Van Winkle.
Everything is misty with drowsiness.
In the evenings you are drunk with songs of crickets—
They’re strong like pure alcohol—
At dawn, the huts try on rains,
Female goblins trying on necklaces.

Your dreams haven't come true. So what?
Have angels on motorbikes sped away,
Leaving you with a backpack on a dirt road?

Don't be sad, Chrysostom,
You're nothing more than a man sketched on a school blackboard.
And you're being wiped off from down up.
Your trunk made of chalk is still seen,
But your elbow's dissolving in the wetness under the sponge.
The highest heights are not conquered.
The silence is as unassailable as ever.
The bout of growing up is dragging on.
The flat tires of your bike stir the warm dust.
The life is passing by, pushing you to the roaring edge.
God allowed you to dream,
To sit for a while behind the wheel of the limo of the world.
Then He threw you like a puppy onto the back seat,
And jabbed the key of dawn into the ignition . . .

The Allins of Easter

by Jess Bennett

Shrove Tuesday

Neither of Celia's brothers used brilliantine in their hair, which made her nervous. Many adults had told her that men with messy, bushy hair were socialists. Thomas and his tangled nest of red hair bothered her especially because she and her eldest brother, James, took more after their Lebanese father: olive skin, blackberry hair. Why should Thomas get the last piece of their mother? At night, she could hear Thomas playing Celtic tunes on their mother's zither. The melodies would fall from his hands and creep from under his bedroom door.

Today, Celia's father, "Papa Allin" as he preferred to be called, expected a visit from one of his wife's friends and her daughter. He had two tables lined with food: two massive bowls of tabbouleh with pita bread close by; a pyramid of shawarma stuffed with lamb, onion, and yogurt, a light brush of olive oil across the wrap; and seven plates of fattoush with two calf kebabs across each plate. Something in the fattoush, the radishes perhaps, dug into Celia's nose and caused her eyes to water.

"Try as he might," whispered James as he fashioned her hair into ringlets, "Mama's friends still take him for a wop." There was an eleven-year gap between James and Celia, and even though she had just turned thirteen and found some of his jokes more detectable, his mid-twenties cynicism got on her nerves. James stood up, towering at six foot four, and lumbered over to the icebox, his heavy belly shifting with each step. As he walked, he unfastened the back clips of his suspenders and pulled the straps from his shoulders, allowing them to fall to the floor. They dragged between his legs as he took out a small chunk of ice and pressed it against the small of his back. "It makes sense," he began. "New York still has only pennies in her purse, and yet Papa insists on keeping the stove lit."

Celia thought of how many pennies she had in a pink coin purse hidden under her pillow. For years, Celia had heard the words "economic crash," which made her think of an automobile accident she saw at the picture show. Glass lay all over the ground, and the driver, a woman with a magnificently plumed hat, had been decapitated. Celia recalled being eight years old and lightly treading the sidewalks, worrying that the "Big Crash" had left the concrete speckled with glass and shrapnel.

Papa Allin stepped out from his room, his purple suit well-starched. He caught James with the ice and said, "No, no, no! Ice is for guests only! Only!" James returned the chunk to the ice box as his father continued: "You want air, stick your head out the window. There's no short-of-cold outside."

With a smile, James said, "I wouldn't fit out of these windows."

"Then maybe you think about working this off, eh?" said his father, pinching at his stomach.

James patted his belly and said, "Losing this won't shrink my shoulders."

"Enough, enough," said Papa Allin, "I need you to come now—order at the liquor store—and," his eyes darkened, "to find Thomas."

James combed his hand through his thick black curls and said, "Yes, I suppose I didn't hear him enter last night . . . It's quite a walk to the Savoy, Father. Wouldn't it be better to just let him find his way back?" Celia's father puffed out his chest and made to slap James, but being five foot five, he only scraped James's chin. By now James was familiar enough with his father's seriousness to feign shock or pain when appropriate.

"You're cruel to speak of your brother in this way!" And with that, they left the apartment. Celia stayed in the kitchen. She grabbed a record of Guy Lombardo's "Goofus" from inside the bread cupboard. While the Victrola spat the squawking step number, Celia took a bundle of chrysanthemums and daisies from the dining table's vase and wove them into her panama hat.

Being by all accounts a "young lady," she was not afraid of being alone in the apartment anymore. The relative quiet, or at least the absence of arguments, made the loneliness far more bearable. But, when James came home after the first time she'd stayed by herself, she was crying and still looking for her mother. She was only six then. Celia took several slow breaths. She listened to the record more than ten times, and just as the needle touched down for another encore, Papa Allin burst through the door.

"Celia, love, company—company!" he shouted with a smile. Mrs. McAdams and her daughter Ruby languidly followed behind Papa Allin. They were in matching day dresses with floral designs that reminded Celia of couch fabric. Ruby's outfit differed from her mother's by way of a yellow, feathery fascinator. To Celia, she looked gorgeous. Mrs. McAdams looked over at the dining table.

"Oh, no spaghetti, Allin?"

Celia's father smiled, the tips of his black moustache glimmering. "My apologies. With Connie's passing—she took all of the angel hair with her. You understand."

Humor and especially agitation were beyond Mrs. McAdams, but she smiled all the same. Her smile, the quaint pink curve of her lips, gave Celia a hazy feeling, as if she was staring hard into opaque glass. Perhaps if she stared long enough, Mrs. McAdams could see her in return. On the other side of the room, Ruby lifted the needle from the Victrola and said, "Mother, Celia and I are going to her room to play with her dolls." Mrs. McAdams nodded.

Celia's room was a porcelain court, a collective gift from her mother's past, "when her family had money," James would say with agitation and a slight tone of loss. A gathering of glass gentlefolk stood in lethargic repose on a shelf that lined the wall space just above her bed. On her pillow sat a black and white Pierrot clown with red lips and a face that looked hopeful and matronly. Ruby stared at one doll with purple and blue bustles. The doll's eyes, one blue, the other brown, were glass, and Ruby admired her face in them. She then noticed a delicate bulge along the doll's stomach.

"Oh, she's pregnant! Doesn't that beat the band? I've never seen a doll with child." She flicked at the bulge, and the glass womb twanged. "I have, however, seen a doll breastfeeding."

Celia blushed, but not wanting to appear squeamish around an older, cultured girl like Ruby, she brushed her shame aside and said, "Some of the mothers that live below us are always sitting on the stoop with babies at their breasts. Now *that* beats the band . . . with a hammer."

Ruby laughed. She picked up the Pierrot clown and positioned it as though it were suckling from the pregnant doll. The glass mouth clinked against the breast, and Celia imagined the doll feeding her newborn. She felt the nipple tightly enclosed in the baby's mouth, and her shoulders and chest twitched. Ruby's smile couldn't be missed. How motherly. Her warm eyes stared at the Pierrot as if it were her own child. Celia believed Ruby could take away nightmares. Ruby knew enough to show her how to be a lady. Ruby could teach her Celtic tunes on Thomas's zither.

"Please never leave," prayed Celia in an unconscious whisper.

"What was that, love?" asked Ruby.

Celia blinked, snatched from her dream.

"No matter. You know, I think you're very lucky to have toys this pretty," continued Ruby. "Most girls who come from overseas turn out poor and trashy."

"I was born here," said Celia with confusion.

"Well, sure. So was I. But I have the benefit of my family being here for a few generations. I've had time to wash the pier stink off."

Celia was about to speak again until she heard the front door open.

A shout followed: "Just when you thought it was safe to drink from the well again!"

Celia turned to her companion with a look of sudden excitement, which Ruby found a little too unpoised. "Thomas is home," Celia said, radiant.

Though she resented Thomas at times, Celia suspected him of being cultured. Or, at least, he had the types of conversations that she associated with cultured people. Economics, race, religion, romantic affairs—Thomas could juggle topics with words so eloquently. But at the table sat a Thomas that Celia only saw when Papa and James were angry with him. Disheveled, he leaned over his plate, looking gray. James wrapped a piece of ice in a dish rag, which Thomas held against his head. Papa Allin set out a tray of saltine crackers, which Thomas ate nearly eight of in less than a minute.

"Heaven help it," muttered James.

"Pardon?" asked Mrs. McAdams.

The three men looked at her but were at a loss for words.

"Thomas loves music," said Celia. She was about to add *He and Mama would sing often*, until Mrs. McAdams quickly tugged at the fresh line of information.

"Oh how nice. What music do you favor, Thomas?"

As if he were a starved wolf pulled away from a fresh kill, Thomas haggardly looked up from the crackers. Mrs. McAdams clutched at the napkin in her lap, bracing for another awkward silence, which Thomas slowly delivered her from by replying, "Rag."

"Oh, a sort of club music, yes? I catch rips of it here and there, mostly from Ruby's sister."

"And how is Branwen?" asked Papa Allin.

"Branwen? Branwen McAdams?" asked Thomas.

"Branwen Smithson now. Yes, that's my eldest daughter," replied Mrs. McAdams. "She's doing well, I suppose. You know she and her husband only recently returned from Montreal. They'll be over for Easter dinner." She looked at Thomas. "Have you met her?"

Thomas smiled, the tip of his tongue involuntarily peeking out to wet his lips. "Oh we're recent acquaintances."

Mrs. McAdams leaned back, scandalized.

"What's Rag about?" asked Ruby, snapping her mother out of a small episode of delirium.

"It's Negro music," she offered. "And it sits so well with a younger crowd, I suppose through its jauntiness. So much of that music is about love and mischief, and—"

"And the undue killing of Negroes," added Thomas. Mrs. McAdams looked up from her plate while Thomas continued: "If any killing is 'due' . . . for that matter."

"I think 'killing' is such a blunt term," Ruby said, shoving a piece of shawarma into her mouth.

"Oh no, it's not blunt enough, honey! How does 'skewered' sound?" added Thomas. His tone dropped, and he looked up without seeing anybody. "I was waited on by a lady last night. She said that's how they found her brother: skewered on a fence post."

"Not during the meal," said Papa Allin. "It is too much."

"You could wait until after the company leaves," James added while giving Thomas a stern look.

"I suppose, but these society gals need to know these things, don't they?"

"Thomas—"

"Would they hear about it otherwise? You're not lacking in any 'social initiative' yourself, James."

Papa Allin groaned, and Mrs. McAdams leaned forward, all the supposedly dirty inner workings of the family laid bare before her like a fresh cut of pig's tongue.

Never one to deprive an audience, Thomas met Mrs. McAdams's hungry gaze and whispered, "James is a socialist." The news was too much. Mrs. McAdams stood, though no one was certain if she meant to leave or if it was mere shock. Ruby squealed in delighted disgust.

"He stayed in a commune with French Canadians for two months!" And now in a whisper: "They even shared beds."

At last, James boxed Thomas hard on the ear, slamming his face against the table. James, Papa Allin, and Mrs. McAdams all began shouting, but Celia could not make sense of all the noise. Mrs. McAdams gestured for Ruby to head towards the door as she gathered her belongings. Celia rose from her chair, but Ruby gestured for her to come no closer.

"Celia, your brother associates with Negroes, and from what I've seen today, you live with thoroughly queer characters." Ruby's eyes, with no discernable trace of the warmth that Celia sought from them, kept a steady contemptuous air. "We don't have anything further to discuss."

Given that slamming the door would have been indecorous, Ruby quietly pulled the door to as she left, but not without making a small clucking noise with her tongue. Thomas crossed himself and spat a gob of blood onto the floor.

"May no evil spirits return," he said.

But Celia, in a mood of full rage and indignation, felt the churning of evil spirits. She jolted from her seat at the table and with only one hand flung her chair back against the floor. The clatter shook her family, and now with their attention, Celia felt that she could do nothing else but scream. It was a long howl, and in her mind the sound could cut through the entire tenement.

"You bastards!" Ah, words! She had heard so many filthy and horrible things to call others while living here. She had seen men's eyes follow her young legs and heard their low grumblings. She had heard children being walloped with the broad sides of liquor bottles and all the torrid little words that popped and sprang between screams. She had also heard Mama lulling her to sleep one restless night, saying *My sweet, my sweet, you mustn't say these words*, and there in her rage, she felt the light impression of her mother's hand on her head. In this tight-knit confusion, only "bastards" made it through. Now the bastards were looking at her, their eyes like bright cherries peeking out of shady branches. James, prone to outbursts of emotion when faced with random conflict, audibly suppressed a sob. Papa Allin and Thomas looked at James, then at the floor, unable to make eye contact with either him or Celia. Finally James looked up at the ceiling, the upwards motion a futile attempt at restraining the fat tears from rolling down his face.

For the first time in her life, words had failed Celia. There was nothing left to say then but to admit the truth: "I feel so alone." Her head and feet grew light. The sentence had exorcised her. She quickly moved to her room, unimpeded by the men. Before passing into a heavy sleep, she vaguely heard James's heavy footsteps, perhaps seeking a rag for his wet face. The thought pained her, but not enough to keep her from rest.

Ash Wednesday

The church was exceptionally peaceful. The Wednesday morning sun swept in through the windows of St. Paul's, and Celia could see specks of dust twirling around each other in the light, like small sea birds in a swarm above fish-heavy waters. Celia, James, and Papa Allin avoided eye contact with Thomas who looked at each of them, one after the other. The church bells rang and the priest stepped in front of the altar. His neck and cheeks were bright red, like rose petals. He opened a tin of ashes and dipped his fingers into a small tray of water.

The congregation queued in front of the priest. Of Celia's family, Papa Allin reached him first. As the priest spoke to him, Papa Allin thought of Celia. His mental codex held many images of her sitting on the front steps of their tenement, sewing small Scotties from burlap for her dolls to play with. He remembered, from two years ago, seeing Celia sneak a drink of beer. She said it helped her fall asleep and stay asleep. The McAdams girl had been so ugly to her. Ruby! And her ugly pig nose! If Celia was not angry, Papa Allin would be angry for her. His little girl wouldn't feel alone.

James was next. As the priest prepared to smear the ashes across his forehead, James moved his hair away from his face. Workers have blistered hands. Blistered hands and strong arms. James could carry his family right out of this country. When the priest told James that we from dust to dust return, he thought about a hostel-stay, the supposed commune, now two years past. He shared a room with sixteen loggers, and he shared a bed with four French Canadians, all of them with sawdust on their faces. One of the loggers would curl up next to James, brush the dust from under James's eyes and tell him how good things were in Canada. James could faintly hear Thomas tell him that everything was top notch in Canada . . . except for the government's handling of natives. Thomas, for all his bawdy behavior, could see things beyond James's initial understanding. As he walked to the back of the church to find Papa Allin, James looked at Thomas, who kept his face down.

Celia walked up to the priest. The priest took a pinch of black ashes and rubbed it between his fingers. He traced a cross on her forehead and said, "Remember, my child, that we are from dust, and to dust we shall return." His skin, with its rosy tint, reminded Celia of felt. She would cut crowns for her dolls out of a spare roll of felt in her closet as soon as she got home.

Thomas was last. The priest imparted the same message to him, but all Thomas heard was "I can pick the flies out of your ointment. You look so tired, please sleep on my couch." Thomas fell on his knees and wrapped his arms around the priest's legs. The congregation gawked, and one woman let out a slight cry after hearing the clatter. Thomas shook, and sobbed "I love you so much." James and Papa Allin were already outside of the church, but Celia had seen all of it. Thomas's pain was needles in her back. She ran to him and the clack of her shoes echoed. After prying one of Thomas's arms away from the priest, Celia held his hand tightly, working her fingers between his. They stayed

this way for a few moments until Thomas, after seeing Celia, rose to his feet. The priest, now very confused, quickly crossed him with ashes and asked them both to leave.

Papa Allin hailed a buggy. As they rode home, he looked at his three children. "Sometimes," he began, "I think I hear Mama calling to me at night. We have tea, and she tells me how much she loves all of you." He looked at Celia and James. "Celia, she loves how you create your toys, the fabrics, all style and shape. And James, she thinks of you as a big, strong man. It'll be good when the work comes." He looked at Thomas, and his smile grew so tender. "And Tommy, Tommy, Mama tells me how you have so much love in your heart."

"She wouldn't have said that," said James. Papa Allin gave James a shocked look. "No, no—what I mean," continued James, "is that she wouldn't have said it like that. Mama had that petite way of speaking." James wistfully tilted his wrist and puckered his lips while he gave his impression of Mama Connie. "I think Thomas is right good in this world for all the love he shows—that's how she would've said it." James looked at his family with a smile.

Celia prayed for Easter to come quick. She imagined her mother riding along with them, wearing her panama hat, the one Celia had recently crowned with flowers. *My children*, Mama Connie would say, *were lost and are found. Were dead and have come back to life*. Celia felt the wind zip past her as she and her family rode along in the newness of life.

The Bird and the Bear

by Sandra Hosking

Cast of Characters

ALIE – female, 20s (Alie means bird or rival in Scottish.)
NITA – female, 30s (Bear in Choctaw.)

SETTING: The patio in the back of a suburban home. There are trees, a table, two lawn chairs, and some empty pots on the ground. It's the last days of summer, near dusk.

AT RISE: (NITA is sitting at a patio table in a lawn chair just putting out a cigarette into an ashtray. She flips through an outdoorsy magazine. There is a noise. ALIE enters and hides behind the fence. She looks out. Her back is to NITA. There is a bit of blood on her neck at the hairline, but Nita doesn't see it, and it shouldn't be that noticeable.)

NITA

(surprised and a little irritated)

Hey.

ALIE

(turning and stepping toward her)

Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was—

NITA

I am.

ALIE

I didn't think anyone lived—

NITA

I do.

ALIE

I never see any lights on.

NITA

Do you mind?

ALIE

Oh my lord. This is your yard. I'm in your yard. Like I said, I didn't think anyone . . . No one was ever out here when I—

NITA

You've been in my backyard before?

ALIE

Did you see it?

NITA

What?

ALIE

The bear.

NITA

The what?

ALIE

I saw it. Across the street and down a little, by my house. Big and brown. As big as a truck!

NITA

There couldn't be a bear down here.

ALIE

I think it came from the woods.

NITA

This is a crowded neighborhood. The woods are far away.

ALIE

He must be looking for food.

(She goes back to the fence and looks out.)

He must be hungry.

NITA

There's never been a bear down here.

ALIE

How do you know? There's more of them out there than you think. I see it in the news all the time. A bear comes down, rummages through people's garbage, slices a hole through an unsuspecting housewife.

NITA

You are melodramatic.

ALIE

That's what he tells me, my husband. You should have seen this thing. Huge teeth and razor-sharp claws. He could tear you to pieces.

NITA

If there's really a bear, someone should call 911. I'm sure your husband would want to know where you are.

ALIE

I'm scared. Do you know what I do when I'm scared? I make myself as small as possible. Like a little mouse or a finch.

(She shrinks herself and hides under the table.)

NITA

What are you doing?

ALIE

Sometimes he doesn't notice. Sometimes he just passes by.

NITA

Come out.

ALIE

Shhh. Must be quiet. Not a peep.

NITA

This is ridiculous. You can't be under there.

ALIE

He'll hear you!

NITA

This is my house!

(NITA tries to pull ALIE out as ALIE tries to pull her under the table.)

ALIE

Get down!

(In the struggle, NITA falls to the ground.)

NITA

Son of a bitch that smarts!

(rising)

You're trespassing, you know. You have until the count of three before I call the cops. One.

ALIE

Wait a minute.

NITA

TWO.

ALIE

(jumping up)

Do you want him to hear you? You'll attract attention.

NITA

(going to the fence)

Hey, Mr. Bear! Here's two tasty morsels waiting for you. Come on, bear. Dinner time!

ALIE

(rushing to her)

Stop! He'll barrel right through that fence, jump on us, and rip us to shreds. Is that what you want?

NITA

There's no bear! If there were, someone would've called the cops by now.

ALIE

There was a bear. I saw him!

(Pause)

Please.

NITA

Maybe he's moved on.

ALIE

Will you check?

(NITA looks out.)

NITA

I don't see anything. It's all clear. You're safe.

ALIE

He could be hiding in some bushes.

NITA

There's no place for him to hide. So you can go now.

ALIE

Do you mind if I stay a little longer?

NITA

Yes.

ALIE

(picking up the magazine)

What you reading? You like hiking?

NITA

Look—

ALIE

You do seem like the outdoorsy type. Do you know how to tie knots?

NITA

Knots?

ALIE

My husband knows how to tie a lot of different knots. Square knot, barrel hitch, noose. But I'm better.

NITA

Planning on tying somebody up?

ALIE

(sits)

Do you have any lemonade?

NITA

No.

ALIE

(rising, moving about the patio looking at things)

Why do you have all these empty pots?

NITA

The plants died.

ALIE

They need nurturing.

NITA

I'm no good at that.

ALIE

I am. You alone?

NITA

No.

ALIE

Because I never see anyone.

NITA

We only feed at night.

ALIE

Ha! That was a joke. Where's your . . .

NITA

Son. He's away for the weekend with friends. Camping. Too bad. He could've seen a bear right here.

ALIE

Oh no! It was very scary. And your husband?

NITA

Just us.

ALIE

I'm sorry.

NITA

I'm not.

ALIE

(sits)

How old is your son?

NITA

You're not leaving, are you?

ALIE

Must be out of high school if you let him go camping with friends.

NITA

If you're still afraid of being eaten, give me your husband's number. I'll call him for you.

ALIE

Oh sure. The little woman is a problem so call the man. So Victorian.

NITA

I'll have you know I was arrested for protesting the Iraq war twice. The second time was for pissing on a general's front lawn.

ALIE

You have a vicious nature.

NITA

I'm no Victorian. My point is you don't really know what you're capable of until you're pushed to the limit.

ALIE

You seem like a very strong woman.

NITA

Are we friends now? Coffee pals?

ALIE

If you like.

NITA

That was sarcasm. If you're staying, I'm going inside.

(She starts to leave.)

ALIE

Don't you know me?

NITA

(stops)

No.

ALIE

I live across the street, one house down.

NITA

Sorry.

ALIE

Are you? Are you sorry?

NITA

It's what people say, when they don't know what else to say.

ALIE

I've lived here four years.

NITA

I've lived in this neighborhood ten years, and I don't even know the people on either side of me. The old guy over there is retired navy or something, and there's a young couple on the other side. Both teachers, I think. Or maybe chefs. Hell if I know. Hell if I care.

ALIE

They're insurance agents.

NITA

Even more reason not to care.

(ALIE reaches up to her neck to scratch it. There's blood on her hand when she pulls it away.)

ALIE

Red.

NITA

Oh my God, is that . . . ?

ALIE

I think he got me. I didn't feel a thing.

NITA

Stay right there. I'll get something.

(She runs into the house and brings out a towel and first aid kit.)

Now hold still.

(She wipes Alie's neck with the towel.)

ALIE

Did he get me?

NITA

Let me see your hand.

(She wipes the blood off Alie's hand.)

Where did all this come from?

ALIE

Have you ever tasted blood? Like iron, like you're licking a fireplace poker. It doesn't taste different, whether it's your own or someone else's.

NITA

I'm not finding the cut. Are you sure it's blood?

ALIE

You haven't asked me my name.

NITA

(smelling the towel)

Can't smell it.

ALIE

(insistent)

You haven't asked me my name, Nita.

NITA

How do you know my—

ALIE

I've gotten your mail before. Nita Brown.

NITA

You have? You've never brought it—

ALIE

I don't leave the house.

NITA

You kept my mail?

ALIE

Don't you see? Bears roaming the neighborhood. Wild animals coming down from the hills because we're encroaching on their habitat. Looking everywhere for a bit of food, not caring who is in their way. They do what they have to do.

NITA

You live in the blue house?

ALIE

Yes.

NITA

That guy with the construction truck is your husband?

ALIE

(happy she noticed)

Yes.

NITA

He's a big beast of a man. Sometimes I hear him in there when I walk by.

ALIE

That's him, that's Jake.

NITA

He's loud. Funny, I thought he was a bachelor.

ALIE

Sometimes he wishes he was.

(rising)

I have a lot of plants in my backyard. I have a green thumb. I could show you how. With just a little dirt and a little water and a little care, you could—

NITA

No, thanks.

ALIE

But wouldn't it be nice to have some greenery instead of all this emptiness?

NITA

We're done here.

ALIE

You still haven't asked.

NITA

What?

ALIE

My name.

NITA

I don't need to know your name.

ALIE

Why not?

NITA

Because in five seconds I'm going to throw your ass out of here. Bear or not. And you're going to hop on back over to your little love nest before I count to ten. And then I'm never going to see you again. I'll never give you a second thought.

ALIE

No wonder your husband left.

NITA

He didn't leave.

ALIE

And your son stays away.

NITA

He doesn't. He's—

ALIE

Camping. If you say so.

NITA

You're trying to provoke me. I've seen this before. My son used to try this crap on me when he was in high school. Pick a fight so I'd blow a fuse then have to apologize and let him have whatever he wants. I know this game.

ALIE

Would it be strange of me to say I liked the taste of blood?

NITA

Everything about this conversation is strange, so I would expect nothing less.

ALIE

I lied before.

NITA

About the bear?

ALIE

No, about knowing whether someone lived here or not. I have seen you. House dark, the blue glow of the TV. Why do you keep the lights off?

NITA

Now, you obviously haven't been mauled by a wild animal. The street is clear. You can go.

ALIE

What if he comes back?

NITA

He won't. Come on, let's go.

(NITA pulls on Alie, partially pulling her sweater or jacket off to reveal a blood-stained shirt underneath.)

Jesus. Is that . . . ?

ALIE

Oh geez, it gets all over everything.

NITA

Oh my god. You are hurt. Where are you hurt?

ALIE

Did I tell you how good I am at tying knots? Slip knots, triple crown, the constrictor . . .

NITA

I should call somebody. I'm going to call 911.

ALIE

Wait.

(The sound of sirens.)

NITA

Who's blood is it?

ALIE

I guess they heard about the bear. I got him. Little me.

NITA

Jesus.

ALIE

My name's Alie, by the way.

(Lights fade.)

Nothing He Can Buy

by Vickie Harden

His hair flaps revealing the opening to his brain.
It's a black hole leading absolutely nowhere.
The exposure to the elements shows it has clearly been compromised.

He slaps his hands around, into the air, pointing into infinity.
Pointing at those things, often people, he thinks he presides over.

His jacket misfit, lank and loose across his chest and arms.
Those arms that seem to have no home, no purpose, no controlled release.
His tie wanders toward a region further south than I'd ever care to see.

He ambles, ungraceful, with strange purpose.
Forward motion, head and shoulders first
Sluggish feet hit the ground, hammered down one at a time.

Frankenstein's monster revived once again.
The story that never seems to end.

Slapping around words that hold great aspiration but little meaning.
Wind that bustles up quickly, yet dies upon delivery.
Words that mourn for more than quick breath and death.

This man of sustenance, but little substance.
Flatulence filled with the stench that hatred leaves behind.

Entitlement bought with the sacrificial backs
Of sons and daughters like mine—
They know the riches that culture and morals provide.

Nothing he can buy.

Flatworm

by *Jess Bennett*

I went by Justine. I was only eleven when I saw it. A young woman, perhaps twenty-five but no older than twenty-eight, was running. Bettie Page bangs, deep black curls that flew behind her ears, red sweater, black skirt, and high-heeled boots, even though she was running full-tilt. Her dog had bolted, dragging her along with it. Her head tilted back, and her laughter sailed through the winter wind. She let go of the leash. I continued to watch the lady run with her dog until they were two specks well down the street.

"What a sight," Mom said. "She's not even wearing a bra."

I felt sharp and warm at the same time, and I knew the word "wet" named this feeling. "Wet" came from a book that Mom kept on her bedside table. The book, *A Parisian Wind*, followed a French steelworker who, on the cover, sported a hairy chest that peeked through unzipped and impractically tight coveralls. For weeks after that day, the steelworker and the running woman would sit on my bed, touch my face, and kiss me on the mouth the way people do in movies.

"Justine," Mother would say, "you'll have to take care not to be so careless with your appearance. Men are always watching."

"Yes, Mother, I understand." I imagined myself with breasts as big as the running woman's. The grown me was a stranger dancing just outside of my bedroom door. She wanted to split my head open and crawl inside. "You won't have to worry about me. I'm never growing breasts," I said.

The breast issue came again three weeks later. I was with Benita Dawson. She drew things. The first drawing she ever showed me was of a skeleton with pearl-lined bones.

"What did you draw today?" I asked her.

She pulled out an illustration of the flatworms we observed in science class. In place of the pond scum color palette of the display-case worms, Benita had used a stark blue for the back of the worms and a sharp fuchsia that stemmed from their centers in frills. "In my opinion," she said, "the ocean flatworms are so much prettier. There were beautiful reference pictures in the back of the textbook. I might cut them out later."

"And those are all the pictures from today?" I asked, smiling.

Benita pulled out another drawing, in *Beetlejuice* black and white, inspired by last weekend's movie marathon.

"If I say 'flatworm' three times, will one appear?"

She laughed, but we got quiet after that. I looked over the drawings. One of the pictures showed a divided worm, each segment with thread-thin tendrils reaching out of the wound. Our teacher had explained how a flatworm, cut in two, will transform into two separate worms. I thought about the tissue, all cut up but thriving with life. I saw the edges of the cut jut out in fleshy bumps, and my face started to hurt. I lay down across the floor, resting my sore face against the soft carpet.

"Are you feeling well?"

"Tell me more about your pictures."

"Why?"

"It's relaxing to hear you talk. I haven't been sleeping well. My chest hurts."

"Your heart?"

"No, the skin."

I curled into a ball, facing away from her. She said, "You're becoming a woman," and I looked up at the ceiling as if a ghost had descended.

"Oh my god, Ben," I said, getting mad, but my irritation felt foolish before too long. "I know."

The next day, I found a folded note in my Trapper Keeper. Benita had made me a sophisticated name plate—or at least as sophisticated as one can get using markers. The grandeur really came from how she had written my name. Pure calligraphy. Her letters dipped and curved. I imagined them moving quietly across my body, like the shadow of waves:

J-U-S-T-I-N . . .

I quietly took the E into my hands, felt its weight, and decided it was not only unnecessary, but dishonest. Like the flatworm, perhaps this E could grow into a completely different organism. It could grow breasts, wear skirts, bear children, march for rights—it could do whatever it pleased. Just not with me.

Choosing Us

by Jemiscoe Chambers-Black

I sit beside my sister Fern, at the bar, in a cheap reception hall at a cousin's wedding—one that neither of us knows all that well—saying nothing to each other. I stare at the clear liquid in my tumbler and mull over the fact that Fern and I aren't that close, at least not anymore, but I want to be. I want to mend our relationship, but I don't know how.

I take a moment to look at Fern. Some things are good to see, like the smudge of paint colors around her cuticles. Others are changes, bad changes, that I hate to see. Her hair is a stringy curtain of grease, and when she sighs, the strap of her dumpy green dress falls off one shoulder. She moves it back, only for it to fall back down again.

She's lost weight.

"You look different," I say.

"You look the same." And after a small pause—a breath, really—Fern adds, "I don't have anything left for you to ruin." Her words are harsh, but even now she looks at me with indifference.

All of it hurts, but I try to ignore it. "That's not why I'm here."

"Then, why are you?" she asks. She laughs without humor. "It can't be for Chelsea's wedding."

With the mention of her name, our cousin, Chelsea appears. Her wedding dress excessive, big, and poofy—like her.

"Abigail," she says. "I'm glad you could come. I haven't seen you in what—ten years?"

It's been longer. She hugs me; it's stiff. She smiles; it's forced. And from all that, I can tell she remembers just how long it has been. The last time we saw each other was at a party where I woke up next to her then-boyfriend wearing nothing but hickeys and a hangover. She hates me, and I don't blame her for it.

"Where's the groom?" I ask. She frowns.

Refusing to meet my eyes, she says, "Oh, somewhere around here. You know how it is."

Chelsea turns to Fern then, her smile more relaxed, more real. Fern smiles back. They hug as if they are close, but I know they are not. Fern never liked Chelsea, but their mutual feelings about me give them something to latch onto.

Instead of *congratulations*, Fern says, "Good luck." She turns back to her drink and takes a large gulp, dismissing the bride.

"Thanks," Chelsea says. It's delicate and unsure.

Chelsea bounces off to the next person who is probably only here for the open bar, leaving Fern and me to empty air. Cutting the silence, I take a deep breath and decide to tell her about a guy that I recently met and somehow love.

"You just met him," Fern states.

"Yeah."

"How do you know then?"

"I just do," I say.

She sighs. She twirls the wedding ring on her finger as she swirls her drink in the other hand. It's girly— the drink. Mine is straight—no need for fillers.

"Fine," she says. "Where'd you meet him?"

"We met at a bar."

"Of course, you did." She notices my silence, doesn't like it, I suppose, and so she fills it. "Then what happened," she asks.

"He sat down," I say.

I tell her he didn't notice anyone outside of himself when he sat alone at the bar, but how I definitely noticed him. It was all jazz music, moody, dark and smoky, with the stink of booze and perfume and acrid sweat.

"He's not especially attractive," I say. "But there was just something about him. He was plain, ordinary." All of his features were in the right place, but not one thing stood out. "I liked that."

I tell her that it was all sort of hazy, yet I noticed he wore a suit, no tie. He ordered a top-shelf scotch. He must be sophisticated, I tell her. He watched while the bartender poured the deep amber liquid into his glass, lost in dreams of forgotten thoughts, and the action of it reminded me of something that was just out of reach but important all the same.

"What was important?" Fern asks.

I shrug. "I wasn't sure then."

I tell her this happened two weeks ago, and this is at least how I remember it. I tell her I was nervous.

"Why?" she asks. "That's not your thing. You aren't usually nervous around guys."

It feels like a dig, but I ignore that too. "I don't know," I say, "but I had to say something."

"So, what'd you say?"

I smile. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

She laughs. "You didn't."

"I did."

We share a smile, one that reminds me of times as young girls, where we were in tune, laughing in harmony, linked fingers, dancing along in perfect rhythm, but our song is broken, and so her smile fades faster than mine.

"You're pathetic."

"No," I say. "I promise it gets better."

"Okay, Abigail. Tell me about it."

* * *

I was rushing. I have always been late, but that night, for the first time, I didn't want to be. I had recently turned forty, and in my haste, coupled with nerves, my body did traitorous things like have a personal season. I was sweating, which is why once I pulled into a parking spot at Stevie's Bar & Grill, instead of rushing out, I stopped to fan myself. It didn't help.

I stepped out of my car and pulled at the hem of my new purchase—a short black number. Perhaps too short. I congratulated myself on fitting into something women half my age wore, and only hoped I pulled it off and looked halfway decent in it.

The air was cool and dried the moisture off my forehead as I made my way to the entrance. It was dark, and so I clutched my purse in one hand, my cell phone in the other. Life had taught me to be ready.

The restaurant was the same as any other—in the middle of a shopping center disguised as a one-of-kind in a nice neighborhood amongst chains—but I knew there was a Stevie's in Long Beach and Montecito. Maybe one in Studio City, too. I was in Marina Del Rey, though, and this location was on the water. I was hoping for deck seating.

Ivy vines grew over whitewashed, aged brick, and as I traced my finger along the wall, I wished pretty and put-together were contagious. Upon entering, I admired the mix of a vintage library-meets-Provence, France, by way of Restoration Hardware, with dark-brown cracked leather seats, wooden accents, dusty books on shelves, and a roaring circular fireplace.

I could live here.

I told the hostess that I was there for Lucas, but I stumbled at his last name. I didn't know it. In the past, I had done things with men whose first names elude me, so I didn't know why this embarrassed me, but it did.

She nodded.

"Right this way," she said.

I followed behind her as she walked me out to the deck. I didn't see him yet, but the anticipation flooded my body. My stomach cramped and gurgled, and the hostess laughed.

"Guess you're pretty hungry," she said. I said nothing.

As we rounded the deck bar, a lone man sat at a table. When he looked up, I realized, in the dim light of this restaurant, brighter than that of the dark bar where we'd met, Lucas was not what I remembered.

"Abigail?" He said my name like a question, as if he had found me lacking too, and for some reason it stung.

When Lucas stood, I noticed the buttons of his shirt seemed at war with his flesh, bulging in the center. This was not the worst of it, and I wondered why he would have matched this with blue basketball shorts, but the combination made me chuckle.

He looked down, following my gaze.

"Sorry," he said. "I came straight from work."

"Oh, what do you do?" I asked.

"Not work, I guess. I coach Little League."

I had hoped for something different than my usual—something safe, like an accountant—but coaches were like teachers and were safe, too. At least I had hoped.

We awkwardly leaned toward each other, to embrace, to kiss cheeks. I wasn't really certain, but when his focus fell from my eyes to my neck, my collarbone, and landed on my chest, shivers raced, as was usual from this type of attention.

We sat, and from the birth of that weird embrace came something akin to the familiarity I thought we had shared at the bar the night we first met—at least from my hazy remembrance of it.

"But what do you do," I asked. "When you're not coaching?"

"I'm an art dealer," he said.

So, not safe. I started imagining a man who, in his youth, had art parties, sex parties, a woman every night. A man who slept with all his artists— men and women maybe.

Not safe at all.

He reached for my hand. He had been saying something.

"What?" I asked.

"Hope this is alright," he said as he spread his arms out toward the floor filled with tables and other couples all out for the night. I smelled the seawater air more than I could see it, and a layer of moisture clung to our skin. A server passed with a tray of food that smelled of rosemary, of cooked meats, of butter.

"It's perfect," I said. "Thank you."

Another server came to take our drink order.

"Can we get a bottle of your—" Lucas tried to order, but I declined.

"Water, please," I said.

Lucas ordered a top-shelf scotch instead. He leaned over with a conspiring smirk and asked, "Remember our conversation? The one at the bar?"

"Sort of," I said, embarrassed.

"You don't remember?"

"There was a lot of drinking."

He looked away. I had disappointed him, and I wasn't sure why.

"What's wrong with you," he asked. "I mean, you're beautiful and don't seem crazy."

I wanted to be annoyed. I was a pro at first dates; it was what I did. This one seemed too comfortable, too intimate. And, for some reason, I wanted to tell him—to maybe even scare him a little—that I was like the Santa Ana winds on a hundred-degree day, all feverish gusts of destruction. But instead, I told him my sort-of half-truth.

"I'm a mess. No matter how many times I clean myself up, I end up a mess again."

Very softly, he chuckled at this, tense and uncertain. It was sweet—his reaction.

"No, really," he said.

Surprisingly, because I hadn't said this out loud for over twenty years, I told him the truth.

* * *

Fern turns to me. She's surprised. Hurt even. "You told him?" she asks. She's staring hard, invested in my response.

"Yes."

She's disappointed by that, and at first, I don't know why until she says, "But you've never even told *me* what happened."

"I'm sorry," I say. And I am.

There's whooping and hollering in the background as a familiar wedding song is turned up. Guests are going crazy over a song that any other day would be annoying, screaming "*We are family. I got all my sisters with me*!" Some don't even know the lyrics, so it sounds like, "We are family. I bought all my listeners to tea." *What does that even mean?* They look foolish. It looks fun. I hate them for it.

Fern orders another drink. The bartender hesitates but gives her one anyway.

"Whatever," she says. "Finish your story, so I can leave."

And, so I do.

* * *

I told Lucas most of it. "After high school graduation," I started, "my best friend, well, we stole my parents' car. We'd been drinking." I twisted my fork around and around, reaching for words to explain. "It was bad—the car accident."

When I stopped talking, he asked, "What happened?"

"She died," I said. "I didn't."

And after a space of quiet, while I played with the soft edges of the tablecloth, I added, with a sense of urgency because I needed to grasp desperately onto my guilt, "I was driving."

I didn't tell him that my father used to be a sheriff and that it was his cop car we stole. It forced him into an early retirement. I also didn't tell him that my parents fought more after the accident until there was nothing left but divorce and silence. I didn't tell him that after the accident, Fern became the *perfect* sister, and that perfection made me hate her; that I always wished she would somehow fail at something—anything—so that I could feel better about myself.

I also didn't tell him that because of all of this, I had been in and out of rehab, that I subconsciously, or maybe willingly, ruined all relationships I ever had. Fern thought I dated men who were beneath me; I was hoping he would be different, or maybe the same. I didn't tell him this.

Lucas grabbed my hand and squeezed.

I asked him what was wrong with him. It was only fair. I didn't add on that he was beautiful, because I didn't think he was. I didn't tell him that he didn't seem crazy; I hardly knew him. There was something about him, though.

"What do you mean," he asked me.

"It only seems fair," I said repeating my thoughts out loud.

He nodded but said nothing. I thought he was going to bail, but he didn't. "I don't like talking about the past," he said.

"Who does?"

"It's pointless—like dragging your knuckles against the asphalt." I said nothing. He was trying to be poetic, so I let him. "But it's only fair," he said, not in a mocking tone but more in surrender. At least that's what I told myself.

He tried to up my mess and told me that he had been left behind—forgotten. He said, "I was married twenty-one years." I didn't dare interrupt even though I was swept up with the stirrings of questions.

The server interrupted, coming back with our drinks—my water and Lucas's top-shelf. I eyed the liquid in his glass. I sipped my water instead. The server took our meal orders and left.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She went nuts and left. Maybe I made her that way. I don't know," he said. "Thought she'd be back. I'm tired of waiting." I was tired of waiting, too.

"We're some pair," he added.

After that, our conversation flowed as steady as the stream of top-shelf scotch and water neats. We talked of lighter matter, great music and old books.

"*Lolita's* my favorite," he said.

"Do you have a thing for young girls?" I asked, both worried and anxious.

He laughed.

"Not at all. I just love finding a good book."

Our conversation continued on a high, filled with arcs of laughter and silenced smiles.

"Come home with me," he said. I told him, yes, hoping for less-frequent loneliness. Maybe he would be my cure.

I entered his condo, noticing that everything was excessively organized, neat, and in its place—very unlike me. There were baskets with labels, and books on shelves in alphabetical order, and in the L's, *Lolita* came right behind *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but before *Lord of the Flies*.

"Can I get you something to drink," he asked. "I have wine. Or beer, if you prefer."

I wanted to, but said, "No, thank you." The 24-hour chip that I'd had for three days burned away at the bottom of my purse; it haunted me.

This time will be different.

While I noisily looked over his reading choices, he kissed me. I kissed him back. It was sloppy, but I dealt. I was most comfortable here because this was the only time I was ever truly close to anyone. It was fleeting, but again, I managed. Our kisses burned. Our hands roamed. The two of us moved to his bedroom.

I took off my clothes; he took off his. I threw my body backward, thinking it would look sexy, a slow-motion act like in the movies, but when I hit the firm mattress, my teeth banged together.

"Omph," I said.

He laughed at this.

I laughed, too.

He climbed on top of me, nudging himself between my legs, trying to push himself inside me, but I stopped him by placing my hand against his chest.

"Condom?"

"Can't. Allergic."

I didn't panic, but I did remove myself from under him. I dressed, left his bedroom, and headed into the living room. Walking the length of the tiny room and back, I contemplated whether it was rude to leave without even a goodbye.

He was no different. He thought I was stupid, like how I had been decades earlier when I fell for that line—*allergic*—and ended up in a clinic, *late*, and alone. Fern's voice echoed then.

Why, Abby? This isn't love.

I thought on this too long because Lucas was dressed too. He stepped in front of me—interrupted my pacing—my thinking.

"I'm sorry," he said. He combed his hands through his hair. "I guess I should have said something earlier."

"Yes," I said. "You should have."

He stood before me, not trying to touch me. His hands were in his pockets as if that were the only deterrent. I forgave him, although I knew I shouldn't. This was like a time and place where I had stood in many times before.

"Can I take you out?" he asked. "To say sorry."

I wanted to say no, but I was who I was. "Okay," I said, resigned. I was—am—weak and needy, and like most lonely people, I was looking for love everywhere—clawing for scraps.

He smiled, but it appeared forced.

I crossed my arms, grabbing at my elbows, searching for something to drain the tension. A painting on one of his walls captured my attention. It was all I could look at.

"It's lovely," I said, but really, I didn't think so. I complimented it only so that I could stare at the canvas longer; to linger.

Facing away from each other, but still holding hands, two girls sat on the bank of a lake; a cabin was off to the side in the distance. The scene was consumed with blacks, blues, purples, but it was the overlapping hints of dark red that made it something altogether different. I reached out.

"Don't—" Lucas started to say, but something, I suppose in my expression, made him stop. Maybe it was his guilt from earlier. I didn't know; I didn't care.

I pressed my finger down on the painting, touching the kind of red that never belonged in the serenity of a scene like this: heavy globs of paint, angry brushstrokes. I knew this lake, this cabin, those girls, their tethered hands, this anger. I suddenly felt like weeping.

"There's something sad about it," Lucas said.

"Sad?" I asked. "No. I see rage." I rubbed my fingers against the initials, F. A.

"I want to sell it."

"Why don't you?"

"It's not mine to sell," he said. "It's the only thing my roommate kept of his ex-wife's."

"Roommate?" And in that question, I remembered how I knew Lucas. The memories weren't fluid or even connected, but there.

* * *

Years ago, I stood at a bar where a man—whom I would later know as Lucas—stared as a bartender poured a dark-colored liquid into his glass; he held my entire focus. He was transfixed to his drink, as I was to him. I thought to say something then, to interest him, to make him look my way. But then I heard a laugh; one I knew well. I shifted my eyes to the man sitting next to Lucas: my brother-in-law Steven. He wasn't sitting beside—or laughing with or kissing—Fern, but someone else entirely.

I moved closer. They didn't notice. They were completely enraptured. This woman laughed at something Steven said and then leaned in and kissed him deeply.

She said, "I've missed you, Steven."

He smiled big, and a part of me wanted to kill him. Another part, one that I was now ashamed of, was happy. She had failed. Not this woman, no, she had won, but Fern. She had lost something, and she didn't even know what it was.

I left my brother-in-law, that woman, and the man with the dark-colored, classy drink. I couldn't remember how I got there—to Fern's house—but I did. I rang the doorbell, late or early, that I couldn't remember, either.

"What are you doing here, Abigail?" Fern asked. She tightened her full-length robe, shielding herself.

I swayed a bit. I burped. I might have gotten sick.

"Where's your husband, Fern?" I asked.

"At work," she said without hesitation. I might have lost my footing; she caught me.

"You're drunk," she said. "Again."

I ignored her.

"Why do you keep doing this to yourself," she asked. "To me?" Her brief exhalations were angry plumes that fogged the biting air. "I can't keep doing this with you."

Fern released my arm; I stumbled.

"I'm done," she said.

She turned to leave, to shut the door in my face. I knew she was tired of picking me up, only for me to come crashing back down. I was sure of this, but still, I reached out to stay the door before it closed. She looked at me, questioning.

"Where's your husband, Fern?" I repeated

"I told you. At work. He's working late."

"No, he's not."

I might have dropped that news with a smile. I didn't want this invisible competition anymore; I didn't want to be in this alone.

I carelessly threw out, "He's with another woman."

I should have told her better. I should have wrapped her up and been the older sister I should have always been. Instead, I threw up all over her front porch, forcing Fern to clean up my mess, while her own brewed and spilled over.

* * *

The drunken memory bled out as I looked past the threads of vein-like reds along the ripples in the calm of that lake. I saw the mix of colors surrounding the silhouettes of those two young girls. I was moved.

I glanced back at Lucas like a mother looking at her freshly born baby— with a lot of awe and a newfound clarity. He gave me this. I loved him. With soft fingertips, I stroked his cheek first, and then stole a kiss—something to keep forever and never return. He looked sad, but not overly devastated, when I reached for my coat and purse.

"Goodbye," I said.

I heard nothing as I softly shut his condo door behind me. I was okay with that.

* * *

The bartender makes Fern yet another drink. She gives him a lop-sided salute as I finish my story. I had told her all of it. I left out nothing.

"You, telling me about Steven," she says. "I remember that night."

"I know," I say. "But you didn't know everything. I didn't either. I hadn't remembered."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Fern asks. "Is this about Lucas? About Steven?"

I shrug even though I know it's about her, about me, about *us*. Maybe this'll push her further away, but I hope it doesn't.

"You said you love him?"

"I do."

"You don't make sense."

She stands from her stool. Her body sways a bit. She reaches out to catch herself, and her ring *tings* the side of her glass.

"I never said I was in love with him," I add.

"So, what," Fern asks—her arms held wide. "What's the point?"

"You never told me you were painting again," I say. I set my tumbler of water down on the bar, swivel in my stool, giving her my full attention. "I remember that lake house." And I love how she captures feeling too, but I don't say this. I don't want to expose either of us to whatever lurks beneath her brushstrokes.

She makes a gagging sound.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she says.

I reach out to bear her weight.

"Let's get you home."

Fern looks at me, eyes wide with fear.

"You're going to take care of me?" she asks.

I push the strap of her dress back up and nod. I cradle her to my side. I failed before; I will succeed this time.

I guide her through the throngs of wedding guests. I see Chelsea standing off to the side searching for her husband. She sees us and smiles, hiding her true feelings, her fear. I look at everyone here and wonder if, while these strangers connect through intoxicated giggles and concealed loneliness, if they too are hiding the story of a busted-up past.

We step outside. Fern's heel catches, but before she tumbles, I adjust and support her. She mindlessly laughs, then stops. She looks out toward the sea of parked cars in the full lot, seeing nothing.

"I can't do this anymore," she says.

"Yes, you can." *We all can*, I think but don't say.

Her watery gaze swivels my way, and then above my shoulder—to the cloudless sky. The moonlight makes silhouettes of our static forms. I think of the young girls from the painting, before the accident and my choices that ripped everyone apart, and I wonder if the red was always there. But instead, I hold tight onto my sister because she means more.

Tangiers

by Ben Jorisch

Tomorrow
I am headed
for Tangiers

There
I will shoot smack
with Burroughs

He will make passes at me
and I will decline

And I will watch the moon's eye
in the curve of the spoon

And underneath the bubbling
the flame will be burning

And each morning
when the local mafia comes

before the junk is cut
with milk and baby laxative

I will say
my head will not last long under the sand

but I will know that is a lie
and there is no place I would rather be

Last Days

by Donna J. W. Munro

Vesuvius's shadow fell across the face of our orchard. Gnarled olive trees clutched the high rock cliffs. Grapes, red as blood on a bright white wall, wind through trellises that my father and brothers fashioned out of sticks. The soil is rocky but forgiving and rich here on the lea of the mountain, between beautifully gridded Pompeii and the winding streets of smoky Herculaneum.

"Tavi," my brother called as he and my brothers plucked dead leaves from the bunches of globed grapes, "water, please."

I hurried with a ladle of water and a wet cloth for him to wipe sweat from his face. They worked and proved their worth to our father, the paterfamilias. They lived in apartments in our complex, families growing to fill rooms with bright laughter. But I just keep my childhood room at the back of the house, casting my eyes down, praying to the goddess of the hearth for more wealth or health or whatever we need.

Father says my work is necessary. He keeps me from marriage to pray for all the family and our grapes.

As I ladled water into my brother's flask, the earth shook, rattling the leaves of the trees clutching to Vesuvius. Vulcan lived there in the volcano, angry about Venus's indiscretions, about Zeus's lack of love, and about his own injuries—sometimes complaining in this way. I fell to my knees to pray, clinging to the ground as the pebbles rattled and the ground groaned.

I had always felt akin to Vulcan, living on his sacred soil and feeling the beat of his heart in the breaths of the mountain. He'd been rejected by his wife, by his father, by the other gods for ugliness. My ugliness was well-known.

Hair that tangled, hips of lumps and rumples. My stomach rolled and my breasts flopped. My features sat crooked on the planes of my face. Father gave me learning. He gave me reading, even as the others mocked him for filling a woman's head with nothing but distractions.

"Tavi, Vulcan speaks," my brother said.

I nodded and grabbed up my bucket, pattering back along the stone path to the family temple. I lit the braiser packed with fragrant oils and broke bread upon the hearth for our lady protector. The family crowded in, my father upon the chair, my mother and the women with their babes upon the benches, my brothers, ringed around in a circle of loving protection.

The ground shook again, and through the open portico, a plume of flame licked the dome of the dusk sky.

"Hurry, girl," my father said. His eyes widened, watching the flames jet against the belching smoke. It rolled down the face of the mountain, engulfing Herculaneum with a blanket of choking ash.

I did the ritual, said the words. I sent my love, my peace to the god of the forge.

But he sent the fiery rock rushing down the face of the mountain.

"Save us, Tavi!" My family wailed. The children's eyes rolled from me to their mothers. My brothers fell to their knees and began to sway, weeping as the mountain swelled beneath us. Even here, the ground crumbled, opening huge plume-belching cracks.

So far the mountain's rage missed the villa. The gasses and the fire and the punishing heat flowed to the other side. It wouldn't for long.

My mother grabbed the upper muscle of my arm, grinding it against my bone. I shuddered but kept my feet and wits. She pulled me eye to her eye until her breath washed across my cheeks.

"You will be my sacrifice. My ugly girl for the ugly god. Give yourself, Tavi. Save us!"

Even as she asked me to save them, it was my ugliness that she spoke of. To go to my death reminded of my gracelessness seemed spiteful. Even as I nodded to her and turned, running up the mountain as pumice flecks rained upon my face and hair, I mourned the features that my family scorned. My face mattered not if I threw myself to the god.

The heat swelled, singeing away my hair and burning my cheeks. I heaved in the thickness of the smoke. If I could throw myself to him, I'd offer him the succor of my arms. His wife was the most beautiful of the goddesses, but she gave him no peace. Perhaps the peace I brought would be enough to soothe his anger.

I crawled up the angry face of the mountain that had given me life. The grass was gone and every part of me smoked, but I saw the edge of the cone.

"Tavi," a voice sounded over the maelstrom of spewing rock. "Tavi, you can't stop this."

I looked into the eyes of the god, his crooked, muddy brown eyes. His bulbous nose. Broken teeth and fleshy mouth. Ugly, but lovely in the mismatch.

"Lord?" I asked, ever the priestess even if only for family.

"They'll all die, Tavi. But, you I'd save."

He lifted me off of the face of the mountain, flying me up into the cloud as the mountain exploded. The trees, the grapes, my whole family sank into the collapsing cone of the mountain.

"This is their end, Tavi, but it doesn't have to be yours."

I looked into the god's eyes and saw my own pain. Even for a god, there was no happiness for those who work—we with features misaligned to this place. My whole family, the only ones who'd seen into my heart, were now on their way to the fields in Hades.

All dead. The beauties. The young. The crippled. The slaves.

I kissed his rough cheek. "Let me join them, Lord. I'm lost without their love."

He smiled with a wistful grace, then dropped me into the vomiting cone of Vesuvius.

Perhaps I'll be beautiful in hell.

The Weight of Secrets

by Jessica Mehta

Secrets weigh a tremendous lot
so you have to be real sure
you can bear the brunt.
And that they're worth it—like a child
who cries something so fierce
you rock them to quiet, something
like complacency. Heavy burdens
only strengthen tendons, grow
muscles, densify bones so long
before the joints give out. I've carried

so many pinky swears they've built colonies
on my back. A dowager's hump
of things I'll never tell, words packed
with a blistering power my tongue
would burn before those syllables
can trickle fire down my chin.

My Body, My Self

by Jessica Mehta

I've put you through so much, and still
you hold me up—shaky
legs and bumpy arms. The years I fed you scraps
at best, you lapped up every crumb, used
each speck to carry on. The times
I beat you stupid, beyond
the ability to stand, flinch from the traumas
or keep fists above breastbone. Remember
the time I slipped you the ecstasy, only
it was some kind of speed-meth monster
that left us lurching in the Atlanta heat? Me,

I would have left me by now. *Long* ago.
But you,

you've stayed, solid. Through the disrespect,
the slaps, the ridicule and pummeling
abuses. And not once did you break. Give up
for good. Not gather all your everythings,
but stood tall on too long legs
and screamed, demanding for more.

The Why Are You Here People

A Comedy/Drama In Ten Pages | *by William Smith*

Cast of Characters:
BOB: 30-35-ish. A veteran of the fighting in Iraq
BETTY: 30–40-ish. A mother of two.

SETTING: Doctor's office waiting room. Bare stage except for chairs arranged in a "U" configuration; the upstage row parallel with the proscenium and the other rows perpendicular on stage left and Right. One end table in the center of each leg of the "U," each with a table lamp and magazines.

TIME: Afternoon

AT RISE: BOB wears fairly dirty jeans and shoes with a non-descript shirt untucked. His overall appearance suggests he just got out of bed. He sits in the upstage row of chairs with a newspaper spread wide, nothing but his legs visible.

(BETTY enters stage right with a bulky purse, an umbrella, packages, shopping bags—more than she can carry. She repeatedly drops things and turns to pick them up again as she enters and crosses SL. She sighs with exasperation as she drops her things into a chair on the SL row and plops down in the chair next to it. She fidgets with her outfit, hair, etc., to make herself presentable. BOB ignores BETTY and turns the page. BETTY barely notices him. She turns her attention to the table next to her, picks up a magazine, and thumbs through it. Silence for a moment. BOB giggles. BETTY gives him a glance, then goes back to her magazine. Silence for a moment. Bob giggles a bit louder and longer. BETTY gives him a glance and a smile, then goes back to her magazine. This continues until they are both laughing.)

BETTY

That must be one funny story!

BOB

(Stops laughing and lowers his paper.
He wears dark sunglasses.)

Say what?

BETTY

Oh, nothing, I just said that must be a funny story you were reading.

BOB

(With a straight face)

What story?

BETTY

(Confused)

Uh... you were reading the paper and laughing just then, and I wondered . . .

BOB

Oh, you mean just now. No, I wasn't reading.

BETTY

But you were just looking at the paper and laughing . . .

BOB

I was laughing, yes, but I wasn't reading.

BETTY

You weren't reading?

BOB

I just said that.

BETTY

Never mind.

(Uncomfortable silence. Then BETTY rises, crosses to table SR, picks up another magazine, then returns to her seat. Meanwhile, BOB folds his paper and lays it on the table next to him. He sits facing straight ahead.)

BOB

You know, this is usually the point where some people get nervous because they really want to know why the other person is here, but they are afraid to ask.

BETTY

Well, I'm not sure I want to share that information with a total stranger.

BOB

I didn't ask you to.

BETTY

What . . . ?

BOB

I did not ask why you are here. I simply said some people really want to know. We haven't established whether either of us might be one of those people.

(Awkward silence, then she rises and steps toward BOB, extending her hand.)

BETTY

My name is Betty.

BOB

I'm Bob.

(He ignores her handshake gesture. She appears a bit offended then reaches toward the newspaper on the table.)

BETTY

Do you mind?

BOB

Mind what?

BETTY

The newspaper . . . do you mind if I—

BOB

Read it? Suit yourself.

(She flips through the paper trying to find the funny article. No luck. She folds the paper and throws it on the table.)

BETTY

Nothing funny in there. What was so funny?

BOB

You tell me. You were laughing too.

BETTY

I was laughing because you were laughing.

(She's aggravated that BOB isn't looking her way as they speak. She squirms in her seat trying to catch his gaze.)

BOB

And I was laughing because you were laughing.

BETTY

You started it!

BOB

Well, that's an awfully juvenile response. If that's the direction this conversation is going, count me out.

BETTY

What? Bob, you literally started all this—the laughing, the "juvenile" answers, all of it.

BOB

See what I mean? You might as well have said, "I know you are but what am I?"

BETTY

I don't think I want to talk to you anymore.

(BETTY again notices BOB seeming to look everywhere but at her and resumes trying to catch his gaze. Suddenly it dawns on her . . .)

BETTY

You are blind!

BOB

And you are quick!

BETTY

There is no way you were reading that paper.

BOB

That's what I said. You don't listen well, do you?

BETTY

You didn't tell me you were blind.

BOB

And you didn't tell me you were "challenged." I could have been speaking slower all this time.

BETTY

You don't have to be rude.

BOB

Me rude? I've told you three times that I was not reading that newspaper, but you just can't let it go. Why does it matter?

BETTY

Because you were holding the newspaper and laughing like a crazy—never mind. Fine. I'll let it go. (Awkward silence.) I'm here to see the doctor.

BOB

Oh, it's a doctor's office? I came to renew my driver's license.

BETTY

Never mind. That's what I get for trying to be nice.

BOB

I had a feeling you were one of "those people." One of those "why are you here?" people, or a "why are you blind?" person. One of those nosy busybodies who can't mind their own business.

BETTY

I hope this doesn't take too long. My son is at soccer practice and my daughter is at her piano lesson. I'll have to pick them up.

BOB

It's going to be a while. The doctor had some sort of emergency and won't be back anytime soon.

BETTY

Well, shoot!

BOB

Shit.

BETTY

What?

BOB

Shit. You said "shoot" but you meant "shit."

BETTY

I don't talk that way.

BOB

You do in your head. Everybody does.

BETTY

I don't. Why are you—

BOB

I knew it! I knew you were one of those people. The "why are you blind?" people.

BETTY

Actually, I was going to ask, "Why are you such an asshole?"

BOB

Well, that was uncalled for. I knew you talked that way.

BETTY

You don't know anything about me.

BOB

I know quite a bit actually. I know you're a foul-mouthed busybody who's here to see the doctor but is in a hurry because she has to pick up Hansel and Gretel.

BETTY

Michael and Madison.

BOB

And now I know that too.

BETTY

And I know that you are a blind asshole. You seem to be awfully interested in my life. Why are you so sensitive about me knowing about you?

BOB

Because you don't really want to know. You keep on and on about it, but all you really want is a nice, polite answer.

BETTY

That's not true. I wouldn't ask if I didn't want the truth.

BOB

Really? So if I told you I was here so the doctor could have a look at my hemorrhoids, that would interest you?

BETTY

Oh, definitely . . . because this doctor is a psychiatrist.

BOB

That's beside the point. There are some things you don't want to know. Asking me why I'm here or why I'm blind is like asking someone on the street "How are you?" You don't really want a rundown of their ailments, you're just being polite and you aren't even aware of it.

BETTY

Whatever. Some of us are not so cynical. If I asked why you are blind, that would be sincere.

BOB

Fine. You want to know about me? Buckle up, 'cause here goes. My name is John McClane and I used to be a cop. On Christmas Eve a few years ago, I was waiting at Dulles Airport, in Washington for my wife Holly to arrive from Los Angeles. In the airport bar, I spotted two men carrying a package, and one of them had a gun. I followed them into the baggage area. When they realized I was following them, they started shooting. I killed one of them but the other escaped.

BETTY

Oh my.

(She leans forward, listening intently)

BOB

I later learned that the dead man, had served with the Army and was reported to have been killed in action, but it turned out that he had faked his death and had become a terrorist. He and his crew cut off communication to the airplanes and seized control of the airport.

BETTY

This must have been on the news. I think I heard about it.

BOB

It was all over the screen. Anyway, the terrorists wanted to rescue a drug lord who was being extradited to the U.S. to stand trial on drug trafficking charges. They wanted a 747 so they could escape to another country. At one point I realized my wife was on one of the planes circling the airport with too little fuel to be redirected.

BETTY

That's horrible! Was she alright?

BOB

Do you want to hear this or not?

BETTY

Of course, go on.

BOB

The terrorists crashed a British jet, killing all 230 passengers and crew. An Army Special Forces unit was called in. By listening in on a two-way radio that was dropped by one of the bad guys, we learned the drug lord had killed his captors and was then flying the plane . . .

BETTY

(Incredulous)

Wait, wait, wait a minute. You're telling me all this stuff happened to you? Seriously?

BOB

Why is that so hard to believe?

BETTY

Because it's the plot from *Die Hard 2*.

BOB

Oh, is it? What a coincidence that is. Who would have ever thought . . .

BETTY

Stop it! You know perfectly well that's what it was. If you didn't want to tell me about it, you should have simply said so.

BOB

I'm pretty sure I did.

BETTY

Just stop it! I've heard enough lies.

BOB

They're not lies—it's just a story. Weren't you entertained?

BETTY

Well, yes . . . a little, but you didn't have to pretend it really happened to you. It's embarrassing . . .

BOB

OK, calm down. I'll tell you . . .

BETTY

Tell me what, more lies?

BOB

(sarcastically)

Please, let me tell you.

(Betty throws her hands up, then grudgingly sits and forcefully folds her arms.)

BETTY

Fine.

BOB

There was this freighter ship that was the largest in the Great Lakes. She carried iron ore from mines in Minnesota, to iron works in Detroit, Toledo, and other places. I had never been much of a sailor and I certainly had never been on a boat that big before.

BETTY

This is true now, right?

BOB

Honest to goodness. This ship was real, and the events I'm describing actually happened. Should I go on?

BETTY

Go on.

BOB

It was in early November . . . with a load of iron ore twenty-six thousand tons more than the ship weighed empty, she set sail from Superior, Wisconsin. That night was the coldest I had ever been. By the next day, the ship was caught in a severe storm on Lake Superior. When afternoon came, it was freezin' rain in the face of a hurricane west wind. The gales of November came early. It happened so quickly it's hard for anyone to know what really happened, and she suddenly sank in Canadian waters more than 500 feet deep. On November 10, her entire crew of 29 perished, and no bodies were recovered. The exact cause of the sinking of the S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald remains unknown. And all that remains is the faces and the names of the wives and the sons and the daughters.

BETTY

(silently staring at Bob)

That's the Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

BOB

(solemnly)

Yes, it is.

BETTY

No, the song! The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald!

BOB

There's a song?

BETTY

You know damn well that's a Gordon Lightfoot song. You weren't on that ship.

BOB

True enough, but I never said I was.

BETTY

You did so! You said you were so cold on that ship . . .

BOB

Ah-ah-ah, no, I said that night was the coldest I had ever been. I didn't say I had been on the boat at all. I could have been cold anywhere. I said I had never been much of a sailor and that I had never been on a boat that big.

BETTY

Forget I ever asked.

BOB

I intend to.

(They sit in silence for a moment)

BETTY

You certainly are an odd duck.

BOB

I'm not a duck at all.

(The ice is broken; they both laugh.)

There are some things that are hard to talk about. Do you want to know the truth?

BETTY

If you are capable of telling the truth. I don't know whether to trust you or not.

BOB

Scout's honor.

BETTY

Whatever.

BOB

P.T.S.D.

BETTY

Excuse me?

BOB

I am here to see the psychiatrist because I have PTSD . . . and that's the truth.

BETTY

This better not be a movie or a song—

BOB

It's not.

BETTY

I'm sorry.

BOB

It was in Iraq. The Humvee I was riding in hit an I.E.D. The guy next to me lost both legs and an arm. The two in front were dead.

BETTY

That's horrible.

BOB

After the explosion, my ears were ringing and the only thing I could hear was the muffled sound of people calling for the "Doc." I knew at least one of the Corpsmen was dead; he was the guy sitting in front of me, and I could see there was no way he could have survived, so I tried to help the guys around me, but there wasn't a whole lot I could do. We lost a lot of Marines that day.

BETTY

I don't know if I should ask this—and feel free to tell me to shut up. Again . . . is that how you became blind?

BOB

Yes and no. The doctor calls it "conversion disorder." They used to call it "hysterical blindness." There's no physical damage to my eyes, I'm just blind. He says it is psychological.

BETTY

Is there a treatment for it?

BOB

We've tried hypnosis and psychotherapy. No luck so far. The Doc says it could last months or years or forever.

(Silence)

I don't guess you've got a song or movie title for that, huh?

BETTY

Definitely not. I'm sorry I pushed you to tell that.

BOB

Doc says it's good for me to talk about it.

BETTY

I would think so. Are you married?

BOB

I was. I guess you could say there's no room in my life for anything but the PTSD. She couldn't handle it. The nightmares, the flashbacks. I'm always on edge—the slightest thing sets me off. I can't sleep, I can't concentrate.

BETTY

That must be hard.

BOB

It definitely wasn't her fault. You were right from the beginning—I am an asshole.

BETTY

I wouldn't say that.

BOB

You did, and you were right. Take my word for it.

BETTY

I'm sorry I said it.

BOB

Don't be.

BETTY

(noticing the time)

Oh, dear, I can't wait any longer. I have to pick up Madison and Michael. I'm sorry to rush off like this.

(She gathers her things and heads toward the door)

BOB

Can't keep Hansel and Gretel waiting.

(They share a laugh as she turns to go)

BOB

Betty . . . thanks for listening.

BETTY

Bob . . . if you ever want to talk again . . . I'm here every Wednesday afternoon.

FADE OUT

THE END

The Secret Life of Garden Gnomes

by Alvin Knox

We are the sentinels, the watchers, the seers of omens.
Our eyes, framed in ageless wrinkles, are always open.

The morning breeze rustles the sage, portent of a coming storm.
There is always a coming storm. Poison ivy twines
with honeysuckle around the trunk of the silver poplar.
A yellow jacket nests in its roots. We are mute.
It is necessary to listen. Listen! You can hear the thunder
thousands of miles away. We are mute and smiling.

The breaking sun reveals in the dew-stained grass
a field of glistening cobwebs and diamonds. A rabbit
hops warily from stump to bush, always on the lookout.
Rabbits know their place in the food chain, as does the apple
on the lowest branch, which the rabbit stretches up to nibble.
We are mute, and we are smiling, and we are perfectly still.

It is necessary to feel the caress of drifting pollen, the shift
and twirl and slide of the Earth below one's feet as it careens
through the universe, the flutter of the butterfly's wings,
two beats up, then gliding down to rest among the violets.
Yes, it is a sign, as are the patterns of the stars at night,
and the absence of hummingbirds this year.

We do not know where they have gone. There is only one
capable of comprehending the simultaneous everything,
and the one has chosen to remain silent. It makes it interesting
for the rest of us, mute and still and smiling, those who know
there is only one truth—there is always a coming storm. Listen!
You can hear the thunder rumbling thousands of lightyears away.

FOOTNOTE TO POLITICS[1]

by Constantine Jones

1: From the Greek word Politika which is mean "affairs of the cities" Polis being the Greek word for city which is mean *olla ta* people coming together living in a single place which is mean the world being the single place everybody's been being already together *Cosmos* which is come from the Greek word which is mean "everything making sense together" which is mean nothing coming along to make a mess of the whole thing throw it into *Chaos* which is come from the Greek word which is mean "gap" / "abyss" / "formless void" / "place before matter" Consider "matter" with two meanings one which is mean *olla ta pragmata* which make up other stuff the stuff of stuff also "matter" which is mean the important things to people A few important things—food / shelter / that thing that lets you walk down a street any street pick one where it doesn't mean danger is there because you are you because it heard you were coming / water / affection / the love of another / someone across the table asking you *efages tipota akoma* which is one way to say: remember you last bite is you strength which is one Greek boy's mother's mother's way of to say: stay full A new term—*Spiti* being the Greek word for house but also house*hold* ie. not only you but those attached to you ie. those you love also those you do not know also those you never will *Politika* made up of *olla ta Spitia* made up of every body being in the same beingplace together which is mean you can't ignore it not if you want to be being in it still.

That Wild Engine

An Interview with MTSU Write Alumna Tiana Clark | *by Kaylee Schilling*

In 2012 MTSU Write, then known as The Writers' Loft, admitted a young local poet to work with mentor Bill Brown. Today, she's lighting up the poetry world with her dense, biting diction; challenging structures; and take-no-prisoners honesty. MTSU Write summer intern Kaylee Schilling shares her interview with Tiana Clark.

The high school version of Tiana Clark didn't consider writing as her future career; instead she viewed her poetry as a personal endeavor. Clark grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, and attended Hume-Fogg, a magnet high school located in the heart of downtown. During school, Clark used the two hours of allotted writing time to grow in her craft. She practiced different techniques and eventually found her own style. Years later, she is now winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize for her collection *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without Blood*. Her writing has appeared in the *New Yorker* and *American Poetry Review*. She is a graduate from Vanderbilt's M.F.A. program and just completed a year as the 2017–18 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at Wisconsin Institute of Creative Writing. Clark now teaches creative writing at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.

Starting out in the Nashville area, Clark says she nervously participated in open mic nights at the beginning of her career. Reciting your own work in front of a crowd as a newbie author is no easy task, she remembers. You can't hide behind the mask of someone else's work. It is yours and comes straight from your heart. "Fortunately, the Nashville community is loving and very encouraging," Clark says. In time, her nerves calmed and gave way to confidence.

Eventually, Clark marketed her work and went on to publish her first collection of poems, *Equilibrium*. Publishers expect authors to promote their books; it only makes sense. However, Clark went about it in a different way. She didn't want to pressure her audience to buy. She wanted to be authentic and honest. She shared on social media every aspect of the process—from pre-order links to photos of the cover art. "I wanted to express everything in gratitude," she says. "I wanted to say, 'Here's this thing I did,' instead of 'Buy my book.'" Clark believes that if your work speaks for itself, people will share it with others.

Clark leans toward writing about personal history mixed with public history, with a focus on race. An example is one of her most well-known poems, "Equilibrium." Clark also writes about anything that pricks her, rather than worrying about what her audience may want. She hits on hard topics such as rape and violence, like in her poem "Tim," or cultural appropriation, like in "Nashville." Clark has earned accolades for her writing, including the 2017 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, 2016 Frost Place Chapbook Competition, Pushcart Prize, 2017 Furious Flower's Gwendolyn Brooks Centennial Poetry Prize, and many others.

A poem that greatly inspired Clark is "I Go Back to May 1937" by Sharon Olds. The poem's narrator recounts how her parents met and details the trauma that would later occur for both parents and children because of the marriage and subsequent divorce. Olds warns her parents in her poem, "you are going to do things/you cannot imagine you would ever do,/you are going to do bad things to children," alluding to more hurt that the reader will never fully know. Clark says, "It makes you think about the trauma that made you. Reading this makes me wonder what I would say to my parents in that situation." In 2017, Clark led a Spring Saturdays Master Class for MTSU Write

in which she used Olds's poem as a jumping off point, challenging participants to imagine the night of their own conception.

Clark encourages her creative writing students at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville not to rush success. She advises taking the time to develop a strong work ethic by writing and reading daily. "It is not a sprint," she explains. "You have to sense an internal validation. You never know when you're truly ready, but you do know when it's good enough." She credits her own success partially to her M.F.A., but mostly to meeting and connecting with others.

Clark views every poem she writes as a teaching moment for herself. Her works showcase what she can and can't do. "I'm a different writer now than when I first started out," she says. "I still have that wild engine, but I simply updated to different cars." Clark is currently focusing on revision and forming deeper relationships while venturing outside her comfort zone.

Can writing be taught? Clark says yes and no. Craft, technique, strategy, and revision are teachable. "What can't be taught," Clark says, "is the mysterious force which nobody can explain that comes from deep inside yourself."

Contributors

Matthew James Babcock: Professor. Writer. Failed breakdancer.

Jess Bennett is a graduate student in the English and literature program at Middle Tennessee State University.

Jemiscoe Chambers-Black is a current M.F.A. Student at Southern New Hampshire University. While finishing up her degree, she is also a writing tutor for Smarthinking, which is a subsidiary company for Pearson. "Choosing Us" is her first published short story.

Dmitry Blizniuk is an author from Kharkov, Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in *River Poets Journal* (USA), *The Courtship of Winds* (USA), *Dream catcher* (UK), *Reflections* (UK), *The Ilanot Review* (Israel), *In Layman's Terms* (USA). He is a finalist for the 2016 Award "Open Eurasia" and "The Best of Kindness 2017" (USA).

Vickie Harden, Ph.D., is a faculty member in the Social Work Department at Middle Tennessee State University. Her social work practice has spanned over 30 years and includes the treatment of childhood trauma, addiction, and co-occurring mental illness. She speaks at national, state, and regional conferences on co-occurring disorders, trauma, and recovery. Harden is a qualitative researcher, telling the stories of people in rural Appalachia who fight through addiction and live in the hope of recovery. The common thread in her work is in her writing. She is a successful grant-writer, and she works with several nonprofit entities to enhance and increase access to care via grant funding. Harden's work is anchored by her passion for creative writing, including poetry, short stories, essays, fiction, and songwriting.

Sandra Hosking is a professional editor, writer, and playwright based in Spokane, Washington. Publishing credits include *The Spokesman-Review*, *Journal of Business*, *Glass International*, *Inland NW Homes & Lifestyles*, *Insight for Playwrights*, *Joey*, *3 Elements Review*, *West Texas Review*, *Edify Fiction*, *Literary Salt*, *Redactions*, and the *Midwest Book Review*. Her plays have been performed in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Canada, and elsewhere. Founder of Play-Makers Spokane, she has served as resident playwright at Stage Left Theater and Spokane Civic Theatre. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America. Hosking holds an M.F.A. in Theatre/Playwriting from the University of Idaho and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University.

Constantine Jones is the managing editor of *Fiction* magazine and an adjunct lecturer of creative writing at the City College of New York, where he earned his M.F.A.

Ben Jorisch is a speck on the face of the void.

Alvin Knox is a Lecturer of English at Middle Tennessee State University, where he was one of the founding mentor's in The Writers' Loft (now MTSU Write) creative writing certificate program. He holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Poetry from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. He is also the assistant faculty advisor to the Sandbox student organization, for which he mostly manages the group's electronic media, including the MTSU Creates website.

Jillian McKelvey, a recent M.F.A. in Creative Writing graduate (2013) of Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, lives, writes, and runs Hugo the Happy Dog in Mississauga, Ontario.

Rock "Pigpen" Madigan was born in the city of Chicago and has shared his poetry and writing across the United States and Canada. He is currently teaching and writing in rural Wisconsin.

Jessica (Tyner) Mehta is a Cherokee poet and novelist. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including the forthcoming *Savagery*, the forthcoming *Constellations of My Body*, *Secret-Telling Bones*, *Orygun*, *What Makes an Always*, and *The Last Exotic Petting Zoo,* as well as the novel *The Wrong Kind of Indian*. She has been awarded numerous poet-in-residencies posts, including positions at Hosking Houses Trust and Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England; Paris Lit Up in France; and the Acequia Madre House in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Mehta is the recipient of a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund in Poetry. She is the owner of a multi-award-winning writing services business, MehtaFor, and is the founder of the Get it Ohm! karma yoga movement. Visit her author site at www.jessicatynermehta.com.

Donna J.W. Munro has spent the last seventeen years teaching high school social studies. Her students inspire her every day. An alumni of the Seton Hill Writing Popular Fiction program, she has published pieces in *Every Day Fiction*, *Syntax and Salt*, *Dark Matter Journal*, the Seton Hill Kindle anthology *Hazard Yet Forward* (2012), the new anthology *Enter the Apocalypse* (2017), *Killing It Softly 2* (2017), and several upcoming in *13 Press*.

George Perreault has received awards from the Nevada Arts Council, Washington Poets Association, International Dancing Poetry Festival, McCabe Poetry Prize, and Fischer Prize in Poetry. He has served as a visiting writer in New Mexico, Montana, and Utah, and his work has been nominated both for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Recent work appears in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Timberline Review*, *High Desert Journal*, and *Weber—The Contemporary West*.

William Smith's plays have been produced and/or developed by the Haywood House Theater and the Bull Durham Playhouse in Jefferson, Texas, and The Nutt House in Granbury, Texas. Smith is an alumnus of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and, over the past 40 years, has acted and/or directed hundreds of performances.