

The Carson McCullers Literary
Awards
2024
Anthology



CSU Carson McCullers Literary Awards Winners

Sara Ayres Jordan Prize for Poetry

Piercing by Cynthia Short
3/27 by Nadia Jacobs
Best Friends by London Van Every

Sara Ayres Jordan Prize for Fiction

March to the Sea by Sal Fleischer
Screaming Beautiful Things by Molly Thomas
Everything Good Comes to an End by Samira Hibbler

Sara Ayres Jordan Prize for Creative Nonfiction

All the Love Under the Sun by Gianna Cabrera
Land of the Sown Salt by Melanie Miller
My Eyes were Watching God: An Essay Inspired by Joan Didion's *The White Album* by K.D. Buckner

Dr. Daniel William Ross Prize for Expository Essay

The Panopticon of Gender: A New Foucauldian Critique of "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter" by Sal Fleischer
God is a Woman: The Feminine in Anne Bradstreet's Poetry by Molly Thomas
Honeysuckles Embracing the Thorns: Bronte Sisters' Protofeminism by Melanie Miller

Anbessita Productions, Inc., Prize for Screenwriting

Change My Mind by Starr
Back to You by Christina Ricks
Onion by Guérin Asante

Dr. Barbara J. Hunt Prize for Playwriting

Outlived by D'Miya Richburg
The Naming of the Dolls by London Van Every
The Hell that is Human Interaction by Dvn Dsn

High School Carson McCullers Literary Awards Winners

Brick Road Greear Prize for Poetry

Nightmares of the Exuviae by Lily Wilson
A Xenobiologist Finds God by Elizabeth "Eddie" Young
The Mudbug's Burrow by Gene Yoon

Dr. Joseph Francavilla Prize for Fiction

Anchor of Hope by Gene Yoon
Dumpster Fire by Cole Hearted
The Grafting by Angel Cotte

Melissa Pritchard Schley & Dr. Philip Schley Prize for Creative Nonfiction

Bung-Eo-Ppang: Sounding Like Me by Gene Yoon
Operation AA: Academic Attack by Emmanuela Ejoga
How I Found Theatre by Mickie Cerda

Susan Schley Gristina Prize for Expository Essay

The Legacy of Korean Picture Brides by Gene Yoon
China's Guanxi Culture and its Influence to a Global Superpower Status by Daniel Troy
Lessons Learned: The Tuskegee Syphilis Study by S. Maysa Johnson

Dr. Jim Owen Prize for Screenwriting

Eternity at Sea by JG
My Best Friend and Dead Celebrities from the 90s by Phaedra Temmis
The Hermit by Jordan Strobel

Andrew Ruhs Prize for Playwriting

The Thing by Jade Magee
A Trip to the Future by Wil
The Supernatural Seekers Club by Lucien Jervis

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Poetry

Columbus State University Selections

Piercing

by Cynthia Short

I'll go back to the girl I was
And tell her hello
Sweet and faux chipper
Like fool's honey

I'll tell her "I got my nose pierced
I hate it
I love it
I would like to change it
I don't know how
I'm too scared to ask."

She will not like this
She thought her unsure nature
Would evaporate in the winds of time
She thought to be an adult was to know things

Dad and Grandma gatekept "grown"
Like a dragon's hoard
Told her to "Stay outta grown folks' business"
Like it was something precious
And productive

"They must know something" she'd think
"They must know everything
And not think me worth telling"

I'll tell her adults are clueless
Actors faking their way into the occasional paycheck
The biggest lie is that of maturation
Miles of stones just to reach the tomb

She'll say, "What are *you* then?"
And I am small, ashamed
A flower curdling inward
"I am you," I'll whisper, "aged,
Wine turned to acid"

She will not like this,
Hates it, in fact
And that hate is the most adult thing
I have ever seen
Even when I was a child, I wasn't

"What's the point of an extra decade
To just be me with mileage?" She'll scream
And soon
We are both screaming
We are both mourning

I'll ask if she likes the piercing
If she thinks I should change it
She will not answer
(She knows something, I'll think,
She knows everything
She does not think me worth telling)

3/27

by Nadia Jacobs

wished a thousand times over.
wished on a dead star falling to earth.
a thousand stars.
a thousand deaths.
a thousand wishes.

but none of them matter.

wishes aren't real;
they're just a way of killing stars
for the sake of someone's self-interest.
so he can say,
"i'm doing something."

without doing anything at all.
and while the stars burn around him,
he will feel safe
and proud
and noble.

because he has changed fate with a wish.
he has made a star fall
by his own thoughts.

and so he creates a fantasy
filled with regret
and dead stars

and he lives there
when he grows weary of living.

but stars don't fall at a wish,
because wishes don't come true.

Best Friends

by London Van Every

back then, we had sleepovers
and I painted your nails blue.
like your grass-stained sneakers
like plastic pony beads and plastic ponies
like your braces
like your eyes.

back then, you had a boyfriend
and I had my first car.
you sat in the side seat
forehead against the frosted window
and smiled at the chime
of his text.

back then, you tried makeup
and I was your canvas.
you held my chin gently
tugged me forward
and colored my lips
garnet red.

now, we have sleepovers
no boyfriends
no makeup
no speaking
no holding back
what had always been there.

does your mother know you kiss me with that mouth?

'you two are so close.'
best friends, she says

smiling over coffee
at her daughter
in my shirt
with lipstick on her teeth.

‘I want a friend like that.’
‘you two could be sisters.’
‘what a thoughtful roommate.’

sometimes I wonder
if the dark is the only one
that will see us as we are.
but as your blue eyes close
and your red lips touch mine
the labels wash away.

High School Selections

Nightmares of the Exuviae

by Lily Wilson

When I find the crisp shell of a cicada
During a moist, summer dusk
I don't hesitate to crush the tender exoskeleton
Or let the past life of the insect balance on my tongue
And choke as its claws catch and tear on the smooth skin of my
esophagus
But when I dream that night, I taste damp soil
And find myself trapped underneath the earth
Shoveling dirt into my jaw to stop the crawling,
The flapping of fresh membranous wings against my throat
And when my lungs fill with the blood of nature I start to laugh
A laugh that echoes miles beneath the surface and awakens the milky
creature
As it begins to reemerge from my lips.
The reverberating laugh mutates into a trembling heartbeat,
A piercing singing that stings my ears as the night begins to unfold
And when I open my cracked eyes
I cough and a fractured wing falls to the concrete
Where a single cicada casing lays.
I smile seeing the clay colored husk and without hesitation
I step on it and let the satisfying crack tremble in my ears
As their sacred symphony begins behind me.

A Xenobiologist Finds God

by Elizabeth “Eddie” Young

it was winter and i was small and there was no one.

i kept the left side of my twin size bed clear so i could pretend there was someone to occupy space with me.

to be so small and yet so lonely but not yet sick with the fear of it, only to pray that come summer, there will be someone like me at some pool in some park and it will be just like the stories. i wanted there to be no ridicule tomorrow in the lunch line.

it's still winter but im not small anymore but im still praying.

what for? where will that get me?

it will be june and there will be no summer friend. there will no park and no pool. there will be no parties and no reaching out from people who seem to have all the time in the world. there will be just the vacant left side of my full size bed and me on the right, sheets stuck to limbs slick with liquid dread.

just want.

i clench my fists to seek a pressure stronger than the crushing in my chest. i try to walk the line between desperation and indifference. i feel like a monster doing a poor job of masquerading as a person – i spend my childhood hoping my pleading could cut through the light pollution to reach whatever alien species i must actually be from. the valedictorian laughed with me in biology, asked me why did we never hang out as kids? i couldn't find the words to remind her that she'd only ever laughed at me before. i gave them all a chance again and the horse did not wake despite the vigor of the beatings.

here in the dark ill keep praying. here i'll hope that i'll wipe the sweat from my brow, look down to the back of my hand expecting smeared mascara, and instead find a miracle. you'll find one regardless, says god. your skin and tears are proof that you are still alive. this is the miracle. do you know how many graves you have tried to dig for yourself?

i try to forget the digging. i try to forget the feeling of the dirt. god coaxes fresh tears out to wash it away, but it takes a patient hose to wash the mud from the swine who instinctively knew to writhe in it. i am reminded of my perceived inhumanity. the grit clears and the burning shame gives way to the coolness of the bedroom fan.

can you feel it? god asks. i realize that i have been hearing my own voice, proverbs spoken from my own lips this whole time. this is the real miracle: feel the blood rushing through you, feel your heart as it keeps beating of its own desire. can you feel it?

it's winter and i close my eyes. i don't shake from the terror but in it's absence i ache. i breathe and the miracle soothes, like skin knitting itself back together over a gaping wound for no reason other than the intrinsic want to end its separation. i can feel my cells multiplying. it is winter and i am not small but i hope again, and i spread my arms and legs wide like a star and the space on the left side of my bed is no longer vacant. my lungs fill with air because they want to breathe, the world continues to turn because it wants to feel the sun on every inch, someone in another city calls a friend with no motive other than a want to hear their voice.

in summer i will go to the pool and if i do not find a friend i will know that i still desire one. the valedictorian will present her project in that biology class on how each body system connects to keep you alive, she will mention that every single one of us possesses these functions. functions born of want. to be human is to want.

and i want

and i want and i want

and i want and i want and i —

The Mudbug's Burrow

by Gene Yoon

The old truck's engine faded, the crank of the gear stick signaling we were here.
Crickets chirped and cicadas buzzed, almost like the whirring of AC.
Yet the mites' hum sang unmethodical, like an improvised chorus.
I inhaled, breathing the unadulterated air of nightfall.
The sound of my uncle slamming the rusty, aged door echoed across the empty rice fields.
I rubbed my eyes, sore from a late night spent sopping up the glare of screens.
What was this warmth I felt here?
The owls seemed to coo welcome, the lightning bugs alighting hello, and I didn't care to check the notifications on my phone, hissing in my pocket like an unkempt friend. I turned it off.
Gruff, unpaved pebble-covered road surrounded us, encroached by tall, uncut grass.
I smelled the smoke of my uncle's cigarette, harshly cutting through the clean country air.
I heard the crunches of leaves as he pushed his way through the brush.
Following behind the clearing he made, I peaked around his torso to see a shallow creek before us.
I listened to the sound of gurgling water, rolling off refined rocks, purified clean by springs.
"Watch closely," he said, wading in the stream.
He dipped his hands into the water, carefully flipping a rock to expose mud bugs.
The dark brown critters lifted their sharp pincers.
Shrouded, concealed were these brutes, amid all the beauty, completely hidden at first glance.
I stepped into the creek, cool, tender.
The ripples encircled my legs, the skin sallow and pale.
Dipping my hands under the running water, I overturned an eroded rock.
The stare of their dark, googly eyes met mine.
I chuckled, cautiously grabbing one invertebrate.
Uncle let out a laugh, placing his cigarette between his lips,

"Yours is even bigger than mine!"
I guffawed, splashing my way down the creek,
phone abandoned by my shoes in the tall grass.
For there were more burrows, bigger mudbugs to find.

Fiction

Columbus State University Selections

March to the Sea

by Sal Fleischer

Everything they own is packed into dented cardboard boxes scattered across the mobile home. The girl watches her Mother take the Tareyton out of Her mouth, leaving a ring of Revlon 730 on the white paper. She drops the cigarette and crushes it into the carpet. It's never going to be clean again.

Her Mother can't stand to stay in one place. They drip down Southeast Georgia: Covington, Madison, Milledgeville. Every town is the same, crumbling industrial districts, drafty rented homes, awful roads with worse drivers. Somehow, there's always a nice neighborhood that seems even farther away than the ever-present mountain peaks painting the horizon. The girl stains her good-ish clothes with red clay and her Mother says that she's a fucking animal.

There's a pack of wild dogs outside her middle school. The other kids say she stinks as bad as them. She's still young enough to not blame her Mother for the smell. The teacher herds them outside to the small, metal playground. She stays close to the school building. Ice crystals scratch her face. Her Mother won't buy a thicker jacket, She says it doesn't get cold enough. The girl shoves her numb fingers under her armpits and feels plenty cold. She hears barking. John-Paul is holding a switch and beating the littlest dog. It cracks against the thing's back with a cruel *thwack*, then another, and another. She watches as the boy laughs. Then the whelp strikes. The first bite drags him down. The second keeps him there. Whetted canines rip at tender mouth-flesh, torn off in gristley, greasy chunks. Everyone goes home early. Later, what she will remember most is how no one blamed the dog for biting back.

It doesn't matter where She works, her Mother always comes home late. The nights are hot. She sweats against the comforter and watches mildew form in the corner of the room. She can't go to sleep until she hears the door open and starts choking on smoke.

They almost spend a year in the backwoods of Statesboro. The girl gets her first boyfriend at the Dollar General. She's holding a yellow plastic bag. The bottom splits open and she can't stop sobbing. The cashier comes out. His nametag says Rhett or Roy. He gets her a new carton of eggs and slips a pack of Twix underneath. He's a year older than her. His Pa' thwaks him hard. They go to the same high school. He likes dirt bikes and Budweiser and her. He misses his fifth period to spend her lunch break under the staircase. He doesn't know how to kiss without teeth.

Mrs. Lovette sees them on November fifteenth. Her Mother has never been angrier. The girl wishes She would just hit her, then feels guilty, thinking about Rhett or Roy's bruises and wet eyes. Her Mother says that she's worthless. A disgusting slut who's too stupid to miss class getting screwed. The girl says she only saw him during break. Her Mother says that it's her fault her daddy left. That one didn't bite as much as it was supposed to. Her daddy was a painless vacancy.

The last time she saw Rhett or Roy, he looks like something you'd buy for Halloween. His jaw is swollen like a plum and just as purple. Two of his teeth are pushed into his gums, three more clean gone. She can see because he's smiling, so wide his stitches break open, because his Pa' looked worse.

The older she gets the less they can stand each other. Savannah is the prettiest place they have ever lived, and Her Mother manages to find the ugliest building there. It doesn't allow smoking. Nowhere does and that never stops Her. She watches Her Mother finish the Tareyton and wants Her to put it out on her wrist. She longs for a burn, something dirty and deep that leaves her with an ugly wound that can heal neatly into a silver scar. Everything would be easier if She hurt her.

It starts with a candle. Her Mother won't let her light a candle in her room. She's spent her entire life reeking of burnt tobacco and she just wants a whiff of fucking Ocean Breeze. They're screaming at each other, and the words shouldn't bite anymore, but what she doesn't know is that it's never going to stop. The girl is horrible, she's an ungrateful bitch, a leech, a waste of space, a waste of food that ruined Her life; she's dumb and ugly and barely even a fucking human, and finally, something breaks. The girl strikes. She doesn't know what she's doing, whether to punch or slap or claw. Her hand connects. If time stopped now, it would be a caress. Time marches forward and

her hand follows through. Her Mother's lipstick is smeared with blood that drips from her chin to the carpet. It's never going to be clean again.

Screaming Beautiful Things

By Molly Thomas

It was a warm winter that year. I got away with wearing slippers out, letting my tidy pedicure peek through. My beauty was no longer in its infancy then, aging rapidly out of the pool of desirability. I had this creeping, heartburn feeling that I had gotten too old to be beautiful. I, too, like women 30 years my senior, was in the winter of my sex. Something had happened after the nymphetic epoch I had endured that stretched me longways. Though the few times the wind was cold, I hardly felt it burn my legs when I walked the block to work; something burned within me. Twenty was already too old.

It was what I considered my first real job. I was a hostess at a restaurant pub. I felt it might finally catapult me into the kind of adulthood I'd been reaching for, though what that was I didn't understand. I didn't understand I was young. I felt failure after tiny failure that girls my age had made personally. I should have been above those things. I caught an infection my first week and it was the sickest I'd ever been. I should've seen that as a sign, some sort of bad omen like a crow in front of my nose. It can be hard to see over the bridge of that nose, bulbous and domineering.

That was what initially brought us together: our understanding that we did not belong here and would not be kosher enough to belong anywhere else. The small but constant slings and arrows hurled from friends and coworkers were enough to callous anyone's temper towards the world. Yet I was young enough that I kept picking and popping the skin, never letting the wound close all the way. It grated on me that he let his close, shielding him from the crossfire. He found the red, swollen spot on me and rubbed it 'till it bled with pity.

The first week we commiserated about our ancestry, our degrees, our coworkers. We hated our manager. He had a temper, and when he was in one of his moods it was impossible to please him. I hated him because he would touch my neck or thighs sometimes. He hated him because he gave him bad tables. Our manager pointed to us regularly our stinginess or how we always complain. He stuck his finger in my ear once.

I also hated him because I wasn't allowed to read on the job, even on nights that no one came in for hours. I would write though. I would

write little snippets of dirty thoughts and violent ends, sometimes love letters to my boyfriend I'd never show. I'd write them on the takeout sheets, with their pepto pink tinge and worn out printed ink. *He* never asked what I was writing. He didn't care. He thought I was young and naive and much too optimistic for the life we'd all been given. I thought he wanted to fix the pain he caused himself. I thought we could chase a youth we said we wanted to forget together.

Men like that, they make you feel like you're the one in control. That winter I thought my sex was so alluring that not even a past self could resist. I wanted to prove I could still be wanted, even as the tenderness of my flesh began to hydrogenate. I wanted to be wanted without bias. For this test, I thought I had made myself immune to the twists and turns those men make in their logic, branching out like wicked old trees. His reasons were subtle but he let me hold them and pet them like a cat in my lap. I thought his bitterness couldn't reach me, but it expanded out from where he screwed himself up and reached me on the inside.

I supposed this was the last frontier: a married man with a kid. I told myself they wouldn't know who hurt them, and whether it was me or another girl it wouldn't matter. It would have been someone anyway. I told myself he didn't matter. I told myself I was using him. I was a snake coiled around itself. When I think back to the picture of their wedding on their mantel, the grays in her hair scratch my throat and twist around my chest, making my breath hitch. I told myself that I couldn't ruin a marriage that was already broken. As I stood before him, his couch separating us, I asked him if he loved her still. He said he thought so.

Men like that, that show you which room is their son's, then fuck you on their couch. They don't want help. They don't need anyone to swoop in and show them what youth feels like again. They let you think that you're in charge of the situation and then show you the shotguns sitting in their closet. Men like that act coy and let that burning, aching little girl in you lead you to them. They let you touch them when you know you don't want to. They want you without bias because you're just young enough that it doesn't count. Men like that make the blood on your back seem ordinary. I'm a man like that, too.

When the news broke I was at work. My boyfriend cried and cried and I had to go home early. There were supposed to be riots that night. I

saw his body twitch as a truck drove by. I felt lightning shoot up from the light reflections in the puddles on the road into my stomach and grease defensive wheels. I gave up before I even began. It seemed poetically just that I would sleep in his bed. It was a cold and awkward offer I was unable to refuse. It was so cold in his house and so warm in the other. I layed there thinking about how both houses kept so many plants alive while I couldn't remember to water mine. There were no riots that night, though neither of us slept.

That morning, I felt the cold for the first time that winter. We took a walk that helped dislodge the hardened mucus that had worked its way from my throat to my lungs. Something in me softened and dulled, stopped shining so brightly, so hot. I thought a part of me died that morning. It was a part that had been there since my father left it, white-hot and always dully aching. Until the core imploded, I didn't know I was even trying to kill it. I'm a man like that; I killed him, too.

Men like that are soft and feel everything. They need you. I was afraid of being needed. I was afraid that if I didn't violently pull the chair from under me as I swung from the rope then I'd fall on someone else's terms. My terms were dry and bloody. They stung and ripped and had to get tested afterwards. They stood in a chamber they filled with gas themselves. My terms snapped the wishbone and took both sides. Men like that are kind and let you tell yourself you're in control.

That winter comes back to me when I make that turn or put on my lipstick that smells like wine. It comes back like ink bleeding out from the back of my head, around my face to cover my field of vision. My eyes turn dry and the road in front of me frays at the edges, giving way to snippets of scenes at his house or the other. Sometimes I see the lights reflect in the rain as that truck drives by. Sometimes a fat black crow perches on my nose and my eyes twist inward to serve his dark purposes. As I drive now, I hope not to hit the small, beautiful things that come screaming into the road, looking to kill that part of themselves.

Everything Good Comes to an End

By Samira Hibbler

Maggie stared at the fish tank across the waiting room, watching the bright orange goldfish swim back and forth, back and forth, trapped inside their water-filled enclosure. Maggie filled her cheeks with air, imitating the fishes' puffed up faces. She used her fingers to poke her cheeks, air escaping through her lips like a balloon letting out air. She repeated this a few times, before her mother gave her that *knock it off* look. Her mom was on the phone, talking quietly to whoever it was on the other line. Maggie assumed it was one of her many work calls, but she couldn't help thinking it could've been one of her many boyfriends, that she liked to rotate on a weekly basis. Maggie rolled her eyes, slouching back in her seat bored out of her mind. Her mother had dragged her to the doctors office for an appointment, after discovering Maggie had started her period the day before.

Maggie didn't think it was necessary to go to the doctor just for a period, but her mother insisted, so the doctor could explain the "birds and the bees" and other information she may need to know, now that she was a "woman." Maggie didn't get why her mother couldn't just explain all those things herself, but she confessed that she didn't know the proper words to say, when it came to things of that sort. Maggie took that to mean she just didn't have the time to explain it to her, much like she never had the time to spend with her because of her busy work schedule and late night, weekend dates with strangers.

"Maggie Goldwin?" Maggie heard the nurse announce. Maggie looked towards her mother, motioning to her that they were up next.

"I'll have to call you back," she heard her mother say, before hanging up the phone, shoving it into her work pants pocket. They got up following the nurse into the back and into one of the examination rooms. The nurse went through the usual procedures, asking Maggie her age, height, weight etc. "Alright, the doctor will be with you guys in just a moment," she said, leaving the room. Maggie laid on the crinkly paper they always had on examination tables, that ripped so easily she didn't see the point in even having it. She stared at the fluorescent lights until her vision was filled with dancing squiggly

lines, thinking about how much she wanted to go home, about how much she hated the sound of her mother texting right now, wondering how her older brother was liking his new college, or how her father was doing in Germany, and how much she really wanted a cigarette right now.

"Maggie stop looking at the light, you'll mess up your eyes," her mother mumbled, not taking her eyes off her phone. Maggie closed her eyes, seeing those same colorful lines, now surrounded by the darkness of her eyelids. How she wished to be like those squiggly lines, just floating without a care in the world. She opened her eyes once she heard the door open, seeing the familiar face of her doctor, Dr. Haynes. She was a petite woman with a scrunched up face like a child tasting a lemon for the first time. Her eyes were big like two sunny side up eggs, which always used to scare Maggie as a kid. She was always so cheery and annoyingly positive.

"Maggie, always good to see you," she said, sitting her clipboard down on the desk.

"Your mother tells me you're thirteen now, time goes by so fast," she said smiling, revealing her slightly crooked teeth.

"I don't feel much different."

"Not yet you don't, but I see you've started your period, a really important milestone for a young lady your age," she said, her smile growing bigger. Maggie didn't understand what the big deal was or why adults had to announce it like some type of prize you've just won in the "being a women" competition.

"I don't know why I'm here, I know all about sex, and boys, protecting myself, birth control, contraceptives, should I go on?" Maggie's mother looked embarrassed, while Dr. Hayes kept that same smile on her face.

By the time they got home it was already too late in Germany to call her dad and she blamed her mother for this realization. She told her mom she was going over to her friend Jessica's house to study, but

really they were going to go to the mall to smoke and flirt with the boys in the food court. Jessica and their other friend Bailey all piled into Jessica's older sister's convertible, singing to an old Britney song at the top of their lungs. Jessica and Bailey were two years older than Maggie, but she didn't mind because it made her feel older and cooler than the girls her age. They always gave her boy advice, tips on how not to look like a loser, and bought her cigarettes by flirting with the gas station clerks every time they went.

"I'll pick you guys up at 6, don't be late," Jessica's sister warned, driving off before they could respond. Jessica rolled her eyes, leading them to the back of the mall where the dumpsters resided. Jessica pulled out a pack of Newports, passing the box around as they each grabbed one, while Bailey lit each one. They smoked in silence, almost like a peaceful ritual between the trio, lost in their never ending thoughts.

"Wanna mess with some boys?" Jessica asked. Bailey and Maggie shrugged their shoulders in agreement, throwing their cigarette butts on the ground, crushing them with their feet. They followed behind, like ants following their queen, entering the dully lit, half empty mall. They followed Jessica to the food court, sitting at one of the many empty tables that littered the area. Jessica did her usual thing of scanning the surrounding tables, trying to get a good look at prospective candidates. It wasn't long before she realized there were no cute boys to flirt with. She pouted, putting on her sunglasses in defeat. Maggie was getting bored and suggested they walk around and window shop. Jessica agreed and Bailey followed quietly behind. They walked around to different stores, watching Jessica try on sunglasses, scarves and jewelry, while Maggie and Bailey nodded their heads in agreement to her questions of whether she looked good or not.

"I'm starving, let's eat something," Maggie suggested, checking her pockets to make sure the ten dollars she took from her piggy bank was still securely in her jeans pocket.

"I'm craving fries and a milkshake," Jessica said, tossing the shirt she had in her hands onto the table she had grabbed it from. They walked

back to the food court, grabbing their food, and sitting at a nearby table. They ate and talked, until Jessica suddenly started smiling.

"Don't look now but loser Laney is sitting all by herself right behind us," she said, as Bailey and Maggie turned around to see a girl about Jessica and Bailey's age with long, wispy brown hair. She had glasses and bright pink lip gloss on that didn't compliment her complexion at all. Maggie thought she was pretty enough, although she may have needed some help in the fashion department.

"Who's Laney?" Maggie asked.

"Loser Laney, Maggie it only works if you say the whole thing," Jessica said, taking a sip of her milkshake. Maggie rolled her eyes, finding it unnecessary to call Laney a loser. Maggie figured she only made fun of her because she was jealous or just plain unhappy with herself.

"Anyways she's this loser in our grade, she barely ever speaks, just sits by herself reading or building legos or some shit, it's pretty lame."

Maggie didn't think reading and building legos classified someone as a loser, but she knew Jessica only said things to seem cool.

"We should say hi," Jessica announced, grabbing her milkshake, getting up before anyone could protest. Maggie and Bailey followed suit, not sure what'd she do next. And what happened next neither she nor Bailey predicted. Jessica proceeded to take off the top of her milkshake, the next thing Maggie knew the milkshake was all over Laney. Dripping continuously down her face, hair, and clothes like dripping paint. Maggie stared in shock, her eyes going back and forth between Jessica and Laney. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, the background noise around silenced. Laney looked at the three of them, not saying anything as she slowly got up, walking to the bathroom.

Jessica started laughing, before walking back to their table, Bailey following behind her. Maggie stood there like her world was tumbling down. Like an out of body experience she felt her legs and body move, towards their direction, feeling her hands form into fists. She was angry, beyond angrier than she'd ever been before. Angrier than when

her mom and dad divorced, angrier than when her dad moved to Germany with his new wife, even angrier than when her brother left for college. She felt tears form in her eyes as she got closer to the table.

“What the hell was that Jessica,” Maggie said, holding on to every ounce of strength she had not to punch her in the face. Jessica smiled, wiping spilled milkshake off her hands so casually, as if what she did didn’t matter.

“She deserved it, that’s all, got a problem?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah I do, she didn’t deserve that, she did nothing to you,” Maggie said, hearing her voice crack. She felt her cheeks grow red and warm with embarrassment. Jessica rolled her eyes, getting up from the table, standing in front of Maggie, Jessica slightly towering over Maggie by a few inches.

“If you have a problem, say it,” Jessica said.

“Yes Jessica I have a problem, a problem with you bossing everyone around, acting like you’re so perfect, when really you’re insecure, you’re mean, and you’re a bitch.”

Jessica stared at her for a moment, a look of anger and annoyance on her face. Maggie watched her grab her stuff, looking at Maggie.

“You want to stick up for her? Fine, do what you want, we don’t need you, you’re a kid anyways, I was doing you a favor, bringing you into the group, but this just proves you’re not who I thought you were.”

And with that Jessica left, and for the first time Maggie felt relief, taking a deep breath, not realizing she was holding it in. Without thinking she hurried to the bathroom, seeing Laney standing in front of the sink, the faucet running as she scrubbed at her shirt with paper towels. She didn’t seem to acknowledge Maggie’s presence at first, focusing on the task at hand.

“Are you okay?” Maggie asked, biting her lip with nervousness. Laney looked up without saying anything, shaking her head.

“Can you wait here a second?” Maggie asked, quickly running out the bathroom. Maggie put her hand in her pocket, making sure the change she had was still there. She went into the first store she saw, looking for the cheapest shirt she could find, settling on a simple white shirt with the words, *friends forever*. She hurried back to the bathroom, seeing Laney leaning against the wall.

Maggie held up the shirt out of breath, handing it to her without saying a word. Laney raised her eyebrows, taking the shirt.

“Jessica is a jerk, I don’t even know why I became friends with her, honestly I don’t think we even are friends. Either way I don’t want to be like her, my dad...,” she paused, not knowing why she was bringing up her dad in this situation, but something he used to say popped into her head, *to treat others as you would yourself*. She felt now was the perfect time to instill that saying.

Laney walked towards her, a wide smile appearing on her face, “You don’t have to explain anything, girls like Jessica act like that because they have something missing within themselves, and you don’t need to hang out with them to seem cool, just be yourself,” she said.

All Maggie could do was smile in reassurance, a silent thank you.

“And hey, thanks for the shirt,” she said, holding it up. Maggie smiled, sitting on the floor as she caught her breath, thinking about how everything she thought was good, ultimately was coming to an end, but she was sure new beginnings were to come.

High School Selections

Anchor of Hope

by Gene Yoon

In this short story, a boy, new to the country, seeks solace through fishing at a lake near his house, while in a bleak situation where his mother is sick and being separated from his old friends. In his recent fishing trips, he missed a big catch which added to his frustration. In his encounter with a fellow angler, he learned it is not the big catch but his relationship with nature that gives him hope.

Mist covered the dark, tinted water, the ominous wind creating light creases across the surface. Awkwardly, I waddled past the rotting, fallen timber en route to the lake. Back then, I fitted myself with mud-covered black boots, clearly a couple sizes too big for me, a gray overcoat whose color was muted from years of use – perforated with small, gaping holes from fishing hooks that had penetrated the cloth and athletic shorts that exposed my tanned skin. I carefully navigated the muddy bank, wet from the previous night's rainfall, swatting at spiderwebs that hung from the overhanging trees with my near-antique fishing rod. After wading through that resistant mire, I finally reached the water's edge. Without waiting even a breath to calm my lungs, I took a long cast, the reel screeching from overuse. I carefully reeled the crankbait through the water, my hands shaking slightly from the bait's vibrations. Light ripples of the morning sprinkle speckled on the water like small water fairies dancing over the lake's surface. It was almost as if these pixies were signaling good luck to come.

I stared absentmindedly at the mist lingering over the water. Mom would have another treatment tomorrow. Fear clutched at my sides, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. The doctor had said this could be the last one. It'd be nice to catch something for her, wouldn't it? The last bass I'd caught, a big one, she'd smiled more than I'd seen her smile all summer long. She'd gone to sleep after that for the rest of the afternoon. But this was normal for chemo. That's what the doctor had said.

Soon I realized that I'd reeled my bait throughout the width of the docks. I cursed myself and stabilized my balance as I made another cast. The soft vibrations of the crankbait rotated back and

forth, moving closer and closer inland. The bait's rattles tinkled, approaching my feet, settled into the sandy bank. *Clink clink, clink clink.* Then the bait stopped.

In fact, at that moment, everything stopped.

Zing! The clear line ripped through the surface of the water with abrupt force.

A fish!

I clutched the rod; the fish's unanticipated strength almost ripped it out of my hands. Line tore from the reel with vigor, the mechanism screaming as if grunting to combat the power of a leviathan. A loud screeching erupted from the friction of my line forced against the rod's tip. It was a monster. Thrashing. Swimming from side to side, my drag squealing from its weight. With every yank of the fish, the old monofilament line lost its integrity as it stretched and stretched.

The electricity of that exhilaration, and how it would spark my heart, I'll never forget. I couldn't tell if my hands were shaking from the weight of the fish or my adrenaline. It wasn't just big, it was a whale, rising up to the surface of the water, its green-white scales reflecting the dim sun covered by the overcast clouds. With all the remaining strength in its body, the bass threw itself into the air, its green tail splashing violently against the water. Then, horror: I saw the lure fly from its mouth. The bass tumbled back down, and was submerged. My shoulders dropped with disappointment. It'd escaped.

Ten minutes later, I'd turned, head drooped over as I retraced my steps through the mud. On the weathered trail that separated the lake from the forest, I dragged my rod behind my back. It seemed that my bag had been packed for a long outdoor expedition; it had become heavier than it was before.

I missed it, I thought to myself, there won't be another.

The lake was surrounded by thousands of acres, and was fished by dozens of anglers everyday. The chances of a fish that size crossing anyone's path was an unthinkable probability. Uncountable factors had led to this outcome: my equipment, my lure, the time of day, the time of year. And they wouldn't line up again. The rain picked up, the water falling from the branches of the trees intensifying, once small droplets turning into large streams. The downpour poked and bopped my face, almost as if it were mocking or teasing me. I pulled my soaked hood over my head, humiliated, gazing down at the damp pine straw.

At home, white paint chipped off the wooden walls. The lights remained off in the house; my mother, father, and brother were already asleep. I pulled open the door to my room with care, its joints squeaking with age. Tiptoeing haphazardly, I tried to not step on any hooks on the floor, and flicked the lights on. Scattered about were old fishing lure packages, clippings of line, soft plastic worms. I tossed my bag and rod into the corner of the room. I heaved myself on my mattress that laid on the floor, the springs squeaking under my weight. I took a deep breath, the remnants of my mother's winter kimchi still wafting from the kitchen, mixed with the earthy tone of a wet day. It all reminded me of home in Korea.

As I lay there, the reality that I couldn't escape bore down on me. Mom's cancer, a fish she wouldn't see. And the pandemic had only worsened my family's problems. After every fishing excursion, I trembled with the fear of exposing my mother to the virus. The dangers of outside were gut wrenching: And if I brought that invisible threat into our home?

I dreamt that night of what could have come from the catch ... There I am, tasting clean air. I lift the behemoth, warm water dripping off the slimy body, sunlight reflecting off of its shiny scales. My mother stands against the green shore, her face radiating health and contentment. My worries seem to vanish.

The next morning, I sat alone in the classroom. In sixth grade, I was always alone. Students walked past the agape door, chattering and chattering with one another through their masks. The language they spoke and the conversation they held were one great puzzle, and I could hardly make out a few pieces. Back in Korea, English class was step by step, an order I could follow. But here in America the sounds were so similar yet so different, a great jumbled mess, and attempting to decode it felt like solving a riddle that didn't have a solution. My teachers' and peers' mouths would open and sound escape, but could barely understand a single utterance. I was the fish out of water. When I tried to open my mouth, no words came out, only bubbles of air escaped.

When the final bell rang, I dragged myself home. At least it was Friday, and dusk wouldn't come for another few hours. Without thinking, I set back off to the only place where I felt like myself.

Trudging through the woods with my fishing rod in hand, the mud was drier than the day before. The afternoon sun had a sense of calm to it, and humid air breezed my skin. I had set about this trail almost every single day last summer after I moved. It was nothing like

the ponds in Korea. The waters in Korea felt more welcoming, whether it be from the warmer climate, or the presence of my old friends who had stopped texting me. Or Mom's laughter. I had already been gone for a year.

I cast into the water, mindlessly reeling my bait. Then a *plop* rang inside my head. *What was that?* I could recognize it, but failed to identify it. Something about the sound was distinguishable. Confused, I looked around. The way it hit was very artificial. Nothing living in the water could have made that sound. I took a look and spotted something else in the water. Another line. Someone else was fishing at the lake over by the dock. I peered through my glasses. *Someone from school!?* No, an older African American man came into focus. He wore a black t-shirt, a hat, sunglasses to cover his eyes, cargo pants, and military style boots. Our eyes met. The man gave me a nod of recognition. I responded by blankly gawking. For the longest time, this had been my place, where only I knew, only I enjoyed. English questions began to flow from my mouth like my brain had already rehearsed them.

"Pish...today?" I asked, trying my best to not sound agitated and make the right sound. The man took a second before giving a soft nod.

"It's been a little bit of a slow day. Only caught about fifteen or so." My jaw went agape. Fifteen fish! I recalled my experiences in the summer, spending every hour from sunset to dawn without even a single bite, let alone a single bass. The experience, skill, and knowledge this man possessed was incomparable!

I probed further. "What lure you use? Do you pish at night or at day? What big pish you catch?"

We talked for hours. We discussed our favorite lures, our favorite techniques, our craziest fishing stories and even more. As I talked to him, I did not have to think about my missed catch, my mom's pain and my loneliness. It was as if he had played a trick on me. After what felt like a day, I got nervous again, that I may have been bothering this man's leisure. But when I studied his face, below the shade of his hat, there was only a smile. His smile shined bright as the afternoon sun and his gentle manner swayed my mind like the summer's breeze.

The sun had finally set. The only thing that we could now hear was the chirping of field crickets. And we could only see the moon reflecting off of the glassy water. The man let out a groggy sigh. "I'm gonna head home now, but I'll catch you later little angler."

I rubbed my eyes, not realizing how late it'd become. A few minutes later, he'd faded into the brush.

I packed my equipment, setting off back home. The path no longer felt so lonely. The cooing of owls, the rustling of little critters, and the squeaking of little insects mixed with the sound of my feet crunching the still moist earth. I couldn't understand the words of nature, but I could feel them.

The next morning, my eyes opened to a clean sun peaking through my blinds, illuminating the dusty air clouding the room. I glanced at my bedside clock. 7:15. I had slept in. Yet, instead of packing my school supplies, I grabbed at my rod.

At the lake, the bright mellow orange sun had overtaken the previous dark, gloomy atmosphere. There was no chop on the water. The calm lake reflected the sun like a beautiful painting. My mind seemed to only be filled with the nature of the life around me. Then my pleasant thoughts were interrupted by something. A sensation, something nibbling on my lure, a light tapping that reverberated to the tip of my rod.

This is it! I yelped in excitement, swinging my rod to set the hook into the fish's mouth. But then ... nothing. Too soon, the dark outline of the bass had swum off into the depths.

I paused, and waited to feel that dismay. But this time, I couldn't help but let out a chuckle. I turned my gaze to the scenery surrounding the lake to discover the morning sun coloring the sky with hues of pink and orange and a chorus of the birds sang. A sense of contentment arose within me. The comfort I desperately sought was not in the next big catch, but in the nature surrounding me. It eased the pain, despair, and isolation ingrained in my heart. All of a sudden, the weight of my mother's sickness was balanced with an anchor of hope.

Dumpster Fire

by Cole Hearted

I am a desk. Desks are used in classrooms. I am in a classroom. Students like to rest their arms on me. They like to beat on my wood in order to make rhythmic sounds. In my opinion, they don't sound good. I am in a 6th Grade class. Most of the day students sat down on my friend, Chair. Chair hated being a chair. They said that feeling a student sitting on you is very unappealing. I suppose that's true when you only have three legs. My name is Desk, if you were wondering.

Today was very special. There was an event going on. Students gathered outside. Window, which was a window, told us everything. They told us of these big metal things called cars. Cars were mean. They often bragged about how far they could go. About how fast they were. And how humans loved them. I wonder, what is it like to be loved by humans? The students here don't care about my well-being. They stick gum on me when the teacher isn't looking. They flipped me over. They beat on me. They wrote on my wooden skin.

I have no reason to stay here. I have to wait. I have to wait for the end of the school year. Why? I overheard talking amongst the pencils. Next year, everyone is going to be replaced. Including the 13 year old desks.

As time flew by, all I could think about was March 17th. That's when everything happened. Men carried me by my legs and placed me into a van. The other desks were frantic and scared. Not me, though. I was excited. The van mumbled something about the smell of the air before starting the long journey.

The drive was long and tiresome. I miss Chair. Chair was 20 years old, and they were a grumpy chair. They often told me stories about the previous school years, or even stories about the last school they were in. As I was lost in thought, I felt the ground beneath my legs shake. Loud beeping could be heard as the van yelled a few swear words. Those words weren't new, but they were rare to hear.

Sooner than I expected, I was out of the van. I was laid in the grass head first. I could see the bugs and the leaves. It was honestly beautiful. Suddenly, I was picked up by the legs again. Another man

put me in a new location. It looked unpleasant. Other objects were screaming at the men. Some were trying to pry their way out of the heaps of others. Most of them were sleeping. Tired souls, if you will.

I was thrown next to an old music player and some computer. Their names were Frank and Computer. Computer, the computer, was from the early 2000s. They said that it was a fun time, and they wished they could go back to their owner. Frank was from the 1900s. They said that their owner was dead by now. I never knew that humans could die of old age. I suppose that humans don't like old things.

Each night at the supposed "Dumpster" grew on me. It was nice talking to others. The desks back at home didn't like talking to me, or each other for the matter. Frank told me of some war called WW2. They said that after the war, he was thrown away. I found that sad. Computer had a similar story. Computer was replaced though. I heard a click.

Another man showed up. He was holding something in his hands. It was a lighter. He set fire to my friend, Cabinet. They screamed in agony as others watched the fire spread. It took a few minutes to reach me. It hurt a lot. No wonder they were screaming. If I could cry, I would. The fire spread on my head until it made it to my legs. I rolled over intentionally. I wasn't letting Computer or Frank burn. They were my friends after all.

Suddenly, I felt really tired. I fell asleep on October 8th, 2022.

I didn't wake up.

The Grafting

by Angel Cotte

Numbness, no more like soreness with the limbs feeling lame and dulled from the stillness. It's cold with the ends of the hands and feet pinching from the chilly air while the rest of the body being damp from a cold sweat. Here there is no sense of feeling with all muscles relaxing and the mind being lulled into a calmness losing all feeling. This state of tranquil being remains the same for an unknown amount of time until it is abruptly stopped.

He could feel his arm being tugged on by one hand grabbing on his forearm "Hey Charlie you have to get up." A voice calls to the disoriented man lying on his back as he shifts around in his bed. "I got you coffee." The voice announces to Charlie as he places the cup on the nightstand beside Charlie. After a while of fidgeting in bed Charlie gets up as he gathers his thoughts together and adjusts his eyes to the sudden brightness the floods them.

He then sits up on the side of his bed and grabs the cup, feeling its warmth in his hand and smelling it improves his mood as he begins to sip from the cup. After a couple of sips, he then begins to drink the entire cup with coffee beading out from his mouth staining his shirt.

After he drinks the cup empty, he gets onto his feet with one of them growing numb and a bit sore and walks out of his room into the bathroom. Washing his face with cold water which helps revitalize him as the cold jolts him further awake, turning the facet off and drying his face with his towel he stares into the mirror. Staring at his reflection it brings up several thoughts to his head like how he should shave his face since stubbles have begun to grow back, and that he should do a better job at washing his face.

He sees the same military buzz cut as his father that he had always gotten since he was seven; there was one time when he did grow his hair out it would grow curly locks which he disliked. Looking into the mirror, he sees his pale face, which he often considered plain, which had the same static expression he always made when nothing came to mind. What catches his eye is his bruised nose when he pokes it, it's

still tender despite the fact it has been healing for several weeks. He stares into the mirror, becoming fixated on his eyes and becomes transfixed with his reflection.

The focus of his thoughts becomes dull as they submerged into the depths of his unconscious making him become detached from the idea that the face in the mirror is his. “Hey Charlie, can you hurry up in there or are you going to be there all day!?” Lucas shouts at him. Regaining his train of thought, he began his shower running the water and grabbing his towel from a hanger. Unfortunately for him the pipes froze outside making the water cold and pushing him into an uncomfortable shower. Drying off and stepping out of his shower he grabs clothes from his room and gets dressed. Stepping back into the bathroom he grabs his toothbrush and walks into the living area where he sits on the couch next to Lucas.

“Could you do that in the bathroom?” Lucas was always annoyed with Charlie brushing his teeth in front of him with toothpaste seeping from his mouth staining the couch. Charlie didn’t pay much attention to Lucas’ comment and continued brushing his teeth.

“Are you going out dressed like that.” he poked back at Lucas. Lucas was wearing a red beanie cap with a brown parka adorned with tan and orange colors at the ends of his sleeves and waist, black jeans sewn with bronze gold thread at the seams, and white sneakers with black and red patterns.

“So, what’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Lucas inquired with a flat voice.

“You look like a kid from one of those holiday movies that they always make around this time of the year. Quite annoying if I’m being honest.” Charlie added with some toothpaste spurring from his mouth.

“Just go back to bathroom and wash your mouth out.” Lucas commented while pointing his arm at the Tv trying to choose something to watch. Charlie heads back into the bathroom and rinses his mouth out with water and reenters the living area. This time he goes to the fridge and opens it, inside the fridge there is a cardboard

box filled with cans of soda on the top shelf, various sauces and jars are spread throughout the fridge, along with some Tupperware stacked at the bottom for the shelves along with a plastic container.

“Can I have the rest of the leftovers from last night?” Charlie asked Lucas craning his neck to look at

Lucas.

“Sure, I’m just going to pick up some breakfast on my way to work.” Lucas replied without facing Charlie.

Taking the container, he places it into the microwave and starts the timer then sits back down on the couch. “What are you watching?” Charlie asks out of curiosity.

“Sunrise at Marion County.” He stated bluntly laying backward onto the armrest. “Which episode?” Charlie further pried.

“Donald Takes the Lottery.” he once again replies flatly, “Shouldn’t you get started on your class work.

You know yesterday dad called me and he wanted to know if your grades are improving.”

“Look, I’ve been working hard to get caught up with all my classes and I just got my grades in Trigonometry and literature back up. It’s been stressful trying to keep up with everything especially since I can’t be in class right now.” Charlie had replied, he was upset that he let his slump cause him to procrastinate his classwork particularly this close to the end of the semester.

After a brief pause with Charlie trying to think of another explanation, he falls short and only abruptly say “I’ll get started right away.” Charlie then gets up from the couch and goes into his room to grab his laptop and gather his notes strewn across his desk. The manner he does this is more frantic with discernable frustration gripping the papers heavily in his hands crumpling them as he paces to the dining table to lay everything across the table.

By then he noticed that the microwave time had finished and went to grab a fork and pulled the container out of the microwave. For the

next several minutes he begins to type on his laptop with a loud clicking sound present from his rapid typing. Throughout his work he takes bites from the leftover barbeque from their outing the previous night. Lucas continues to watch Tv as he sits in place for a while placing his legs onto the couch.

The early morning begins to pass by with the sun rising spraying hues of blue into the sky raising the temperature by a slight ten degrees. By then, more people emerge from their houses and begin their commute to work while others move around carrying out their business throughout the day. Like ants, the number of people moving around the streets becomes innumerable to count and a small hum begins to build up as more cars travel through the many roads intertwining with one another. By that time, an orange glow had come to consume the sky Charlie had finished eating the ribs and had switched to taking notes while Lucas had spent the time watching various episodes of the same show, he had been watching several hours ago.

There was a visible silence in the apartment with the tv acting as a small ambiance in the background faint in sound. Lucas had finished another episode but had a challenging time trying to find something else to watch spending around thirty minutes scrolling through numerous services on the Tv. After a while he just got sick of scrolling around and turned off the tv and laid on the couch for a bit.

Out of boredom he decided to check on Charlie, “Hey Charlie how is you work coming along?” glancing at Charlie who had his eyebrow furled and had been focused heavily on his computer slouching onto the table. At first, he doesn’t respond, his frustration increases as he cannot seem to get a website to work as he repeatedly attempts to load in a tool.

“It’s just stressful, I’m working on a presentation for economics and the tool on the website isn’t working at all.” He replies while repeatedly tapping the touch screen on his computer, he misplaced his mouse earlier and could not find it. Eventually the screen starts reloading the webpage only for it to completely shut down. Charlie hammers his hand onto the table and closes the laptop lightly despite

his anger. “The damn application crashed again.” he muttered and groaned in annoyance.

Despite getting an early start he only managed to finish several pages of his presentation and had to go over several graphs he had to make for the presentation which required him to use various data sets he had to create himself and had to display the data using another application to better display the statistics. Out of all his classes he had grown to dislike economics since it often required him to use different displays of data, he even had to conduct his own research to produce accurate numbers for his work. He especially hated working on the graphics for presentations since he did not know how to use the tools needed to design them.

Concerned Lucas sits up and for a moment he seems hesitant and annoyed in a brief second. It looked

like he was struggling against his better judgement to even muster a single word. “How’s the nose?” he

asked seemingly reluctantly.

“The nose Is good, the doctors managed to set it back in place. They said that it should be able to completely heal in several days.” Charlie replied bluntly unconsciously touching his nose. “Though my, foots been stiff lately and I think that my ankle has a rash on it.”

“By the way, did they tell you when you would get your foot back?” Lucas gestured to the foot.

“They said that I could get the thing off after a couple of weeks, at least until February.” Charlie was now scratching his ankle trying to pick at his rash “How much money do we have left to pay off for the car?” Charlie inquired; back in November Charlie had gotten into a car accident that occurred in the wooded area leading from their apartment through the park into the city. The incident had occurred in the evening when Charlie was on his way to work, he was in a rush and the road was iced over earlier that morning.

“Look, I didn’t mean to cut that guy off at the turn, but he was the one who was speeding.” Charlie reiterated, it felt like every time that they

brought up the topic, he had to bring up that detail to defend himself. This comment was partially true, even though Charlie had only taken an initial glance and saw a car at the distance, he had already begun to merge but hadn't account for the other driver to try to race past him. When he had already merged into the road and the driver behind him tried to slow down before it hit him, any attempts to do so were ineffective due to the patches of ice that built up on the road causing the car to skid behind him.

He had broken his nose as a result of the incident to the point where the doctors had to set it back in place before it would begin to deform crook permanently. The damage to the car was severe enough to call for replacements for parts such as the transmission to be damaged beyond repair. The repairs were costly but stayed at a tame price underneath 20,000 dollars, unfortunately for them the insurance only covered damage that cost over that amount.

"If I could, I would try to pay your back for the car." Charlie didn't have much money to pay any substantial amount for the repairs, it would have helped if he had his job but unfortunately, he had to quit since commuting by bus was neither convenient nor did it allow him to get to his shift on time. He would have tried to find another job, but he and Lucas had to reschedule their classes from the early morning to around noon since they had to work around the bus schedule which would not arrive near campus until 9:00am. This was also piled up with the fact that they now got out of classes around 6:00pm. Charlie had opted for online classes after two weeks of taking the bus, he grown to dislike it and found no point in further attending in person.

"You don't need to worry about the car, me and dad got that covered. You should be more worried about raising your grades. Got it?" Lucas replied. Their father had set up a payment plan that he and Lucas put money to, at the rate they were going they would have the repairs paid off in two months. Lucas was more concerned about trying to get through the semester without any other problems occurring this month.

"Yeah, I got it." Charlie replied flatly looking a bit down as his eyes dropped slightly contemplating his situation. Lucas then laid back

down on the couch stretching out his body on the couch with his head from one armrest and his feet on another. Sighing, his back was stiff causing discomfort, he pulled out his phone and checked the time reading 8:23am. Reading it he groaned, he was annoyed with the fact that he had to leave for work soon.

"Hey, do we need anything for the apartment?" he asked without bothering to face Charlie. He was pulling up a tab on his phone to type the list.

"We are running out of bleach along with some scrubs for the bathroom." Further racking his brain Charlie tried to pry out other items that they might need.

"Do we need toilet paper?" Lucas said while continuing to type the items he was going to buy.

"I don't know why you don't go check for yourself."

"Because you're closer to the bathroom." He sighed again. "Never mind I will just put it on the list." He said lazily as he typed it down on the list.

"Are you taking the bus?"

"No, I'm having Shawn drive me there and back." Frustratedly replied Lucas reading over the list pocketing his phone rolling to his side. He decided he was going to lay around for a while until his friend came to pick him up. "Speaking of which, I was thinking that Shawn could drive us to a party tonight on campus. It would be good for you to get out."

"I think I'm good. Besides, it's probably going to be late anyway" Charlie was not keen on going anywhere and had found the idea of leaving that late to be problematic.

"Come on, you barely leave the apartment, besides, you can afford to take one night off. We won't be out too late." Reassured Lucas. He was pressing Charlie to go.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't want to press my luck any more than I have lately." Charlie was trying to kill the conversation as quickly as

possible. "I already got lucky that my professor gave me an extension." Charlie further added.

"Look Charlie, we're not going to be gone for that long," reiterated Lucas "-we will get there early, stay around for a while. No longer than thirty minutes I swear." He was trying to gauge what Charlie was thinking by his expression he figured he would ease Charlie into the decision. "You have all day to think about it and you can tell me your answer when I come back."

"Okay, I'll think about it." Answered Charlie unsure of whether he should go or not. He saw Lucas exit the apartment and could hear him pacing down the hall. He paused for a moment debating with himself if he wanted to go at all. Part of him was firm and direct in the opposition to staying at home and just skipping the party but another part of him was digging away at his resolve prying at the depths of his mind. He figured he should push the matter aside and concentrate on his work for the day rather than tear himself apart trying to decide.

But contrary to his choice, the matter had loomed over him throughout the entire day while he was on his computer. It was around five in the afternoon and the anticipation made him feel uneasy, he was still conflicted with himself about the choice and just wanted to go on with his work but still felt it dig at him. He had always been indecisive, which always plagued him when he had to make a choice between minor things such as choosing between shoes, to things such as if he wanted to go to college.

Around seven, Charlie had completed several pages of his presentation and had already turned in various other projects due in other classes. He was in the middle of going through several notes when he received a call from Lucas. The phone in his pocket began ringing, picking it up he answered it.

"Hey Charlie, I'll be home in a couple of minutes, are you going with me?" Lucas' voice was fuzzy from the shoddy reception.

"Well," Muttered Charlie, he began to stutter as he began trying to come up with a reply, "well, I guess I'll come with." he managed to muster he was still at a crossroads with the decision.

"Okay, then you better get dressed before I get back to the apartment." Lucas instructed, there was a slight hum audible in the background. "I'll see you at the apartment." he announced.

"I'll see you soon I guess." Charlie replied with a harsh tone, ending the call, he got off his seat and went to his room to change his clothes. Grabbing his hamper, he brought it over to the side of his bed and dumped it onto it, he had neglected to sort through his laundry earlier that week. Picking out some socks, a pair of jeans, and a shirt, he proceeded to pick up the rest of his clothes piled onto his bed and began placing them back into the hamper. Dropping the clothes into the hamper several began hanging out by the sides of the hamper and began bulging out of it, he had to press his hand digging it deep into the hamper to press down the clothes to fit in the hamper.

Then he went on to change his clothes starting with his shirt, changing it from plain long sleeve black pajamas to a lime green T-Shirt, from his spandex shorts to a pair of jeans, and tugged his socks onto the feet. He then slipped on some sneakers over his socks, but to his discomfort one of his socks was wrinkled and tucked up against his ankle uncomfortably. Ignoring this he went to his closet to pick out a sweater, out of the few sweaters he had he chose a dark blue and white striped jacket, after that he looked around his bed stand to see where he placed his beanie.

He could hear noise at the door as the doorknob jiggled with the door bursting open with Lucas's shouting "Hey Charlie, are you ready to go?! Shawn's waiting downstairs." Charlie could hear him place the bags he had onto the kitchen counter which further urged him to find his beanie as soon as he could. "I'm going to use the bathroom, when I'm done you better be ready."

"I'll be out in a minute I just need to get my hat first!" Charlie responded as he was searching around his room frantically, he heard Lucas finishing his business. After a while he noticed that he left his dockers beanie underneath his desk in between the desk's leg and the wall. As he began to exit his room, he noticed that Lucas was washing his hands in the bathroom through the partially open door. "I'll see

you down there!” Charlie exclaimed, exiting the apartment as he jogged down the hall.

The carpet stamped and dragged beneath his feet as each step propelled him further down the hallway, he then pivoted right to the stair well and began trotting down the stairs. He made sure to do his best to maneuver around the other occupants in the stairwell with most of them coming home from the long workday. Reaching the bottom of the stairs he hits the smooth tile floors as he passes along to the front door, the front desk, and the coffee table in the corner to the right. Stepping into the street panting for air, he glances around the area and spots Shawn sitting in his old car several cars down the street.

Walking to the car as he drew heavy breathes, he steps up to the driver’s seat and knocks on the window. Shawn was on his phone and gave a quick glance and unlocked the car, prying upon the back seat he slides to the seat behind the passenger's seat. As he was seating himself Shawn was still on his phone barely batting a glance at Charlie or saying anything at all for a while. He thought he should try to at least make some small talk to get the stillness out of the way.

“How have you been doing lately?” flatly stated Charlie.

For a moment Shawn was unresponsive, then with a slight pause he craned his head over facing Charlie. “I’m doing good for myself all things considering. Tell me how the house arrests been doing.” Shawn had deflected.

“The house arrests been doing good I guess, but the anklet’s been riding up on my ankle lately and it started giving me a rash.” Pulling up his left pant leg to show Shawn but the man paid no attention to him. “It’s made wearing socks uncomfortable for me which is a problem since I wear mostly long socks.” Charlie continued trying to ignore Shawn’s coldness.

“That’s too bad, I guess. Do you know what’s taking your brother so long? Shawn replied without acknowledging much of what Charlie said. He had seemed to be disinterested in trying to make any conversation with him. He continued to be staring at his phone

carrying out his own business with whatever he was doing. The car’s air conditioning gave a slight warm breeze producing a slight hum as the car warmed up, being the only sound to occupy the car.

After a while of waiting Charlie could see Lucas step out of the apartment building and approach the car, he awkwardly stood in place at the passenger door gesturing at the door. After a moment, he realized the door was unlocked, slouched into the car, and jostled his seatbelt on. “Hey Shawn, do you know that you have a dent in the front?”

“Yeah, the dent’s new, I got it when I was picking up Riley from her band practice.” Shawn replied as he was putting the car in reverse to get out of the two cars. He was struggling to maneuver his car into the road while trying to avoid passing cars.

“I heard that the band is going out of state to regionals are you worried about her going?” Lucas further inquired. By the time that they got out from between the cars Shawn began driving the car down the road as he lined up behind other drivers. At this point Charlie stopped paying attention to Lucas and Shawn talking with the car making sharp turns through the narrow roads and various pauses in the various intersects and stops. Looking out the window he saw the various buildings and cars that they passed reminding him about the daily commute that he and Lucas made previously.

After a while Lucas and Shawn’s conversation shifted from his sister to his girlfriend and other issues he’s been having with his work. Lucas had been friends with Shawn since high school and had not expected for Shawn to end up at the same college as him, unfortunately for Shawn his parents needed his help watch over his father who had various health problems developed from a recent heart attack. Even back in high school Charlie disliked Shawn since his brother would always go out with him and drove around the place during the weekend.

After a while with the two in the front talking about recent events and dismayed Charlie lost in thought they eventually made it to the campus. They drove into the campus grounds, churned throughout the various turns of the building, and turned the corner to the parking

garage. Scaling the parking garage, they spun their way up the garage with a smooth drive up the building. Parking the lights indoor died down as the cold light lit the crowded garage.

Being the last to exit the car Charlie had kept his head down and seemed to be lost in some thoughts as he trailed behind the two friends. Making their way to the stairs their breaths fogged up the air as they made their way down the damp garage. At the bottom of the stairs, they ended up next to the entrance of the parking garage and took a sidewalk into the campus grounds.

Looking around Charlie could only see the pristine buildings that he had grown disenchanted with, the very idea of the opportunities that college offered becoming very distant from his mind as he grew disillusioned with its many promises. He felt as though it were no different from high school, it was just another form of monotony that would consume his many days forcing him to do the same work repeatedly. The wind grew soft with a breeze sliding smoothly across his face being as refreshing as water.

In the distance they could see the dormitories with the main building hold the party at the front of the various dorm buildings. The patio on the second floor bore flags that laid on ropes across the poles placed on the ends of the area with several light bulbs hanging on the cords. There were few people in the area since it was early in the evening with the party still being partially set up inside the building while some people lingered around to grab a seat.

“Do you want to take the stairs or just the fire escape?” Lucas asked Shawn. He wanted to avoid running into most people and found this to be a far more thrilling entrance. They had done this several times before when they weren’t invited to certain events, and they tended to linger around the roof. Making their way to the side of the building where the trash next to the fire exit was located. “Hey Charlie, can you help me lift Shawn to the ladder.”

“Got it.” The two squatted down and raised their forearms up for Shawn to step on, hoisting him up.

Shawn almost reached the lead but felt a little bit.

“I think you guys must throw me.” Shawn said as he stretched his arm as far as he could and failed to even graze the handle. The two then lowered their limbs relaxing their muscles and then lunged forth giving heaving Shawn higher into the air. This time Shawn Managed to grip the handle, he was hanging by his hands and managed to pull his arm onto the handle anchoring it as the two brothers began pulling on his legs. Their combined weight managed to force the ladder down which allowed the three to scale their way to the roof of the building.

Going up the various steps and reaching the roof they made their way to the locked door surrounded by the various AC units. “Is she here or are we going to be waiting for a while?” Lucas asked Shawn as he leaned his back against the entryway. Charlie was already laying on the cold concrete on his phone in the same area where they scaled the building.

“She should be here, she said she’s on her way. This is going to be several minutes. I have some drinks in my bag if you want any.” Shawn pulled his backpack off his back and dug into it pulling several cans of a drink. “Here” Shawn handed a can over to Lucas while keeping his

Creative Nonfiction

Columbus State University Selections

All the Love Under the Sun

by Gianna Cabrera

I think I must be hard to look at the way the Sun is hard to look at. A radiance that might be better in the reflection of the Moon. Not meant to be stared at directly. Never a moment of true connection. Just an idea of who I am waning with my path that you never wish to follow. Meant to be liked not loved. People do not look up at the sky for the Sun. Their eyes search for the Moon in all its beauty. They appreciate the other Stars but never the Sun. It is not their fault. The Sun is simply hard to look at.

Sometimes I still read the messages from Ash. I thought I liked him. I thought he liked me, but he did not know me. At times I wonder if I know me. When I look back at the messages, I see a portrait of myself drawn in his style. It is not really me, and now I sit awake in the middle of the night feeling loneliness so deep I wish it were me.

I could have let him love that girl.

I get dizzy at the thought. He wanted to love me, but I did not want to love him. Not that he would have been hard to love. I just wanted to be loved without giving anything in return. To have somewhere to place my bruised heart to heal. I need not love but care.

This night is one of hundreds just the same. We are in Cate's car. It is the middle of the night. We cannot look at each other without erupting with laughter. It is so sweet I get nauseous at the thought of it ending. I hear the change in her laughter, in her intake of air. I know what comes next. I know that if she leaves, she will be back tomorrow. I know that if she drives home, she will text me when she gets there. It

does not matter. There is a selfish, childish, part of me that fears what will happen when she leaves my sight.

"Stay."

"I have class early in the morning."

"You can just sleep here."

"If I sleep here, I'll just have to drive home in the morning anyway."

"So?"

"Good night."

"Drive safe."

The time after she goes, I am at my lowest. How will she remember to love me if I am not there to prove I am worth it? My phone pings.

Made it home safe love you good night

I breathe. In. Out.

My father is hard to love. He absorbs me like a black hole swallowing up my light. When I loved him, I would lose every part of myself to that.

He thinks I love him because it is what he is owed.

He loves me because he does not know enough of me.

I think he loves me because he has never thought to do anything else.

I hate him because I know too much of him.

I do not know which is worse.

There is no one alive quite like Gabby. To be near her is to feel like you are enough. She is a reminder that I am not a puzzle with some missing piece. I am an oil painting, a beautiful work in progress made

up of thousands of small purposeful brush strokes. I should take a step back and remember to admire artistry.

My grandmother and I are one and the same. She smiles and it is like a window looking to the future. One day the lines in my face will deepen like hers, but I hope my heart will never callous. I hope that I do not give up on love, on the sweet things that flower in soft moments.

I am her reflection, and she is mine. What I hate in me I learn to love through her. What I love in her I look for in me. I look at her life and see a reality I could have lived, and I pray that my fate is not the same.

I worry that Judith and I are too different. That one day she will wake up and realize she hates me. On that hypothetical day when Judith has her epiphany that we are not yin and yang, not a representation of duality, I will curse myself for not finding it in me to change. I could have tried at least to have saved us from this.

On this real day Judith reads my essay, and she tells me, “The Sun is best when it burns bright.”

Land of Sown Salt

By Melanie Miller

“Well. People often belittle the place where they were born. But heaven can be found in the most unlikely corners.”

—Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven.

My Dearest Land,

How are you? It feels like ages since I last had a chance to truly be with you. The adult-world rarely makes room for your appreciation. I’m sorry for not making more time. What have you been up to while my mind was away? My days have been cyclical since summer ended. I did see your autumn leaves, though, and they were beautiful this year. I took longer routes during October and November to slip glances of your foliage through windows. I pined for you the most during those months.

Though I’m no well-traveled woman, from tundra to tropic, I find beauty in all of your many faces. I learned the reason why the coo of mourning doves in the south grows softer on May evenings: They carry their song to your corners, and I am forever envious. Still, I sink into my southern sod while the magnolias and moonlight hang low enough to seep into my skin. The conversations between cicadas and crickets whirl in the sky above me in a symphony of secrets that only I know. If there is a heaven, I’m sure I’ve found it in you.

Forever Yours,

Mel

“I remember thinking: There will never come a time when I will not be thinking of this. And I was right. And I was wrong.”

—Amy Hemple, “Cloudland.” Sing to It.

The Vine That Ate the South

The heat is blazing something fierce, sealing the leather interior to my thighs at the profusion of sweat. The AC taunts me from the front seat, appearing in short bursts against my face as I rest against the back of

Papa's headrest. We are packed tighter than a can of sardines. For the hundredth time, I contort my legs in search of a sort of comfort that makes me smaller, a comfort that's granted to everyone except me. We are northbound on I-185's scenic byway, making our way through a stretch of road with pines that tower on the shoulders for miles in all directions. Aside from the state's iconic red clay deposits in the earth, the only scenery my eyes trail outside the window are those wild, untamable vines.

Some time later, I awake to the clattering of pills against plastic crescendoing before Grandma discovers her phone. I watch as she scrolls through countless posts of restaurants, shops, attractions, and temples. Each video plays out for 40 seconds until it is interrupted by the dramatic swipe of an index finger. One by one, the videos appear and disappear, with a certain exception. The reflection of fruit markets pauses in her eyes.

"Yak gin durian!" she exclaims.

A tell-tale sign of Atlanta is its skyline. Skyscrapers appear from the trees almost instantly, like a sudden materialization from the abundance of nothingness that is the drive. Being some of the highest things in the Georgia sky, they are just low enough to refrain from melting under the southern sun. Airplanes invade the air, maneuvering their way through the obstacles of glass and metal. Every five minutes, another plane takes off with its jets reverberating throughout its surroundings. It goes into the ears and somehow makes its way through the lungs. It doesn't escape altogether, though. The sound rings until it dies down into a tone that is just faint enough to go undetected, like when a coin spins fast enough to levitate after falling to the ground. The sound, like the coin, inches until it becomes a beat away from defying the laws of physics, but not before a hand hits the surface and the next plane takes off. The sound only grows louder as we approach the terminal entrance for check-in.

Everything is set. Grandma and Papa have their passports in hand, a suitcase cart, and a wheelchair to help Grandma get around. We wait in line by the window walls outlooking the airstrip. I take a seat on the ledge of the window and trail the cycle of planes with my eyes. Delta

and Korean Air are stationed at the gates. Air France lands as British Airways makes its departure. A plethora of planes and people come and go in an instant. Over my shoulder, Dad rolls Grandma to the window. The oxygen tube wraps around her ears and hides beneath her charcoal hair before escaping to her cheekbones where they stretch to meet just underneath her nose. Tired. Exhausted. Her features scream a silent sadness to me. Though, her eyes: half-moons and the color of shelled water chestnuts, beam brightly as they follow the invisible paths of the sky. I imagine they envision and bask in the nearness that is her last return home. As dark as they were, they shined the brightest in that moment.

I used to watch documentaries about space. Black holes were always fascinating to me. Specifically, the unsure nature of them. Our current understanding of black holes is that they exude an extreme amount of gravitational pull. Combined with their massiveness, they pull in anything in their vicinity and ultimately devour and warp them out of existence as we know it. Where they go and what happens to them is not exactly known. Light, however, is unable to escape because of the event horizon: the point of no return.

"Excuse me," Papa stops the flight attendant, "we have our paperwork here for her oxygen tank."

With a dubious glare towards Grandma, the flight attendant begins her questioning proposition. "Where is the doctor's note?" "Where are the batteries located?" "How often does she need to use it?" "If she isn't using it now, why is the tube in?" "You didn't bring extra batteries?" "Let me contact my supervisor." "Give me her passport." "Stay here."

Her glare turns fiery, striking Dad and me down. "You two can't be standing next to her. Y'all need to take a seat over there," she rectifies us before walking off with Grandma's passport.

My confusion sets in as fast as the interaction. None of us understand what just took place. I look over at Grandma. Worried. Confused. Met with an interaction in her second language that went a mile a minute, using big and fancy verbiage to further solidify the barrier. Something feels off. I hear Dad and Papa talking about liabilities, permission,

cancellations. As I glanced back at Grandma, a haze began to glaze over her eyes.

“What going on?” Grandma turns to ask me.

“Mailu.²”

After what seems like an eternity, the flight attendant makes her way back to us. After running off with Grandma’s passport to help, she comes back to inform us of the news.

“Ma’am, you are banned from flying with our airline.” It was that quick, as quick as the skyscrapers that appeared from nowhere. The attendant left no room for excuses, no room for blame, no room to digest the news. A year of planning sucked down the drain in less than half an hour. Grandma’s last trip to her homeland, ruined. Her earth-colored eyes begin to well, flooding into the murky mud that lotus flowers emerge from.

“Mai bpen rai,³” She utters, “It’s not the right time; everything happen for a reason.”

Out the back window, the towers disappeared into the pines faster than they had appeared hours prior. I was in the same corner of the car, my knees against the plastic of the door. No one spoke. Maybe we thought that if we didn’t mention it, we would wake up from it all to discover it was a sick dream. So, I sought solace in the silence, a solace that never arrived. Sorrow. Guilt. I don’t know if these words can do justice explaining the helplessness I felt that day, but I felt something in the stillness of the car cabin permeate within me. It was the kind of sorrow that eats at you from the waist up, pitting behind the navel like a peach and working its way up through the back of your throat. A kind of guilt that isn’t yours to bear, and you know it’s not yours, yet, it still strikes a heat behind your eyes and always will.

Kudzu. Native to southeast China and Japan, it is a plant that nourishes. It thrives in the humidity. Upon its arrival to the United States, it was beloved for its sweet blooms, aesthetic, and sturdiness. It served as an ornamental piece to the houses of many Americans. That is until its perseverance began to outweigh the decorative

intentions placed upon it. Unruly. Untamable. Invasive. Its vines entangle the sides of abandoned barns, telephone poles, and the outskirts of Atlanta for miles in search of vengeance. A plant once respected and admired for its persistence, now left to its own devices across the state. Our own event horizon.

“It was getting harder every day to say that this was really living.”

—Michelle Zauner, Crying in H Mart.

Country,

It is with salt soaked eyes that I write of the silent cries and screams that resonate in the night, summoning intermissions between the song of cicadas and crickets. Yet, your echo chamber is impenetrable. You have equipped your greenery of palmettos and shrubs as your shield, dead presidents as your sword. Like the petals of a camellia, you slash and slice your way through us until we collapse all at once. Carmine and chartreuse seep into the earth.

I sink into the southern salt. There is no moon in the sky. I learned that the superintendent gave himself a raise, making \$203,000 per year. On the same day, I walked into the barrenness that was my future classroom. In the distance, perched atop a money tree, sits a mourning dove. Its coo rings on top of cries in the distance as you tend to your crop. If there is a hell, I’m sure I’ve found it in you.

Tepid Regards,

Melanie

My Eyes Were Watching God: An Essay Inspired by Joan Didion's *The White Album*

by K.D. Buckner



Photo by Carrie Mae Weems

“I believe this to be an authentically senseless chain of correspondence, but in the jingle-jangle morning of that summer it made as much sense as anything else did.” - Joan Didion, *The White Album*

In the summer of 2008, I was 5 years old. My parents slept in the room directly attached to mine, in the upper-left hand part of our two-story house. It was an average suburban home complete with four bedrooms, three baths, and a two car garage. Out of all four bedrooms (including mine), the kitchen, living room, dining room, and the stuffy garage, my parent's room was my favorite. Originally designed to be a dual resting space, it evolved into an area where me, my mom, and sister would gather to hash out the problems of our day. Ma would start off by telling us about her day at the hospital, usually entertaining us with some sort of tale about one of her patients, and how all of them seemed to each want the same thing in the end. My sister would follow up by explaining how one of her teachers yelled at a student for being disruptive and then sent them to the office for “insubordination”. I often broke the flow of these conversations by

saying things like “well why didn't you just take the patient home? Obviously he wanted to go home, so why didn't you just take him ?” or “I thought teachers were supposed to be nice? Maybe she should find another job”. My mother never made me feel bad for asking questions. Instead, she'd answer them the best way she could, leaving me with enough curiosity and courage to further structure them in a way that would produce my own response. These conversations, as interesting as they were, were never quite as interesting to me as the mirror dresser that sat against the back wall of the room. Fashioned to be expansive and I often found them placing any and everything on it: bills, credit cards, pictures, a small ceramic jar with my mother's name painted on it, cat-eye sunglasses, loose change, etc. I often found myself standing in front of the dresser, looking at myself in the large rectangular mirror that was placed on top of it. In the corner of the mirror was a small piece of paper with the Lord's Prayer printed on it. My mother made many references to this prayer, but I had never actually seen it. For all I knew, it was something that she had made up because at that age, seeing really was believing and everything that I knew to be true and had regarded as fact was because I had seen it in the physical. Birds nesting in trees, dogs peeing on fire hydrants, and sisters getting annoyed at the fact that their younger sibling knows more than them.

My first introduction to the divine came in the form of a reckoning. As I type this, I'm realizing that this experience is in no way unique to me and only me. Countless others have had their own reckonings with the divine in a way similar to my own. And much like them, my experience has allowed me to glean bits of certainty about who I am, who my family is, and why I was placed on this earth. And still, I only know very little about the movements of the people and things that seemed to be very emblematic of my early years. I know of course that I lived in a two-story house with 4 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, and a 2 car garage. I know that birds nest in trees and dogs (sometimes) pee on fire hydrants. I know that I never shy away from asking a question, no matter how ridiculous or painful it may be. I also know that my parent's bedroom remains a safe space for me and my sister to have conversations with my mom, and just like prayer, writing has helped me to see what it all means.

High School Selections

Bung-Eo-Ppang: Sounding Like Me

by Gene Yoon

I was born in America to a Korean family; my parents immigrated to the states from Korea for educational and employment opportunities. I grew up with two cultures and two languages that I had to acquire to fit in at home and in public places. This story describes my journey creating two voices and learning to love both through stages of shame, confusion, acceptance and finally appreciation.

My first memory of hearing a foreign language, outside the comfort of my home, came when I was three and a half. The smell of chlorine with a whiff of sunscreen cut through the air, while dozens of children with brightly colored floats splashed water and screamed with all their might. I dipped my toes in the sun-heated pool. Two boys swam large strokes toward me. They began to speak, but I could only make out sounds. My breath shortened, my stomach tensed. I furrowed my brows, tilting my head, mouth groping for sound like a fish for air. My eyes darted, scanning the mob of swimmers for Omma, but she was nowhere to be found. As the boys' mouths continued to open, I cocked my head, wondering if somehow water had entered my ears. Abruptly, my mother's soft hand grabbed my shoulder.

"Sorry guys! Dean cannot speak English. We are Korean."

They turned to each other before slouching their shoulders. "Hola, Dean! Mucho gusto!"

They thought they were being helpful.

"Did you hear me, Dean?"

A couple of years later, I stood in the middle of a rounded carpet, surrounded by tens of English-speaking children. The kindergarten teacher wore what looked to be a kind smile.

"You look a little lost," she said with a pitying look, to the laughter of the classroom. All I could do was stare.

At the end of the day, as I shoveled broken crayons and coloring sheets into my bag, I caught sight of my teacher shepherding Omma through the chaos of class dismissal.

She sat silently before the teacher's desk as Mrs. M. spoke reprimanding words and waved her hands at me. I picked out the words "American" and "English." Mouth tight, my mother just clenched her fists.

When we'd returned to the car, Omma cast her eyes down, letting out a sigh.

"If you don't learn English, Dean, you'll be placed in another school," she said in Korean. Then she straightened her posture and her voice rose. "Learn to speak this language, but you will not forget: Being Korean is great. Your heritage is the root of a thriving tree."

Yet, mother's patriotism didn't feel true to me, especially when I had to open my green dinosaur lunch box.

Each morning before I woke for school, she would prepare traditional Korean lunches, like kimbab: pickled vegetables and meat wrapped with seaweed. However, when the umami aroma wafted through the classroom, my peers would cover their noses or pretend to gag.

"Ew, what's that smell?"

While I sat alone, the other children feasted on Lunchables and PB&J sandwiches, giggling. One day, I closed the lunchbox without touching my food. As I came home, stomach rumbling, I placed it on the counter and tried to escape to my room. Omma, feeling its weight, grabbed my shirt.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. I wasn't hungry today..."

"But kimbap is your favorite," she said, crossing her arms.

"Omma, can you pack me Lunchables tomorrow?"

“Why...? They don’t compare to my homemade treasures.”

“You’re right, Omma“

The next morning, I opened my lunchbox to the stench of seaweed and canned fish. Unable to endure another comment, I slung the lunch into the trash, snuggling it beneath layers of waste, hoping no one would notice.

As Christmas break came, I begged my parents to stay home and put up a Christmas tree like my classmates did. Instead, they insisted we travel to Virginia to my grandparents. As we stepped into their house, the smell of ginger and ginseng filled my nostrils. The tables were covered in white and red Hwatu cards, the walls in Korean art and Hangul syllables. My parents nudged me to bow and while my older brother quickly greeted my grandparents, I stood silently.

“An-nyeong, Jin Young.”

My grandparents greeted us, gawking at how much we had grown.

We were ushered to the table loaded with bowls of steaming white rice, a mountain of spicy stir fried pork, and endless vibrant side dishes.

“Jinyoung, Seyoung, hak-gyo eo-ttae?” grandma asking us about school.

“Jae-mi iss-eo-yo. Chin-gu manh-i iss-eo-yo.” Then my brother, shoveling down food, enthusiastically listed his new friends.

“It's going okay,” I said quietly back.

My dad gave me a soft push on my shoulder.

“Han-kuk-mal-hae!” he said, urging that I speak Korean.

“Jinyoung, mow-lah-gu?” my grandma clarified.

“I said that school is going okay.”

The clinking of utensils halted. My face grew red, but still I stayed silent.

As kindergarten came to a close, the banter of the in-crowd was all Power Rangers.

“The best and coolest Super Samurai Power Ranger is the Red one,” I heard Chapman say through lunch chatter.

“No, the Green Power Ranger is the newest and best,” said Maddox.

As I ate the Lunchables Dad had snuck me, I thought about how cool the Pink one was. She was Asian, and her weapon was a fan like the ones my grandparents had given me. But now I wasn’t sure.

“I like the Red one the best. He beat Master Xandred in the last episode!” I blurted.

Chapman smiled at me. “See, even Dean thinks so,” smirking at Maddox.

The next day, as I sat alone on the log fence surrounding the playground, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Chapman stood behind me, oozing cool while holding a red rubber ball.

“Hey Dean, you wanna play kickball with me and Makana?”

“Yeah sure.” I tried to hide my excitement. Following Chapman, I spotted Makana trotting, rolling back his long flowy hair after he’d dusted a horde of guys he was playing tag with. They lapped at his feet, begging for him to slow down.

On the sandy turf, my classmates and I stood, waiting to be picked for teams, and I couldn’t help but be excited to not be last. As the ball rolled towards me, I closed my eyes and felt the rough rubber press against my shoes. As I sprinted to first base, all I could hear was the cheering of my classmates. A warmth filled my insides as I touched second, and then third.

“Nice run, Dean,” Makana said as I caught my breath behind home plate.

Then, on the last day of school, as I packed to go home, a golden envelope stuck out of my folder: an invitation to Makana's birthday party. The tingly warmth in my gut only seemed to rise as I skipped across the hallways.

Yet this bubble of contentment would end days later.

"Jong, the flight Monday is 9 am. We have to leave early," Mom said.

"Okay, okay," my dad said with a mouthful of rice. "I got the morning off."

"Dean, make sure you go to bed early tonight." My mom yelled again. "Dean!"

"Yeah, yeah," I yawned, flicking on the newest Power Rangers episode.

The next morning, as she shook me, my eyes adjusted to the darkness – and the view of a half dozen suitcases in the hallway.

"Dean, time to go."

"I thought it was next week," I yawned. "I'm not going."

"What?" Mom begged. "We're going to be late if you don't get up."

I was fully awake now. "But Makana's party is in a couple days! Why are you doing this to me?"

"Sun," Dad chimed in, hearing the commotion. "The ticket is flexible. I can take care of him if he doesn't want to go."

"I'm not going. I'm staying with Appa."

"Dean, your family in Korea is waiting to meet you. And you'll make new friends."

"Who cares? I have friends here now."

"Okay then. Stay here," she said sarcastically, storming out the room.

As I listened to the muffled sound of my parents arguing behind the door, I crawled back under the sheets and closed my eyes, the warmth

of my new friend's laughter gluing me to the bed. Yet before I could fall back asleep, Mom's crying echoed through the early dawn.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled my backpack over my shoulders. My mom let out a chuckle as I squished myself between the tons of luggage in the back of the car. As the view from my plane seat overlooked the shining lights of Atlanta, the missed chance of hotdogs with Chapman and Makana tortured my mind.

Only days after landing in In-cheon, I stepped out of a car and into the intense humid air of the Korean summer, which flustered my face and arm pits as though I were trapped in a sauna I couldn't exit. I hot-stepped into the alien building, until a brief woosh of AC seeped into my sweaty limbs.

"An-nyeong-ha-se-yo," my mother exclaimed, bowing to the principal as though apologizing for being here, for bringing extra baggage.

"An-nyeong-ha-se-yo. Man-na-seo ban-ga-wo-yo," he greeted back formally.

The echoing of footsteps on the stairs hummed through the warm air. The principal pushed open a screechy screen door, and a burst of chatter seized up as we entered a brightly lit classroom.

A sea of curious faces turned towards me, a confusion in their eyes. In the swarming classroom, each step I took felt like an error. The chatter around me was a chaotic symphony of sound, whose notes were so familiar yet so foreign. These students spoke an unknown dialect. As the teacher introduced me as a new student, I trained my eyes onto the wooden floor.

Once again, in yet another afternoon, I sat alone on the heated turf, watching my classmates play T-ball and soccer, left behind like dirt carried by summer winds. Among the players was Hyun Soo, whose boisterous laughter was echoed by a dozen kids aping him as he scored his third home run in as many tries. I projected my own laughter, straining to get it to reach him through the din, but was only met with a quick flicker of eye contact, as he vaguely acknowledged my existence before looking away.

Day after day, I would return to the rented apartment in Gwangju, my unpacked suitcase sitting in a lonely corner.

“How was class?” my mother would ask.

“It’s fine,” I muttered stomping to my room.

Later that week, as I unenthusiastically shuffled to my English class, the slim figure of my teacher sat stiffly as she monotonously explained our newest project: a poster presentation about our family and identity.

“This project sucks, Mom...” I groaned, absent-mindedly staring at the blank board.

“Dean, stop complaining,” she snapped, stirring a pot of soup. “Your classmates would love to hear about America.”

“Yeah, how much better it is than this place?” I muttered under my breath.

That night, under the direction of my mother, I carelessly drowned pictures of Chapman, Makana, and me in glue, slapping them onto the board.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of the stares of my classmates. I held my breath, all the saliva in my lips evaporating from the heat. I blurted through each of the pictures of my family and friends in America. As I finished, I scuttled back to my seat before my teacher stopped me.

“Jin-young, aren’t you going to take any questions?” she said with her distinct Korean accent.

I gulped before walking back in front of my class.

Eun Keul, a usually quiet kid, shot his hand upwards at me.

“What you and your friends like?” he exclaimed.

“Power Rangers. Our favorite...well my favorite one is...” I paused.

“They like the Red Power Ranger.” I felt disillusioned. Were we really

friends because I’d lied? I wrinkled my nose, shifting my feet uncomfortably.

“We play kickball together sometimes...or, I guess they let me play with them.” Then I smiled. “But it’s really fun”

“Kickball?” He asked curiously.

“Yeah! It’s T-Ball and soccer combined. We could play sometime.” I felt myself smiling even wider. Eun Keul gave me an amused look before the teacher escorted me back to my seat.

The next day, my mom warned she would be extra late because of her classes. So when the bell rang, desperate for protection from the blazing weather, I swung open the gym’s glass doors to the shocking sight of 50 different students jumping rope and playing badminton and volleyball. I ambled to the corner of the gym. Just as I was trying to hide in the bleachers, Eun Keul asked if I wanted to jump rope with him. His friend had left early. Hesitating, I said yes.

“Na-neun neo-boda deo manh-i hal-su-iss-eo,” he declared, challenging me.

“Oh yeah? No way you can jump longer than me!” I shouted back.

“Ready! Go!” Eun Keul exclaimed before I could give a second thought.

Sweaty palms squeezing onto the cheap plastic handles, I snapped the elastic rope off the floor three times, but then lost control, tripping over my own legs. My face burned in embarrassment. I knew he was going to make fun of me. Yet as my eyes met Eun Keul’s, he reached his hand out towards me. Before a second attempt, I heard my name being called by my brother, signaling it was time to go.

“Nae-il ha-ja!” His eyes animated, Eun told me we’d meet tomorrow.

I returned to the gym everyday after school and played almost every game imaginable with Eun Keul. We played badminton and T-ball and soccer and dodgeball in the disorienting heat. And Hyun Gun, Eun’s friend, had a way of grunting as loud as he could when he swung his racket.

“What else America?” Hyun Gun would ask me over a cup of bubble tea at a PC cafe, or while playing ttag-ji, or as we ate instant ramen in the convenience store.

“Well there’s Fourth of July, and Halloween–” It felt good to say whatever came to mind without worrying about losing a friend.

“Halloween?” Eun Keul asked. He had a way that his eyes would widen, shocked by the cultural differences we held.

“Yeah, we would probably get enough candy for days. Imagine all of us having 1,000 ma-lang ka-u candies each.”

Like Eun Keul and Hyun Gun, my own thirst for learning about a new culture was expanding like a scoby in kombucha.

As we walked past our classroom laughing, the squeaking of our rubber sil-nae-hwa shoes slowed as we saw Hyun Soo, hair slicked back like Makana, lacing up his new baseball cleats.

“Jin young, ya-gu gat-i hal-lae? Nae chin-gu-deul mo-du gi-da-li-go iss-eo.” Hyun Soo asked me. Really? I thought. He wants to play baseball with me? My gaze fluttered between my loyal companions and Hyun Soo’s welcoming expressions.

I opened my mouth. Yet before my voice could escape my chapped lips, I had a vision.

Alongside Soo’s squad I ran, laughing the same laugh in which I’d once tried to join. I lined up to bat, friends cheering my name. The ball blazed in.

I missed, my smile disappearing as the leather ball struck the netting of the glove.

“Strike! You’re out!”

Loud groans and snickering erupted from the stands as Soo exclaimed his disgruntlement. Tapping on the padded handle, I discharged a nervous chortle, the same kind that Soo’s friends would echo across the empty fields. Yet, a familiar laughter cut through even the

obnoxious jeers. In the shade, Hyun Gun and Eun Keul pointed at me, holding their stomachs as they howled. I met their laughter with a bright grin, dropping my helmet as I jogged over to them...

“Jin-young?” Soo called, his voice echoing off the walls of the school’s empty stairwell.

“Gwaen-chyanh-a,” I said resolutely, denying his offer. “Ga-ja,” I said to Hyun Gun and Eun Keul, as we slid and leapt down the staircase together.

Every summer until I was twelve, I returned to Korea and reunited with Eun Keul and Hyun Gun. Running across the vibrant streets of Gwangju, our stories mixed over steaming bowls of bibimbap as we laughed until our stomachs were a boiling bowl of spicy sundubu. As we grew, we spent our late nights at street stalls, running through alleys while dodging honking delivery motorcycles.

Yet, in the bustling markets with countless vendors, year after year, I always found that the bung-eo-ppang sparked something in me. Bung-eo-ppang starts as batter and a red bean filling, which is then piped into a folding pan to yield a crispy pastry. It’s become a metaphor of what I’ve discovered about myself. The raw, shapeable dough represents the beginning of my journey, easily conforming to molds around me. As the mold encases the batter and red bean filling, the fusion of both Korean and English identities, after a scorching heat, merges into a harmonious treat. The finished golden pastry symbolizes my appreciation of myself: the harmony of flavors, a harmony within me, a fusion of character that enhances the whole.

As my time with Eun and Hyun ticked down to a close the summer of my seventh grade year, the sweet treat’s taste lingered, marking an experience that would influence the rest of my life.

I yawn, rubbing my eyes. Framed portraits of friends in Korea hang from the wall. Although it’s been three years since our last visit, Omma says I still speak Korean like I never left. My fingers flip the

waxy pages of another picture book. I look up, meeting curious eyes staring back at me.

“Benji, what does this say? Let’s read it together. T-I-G-E-R, what does that say?”

I pause. I watch as Benji’s lips quiver, his words trapped in a labyrinth of two different languages. His eyes dart between the book’s pages and meet my gaze. I turn the next page, continuing to guide him through the tale. His silence speaks loudest to me, resonating with a sense of confusion I’m familiar with. Since first meeting him, I’ve learned his parents worry about his inability to speak English and his pediatrician recommends that he get a screening for Autism because he’s antisocial. As I close the book, an unspoken clarity embraces us both.

“It is going to be okay.”

Operation AA: Academic Attack

by Emmanuela Ejoga

Quickly, my title shifted from the third child and first daughter of the Ejoga home, to now, commander-in-chief.

My mother became my pupil, and I, her tutor.

On a July afternoon of 2022, she inched my room door ajar and suddenly proposed the tutoring arrangements, confessing:

“Emmanuela, can you help me revise my school papers?”

To confirm I heard the correct words, I recall scratching my head: My mother was asking me, a sophomore, for assistance—despite the presence of my two older brothers (ages seventeen and nineteen) downstairs.

She recently enrolled at Capella University to hopefully attain her nursing certificate; however, each graded writing assignment seemed to deepen my mother’s frown. Her situation reflected one I was awfully familiar with.

The year: 2017. My accelerated math grade: 73.

At the time, my mother couldn’t understand the devastating attack the D inflicted upon my mind.

For her this letter was just that, a letter. For me, it was world-warping, redefining, and taunting!

Now that I have a D, who am I?

Am I fated to fail? I ruined my future!!

Of course, my D sucked. Though, despite my perpetuating thoughts as a sixth-grader, the world wasn’t ending. Rather, earning a D pushed me to reflect on what grades represent, such as one’s understanding (or misunderstanding) when solving algebraic expressions and the resolve required to request help for oneself.

My mother, to a lesser degree, was where I previously was, and her courage to ask for help allowed me to initiate Operation AA: Academic Attack. A twofold procedure involving 1) identifying mistakes and 2) using appropriate feedback (such as my mother's professor's comments and rubrics) to correct said mistakes.

Due to growing up in Nigerian schools following broken-English rules, my Nigerian mother's and my perception about "proper" English differed. In her papers, I caught her casually leaving I's and proper nouns uncapitalized, mixing unrelated sentences inside paragraphs, and sharing bold claims without citing supporting sources.

Immediately, it became apparent that a writing war was unavoidable; though, luckily for us, our tutoring deal symbolized a win-win. She received my personalized guidance available 24/7 and I could share my knowledge in researching and constructing APA papers.

Because I lack a desk, my room's queen-sized bed sufficed as our workspace. Seated atop my bed's edge, I balanced her Microsoft Surface Pro on my bent knees. With her beside me, I discussed the ways that complete and fragmented sentences differ, showed her the free online APA citation website I use (Scribbr), and taught her keyboard shortcuts so she could flawlessly copy and paste information into Google Docs or Microsoft Word—using appropriate in-text and parenthetical citations, of course.

Viewing my mother successfully applying the hanging indent or adding sources into Scribbr during our tutoring days, I found, showcased knowledge's transformative power when shared since it unlocks one's awareness of his or her potential. While I admit feeling irritated each time I had to re-explain how to find peer-reviewed journals using Capella's catalog or how to download Google or Word files as PDFs, I understood that my help saved my mother money and time.

Today, I acknowledge our arrangement in inspiring me to assist others. Whether I do so as an Envisions Girl's tutor—where I ironically taught sixth-grade math to Casey during our weekly 7 PM Wednesday Zoom sessions—or among my AP Literature classmates when they ask me to edit their practice free-responses a day before the deadline, I

feel proud sharing my understanding with others. Even now, I can envision my college-self performing Operation AA on my classmates' English 101 analysis essays or last-minute club applications.

Still, another fight obscures my path before I can pursue higher education. Quickly, I fastened my title as commander-in-chief.

It was time for my own academic battle: Senior year.

How I Found Theatre

by Mickie Cerda

Many don't ever give new hobbies a chance. Few people go outside their little bubble of comfort out of the fear of trying new things. For some, this means never finding their true passion until they are forty. For others, it means they never find a hatred for an activity they wouldn't have known of otherwise. None of this was common knowledge to a five-year-old willing to try anything. So I walked into a Drama Kids class with no inhibitions and walked out, sure I would never try theatre again.

The class consisted of two portions. The first portion was a glorified tumbling class where they lined us up and had to do cartwheels, round-offs, and too many rolls. The teachers told us to do rolls to the front, the back, the side, up and down, left and right. I wasn't an athletic kid, but I would always try my hand at something before deeming it impossible. First up was cartwheels. I stood up, prepared my hands as they taught us, and got ready to do my first cartwheel ever. I immediately fell flat on my face. I tried again, and the same thing happened. I rinsed and repeated this process for the entire thirty minutes they had us tumble. By the end, sweat was running down my red puffy cheeks. I stared at the floor as the other kids had fun showing off their skills. I looked at the glossy brown wood we were rolling on and decided theatre was stupid and dumb, and I would never do it again.

Around five years later, I decided to try it again. I was in fifth grade, and Drama Kids had swooped into my school. They were offering free after-school classes, and having completely forgotten about the previous Drama Kids fiasco, I decided to attend. It was so utterly different from anything I'd seen about theatre. I was kind of amazed at how fun it was. There was no rolling around on the floor with a bunch of show-offs. No, it was just acting. I got the hang of things quickly because to act was just to pretend with specific words, which was my favorite part of recess. So I walked around pretending to be a construction worker, a nurse, a lion, and, my favorite, a pirate. I

enjoyed every part of that class. I came every week, excited to do whatever our teacher had next.

When I was doing my first play, I knew I would stay with Drama Kids forever.

Only three years later, I realized I loved theatre, not Drama Kids. I did two plays with them every year, and every year, the plays got worse. The teachers changed, and they became strict and somewhat rude. They would command the room, commanding every choice we made. If we didn't act exactly how they wanted, we would start over. We would start over at least ten times per class. I knew I wanted to continue to act on stage, but not like this. I left in the middle of the year. By then I was in eighth grade, and there was an audition happening for the middle school play. I decided that it wouldn't hurt to try out, and the worst they could say was no. Imagine my surprise when the next day, I saw my name called back for the male lead. I was shocked, to say the least. I tried my best to act as hard as I could during callbacks, and my hard work paid off. I had gotten the lead role of Honza in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. I jumped up and down when I saw that cast list. I was flabbergasted that I was that good of an actor, and excited that I could do theatre outside of Drama Kids. After three months, I performed for the first time on stage. I could feel my heart beating throughout my body, and I thought I was going to die once I got on stage. This was my first real play that the whole class cared about I didn't want to mess it up. I went on stage to say my first line. The feeling I felt was indescribable. In those ten seconds, I realized this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. This stage was my home.

The stage stayed as my place of comfort. I still love going on stage and acting. It's stayed as one of my main passions. There's something magical about the way the lights, the sets, the props, and the actors come together to make a story come to life. If you had told me around ten years ago, that I would aspire to be an actor for the rest of my life, I would have called you crazy. Yet I stand today, a theatre major, anxiously awaiting *Shrek* callbacks. It just goes to show to try everything once, then maybe try it again.

Expository Essay

Columbus State University Selections

The Panopticon of Gender: A New Foucauldian Critique of “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter”

By Sal Fleischer

The Panopticon of Gender: A New Foucauldian Critique of “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter”

By: Sal Fleischer

Clarkesworld Magazine has been in print for seventeen years, and in that time, few stories have spawned greater conversation than that of Isabel Falls’ “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter”. Unfortunately, it gained notoriety for all the wrong reasons. This is a work of speculative science fiction, wherein the United States military has commandeered the concept of gender, creating new identities that can turn people into actual weapons. The narrative follows Barb, a pilot whose gender has been reassigned to “attack helicopter” to make them¹ a more efficient pilot. Alongside them is their gunner Axis, who has also been assigned helicopter. Together, the duo enact missions to cull enemies of the United States. This is a strange, uncomfortable, and complex piece of fiction. Yet the response it received was far from thoughtful critique. Many readers, basing their judgement on a superficial understanding of text, or perhaps reading the title alone, misinterpreted this to be a bigoted attack on transgender individuals. Falls, who is a transgender woman, faced significant harassment as a result. Just ten days after its original publication, Clarkesworld pulled the story at Falls request (St. James). There has been constructive dialogue following this incident. Many have condemned the attack on Falls and reflected on how this incident shows the need to be more responsible when responding to marginalized authors. However, a noticeable gap persists in the conversation. Frustratingly, this gap mirrors the initial issue—a failure to engage with the actual text itself.

“I Sexually Identify as An Attack Helicopter” is not a transphobic work. Rather, it is a mindful commentary on the concept of gender identity, pushing the idea to its illogical extreme to recontextualize and reveal truths about our assumptions of gender. This paper will use Michel Foucault and his progenitors’ model of power, knowledge, and discourse and to show how this story engages with these ideas.

Before delving into the intricacies of the piece, it is important to provide an overview of the major elements. The story takes place at an unknown point in the future. There are many other details that remain similarly unclear. What is known is bleak. The United States government abandoned the Gulf Coast after a series of pathologic, economic, and environmental catastrophes rendered it a lost cause. The “Pear Mesa Budget Committee”, an AI program originally created to manage a credit union, autonomously retrained itself to assume governance. The program can no longer be controlled, and so the United States has declared war against it. The story is told from the perspective of Barb, formerly a woman named as Seo Ji Hee. Barb consented to “tactical-role gender reassignment” (Falls, 1) after joining the military. This procedure purportedly changed their gender to “attack helicopter”. Warfare is a part of their gender expression, just as a woman wears makeup, they enact violence. The story details Barb and their gunner Axis completing their mission to bomb a high school in Pear Mesa territory. The narrative jumps between warfare and reflections from Barb’s past as a woman, their altered behaviors and feelings, and their relationship with Axis, who has begun experiencing gender dysphoria. A phenomenon that should be impossible.

It is within this impossibility that the central tension of this piece lies. From the start, we are presented that the world where one’s gender is entirely based on manipulatable neurology, as Barb tells us, “Generations of scientists mapped the neural wiring that motivated and encoded the gender choice”. In the real world, brain surgery lacks the capability to change one’s gender. However, as readers of science fiction, we are prompted to grapple with ideas that deviate from reality. So, despite being “biologically” female, Barb unequivocally

identifies as “helicopter”. Barb asserts that their gender identity is so absolute that their physical assignment does not even have bearing on their sex: “My body is a component in my mission, subordinate to what I truly am. If I say I am an attack helicopter, then my body, my sex, is too. I’ll prove it to you” (Falls 1). This stance puts analysts in a challenging position. On one hand, it might be interpreted as a gender essentialist worldview, seeing gender as entirely innate and biologically determined. However, it also introduces the notion that gender is malleable, not tied to the body but to the mind—an idea rejected by gender essentialists (Gülgöz 1). The psychology of gender identity is a widely debated and not fully understood topic, extending well beyond the scope of this paper. In fact, this discussion is somewhat irrelevant to the piece at hand, as even though Barb fervently believes otherwise, there is more at play here than neural connections.

To see this, we must examine Foucault’s ideas of discourse and disciplinary powers. Foucault defines discourse as a practice that creates what it claims to describe, it is a pattern of behaviors that are believed so deeply that individuals will repeat them unquestioningly. Related to this idea, Foucault posits that society operates akin to a Panopticon, a circular prison structure featuring a central tower where a guard could potentially observe any prisoner at any given moment, even though the prisoners remain unaware of when they are being surveilled. This pervasive fear of scrutiny leads individuals to internalize these societal norms to such an extent that they begin to self-regulate. In the context of gender, certain beliefs are so ingrained in the dominant cultural notions of femininity and masculinity that individuals autonomously adhere to these ideals without explicit instruction—they inherently impose these expectations on themselves (Parker 271-272). This idea is practically exactly stated in “I Sexually Identify” as Barb describes why they commit acts of violence.

“I kill for the same reason men don’t wear short skirts, the same reason I used to pluck my brows, the reason enby people are supposed to be (unfair and stupid, yes, but still) androgynous with short hair. Are those good reasons to do

something? If you say no, honestly no—can you tell me you break these rules without fear or cost?” (Falls 9)

Because their gender role in society has changed, they have entered a new gender discourse, one that requires them to fill different acts. In the changing of their gender, they now have a new series of roles and acts, a new discourse they must follow.

Despite this, it is intriguing to note that Barb seems much happier in this role than when identified as a woman. However, it is interesting to state that they seem much happier in this role than they were of a woman than when identified as a woman. Here it should be acknowledged that Foucault has faced criticism for his lack of nuance in understanding the diverse experiences of different genders, seeing both men and women being similarly limited in the discourse of gender. We shall turn to Sandra Lee Bartky, who expands on the topic, stating that the discipline imposed on women is both different and more limiting than that of men, creating what she describes as “docile bodies” (Bartky 134). With this in mind, we can see how Barb felt limited as a woman, stating:

“When I was a woman I wanted to be good at woman. I wanted to darken my eyes and strut in heels. I wanted to laugh from my throat when I was pleased, laugh so low that women would shiver in contentment down the block. And at the same time I resented it all. I wanted to be sharper, stronger, a new-made thing, exquisite and formidable. Did I want that because I was taught to hate being a woman? Or because I hated being taught anything at all?” (Falls 9)

Barb wanted to fill the role of woman, that is where we again see the internalized power of discourse in play, though they resented it. Now compare that passage to how they describe being in combat:

“Have you ever been exultant? Have you ever known that you are a triumph? Have you ever felt that it was your whole life’s purpose to do something, and all that you needed to succeed was to be entirely yourself? To be yourself well is the wholest and best feeling that anything has ever felt.” (Falls 11)

It is strange to say, but they have found more freedom and liberation as an “attack helicopter” than they ever did as a woman. This causes me to question what exactly the neural reassignment surgery did, Barb was clearly already dissatisfied with the binary confines of being a woman, was something truly internally changed? Or has the external perception and expectation of them changed, allowing them to be truer to themselves?

Axis further complicates the matter, as a gunner, they underwent the same reassignment surgery. The two work together, Barb describes them as such, “My gunner is my marriage, my pillar, the completion of my gender.” (Falls 2). A helicopter needs two people to operate correctly after all. Thus, their relationship has become another behavior that has been ingrained in the discourse. Barb experiences distress when Axis begins to hesitate. This hesitation is ostensibly what causes their own reflection on their gender. At the end of the story, when the two have a conversation about Axis’s doubt towards their being, Barb cannot understand. They have “never even thought about this before”. Once again, this supports the idea that gender in this story is not an essentialist reality, but rather follows Foucauldian theory on knowledge and power. In the definition of their role, Barb found power, while Axis who underwent the exact same process, fills limited just as Barb did as a woman. Perhaps the final nail in this theory is seen in the final passages of the story, Barb and Axis enter a state of uncomfortable silence, Barb knows that “As an attack helicopter, whose problems are communicated in brief, clear datums, I should ignore Axis. But who was ever only one thing?” (Falls 11).

Perhaps there is no better case for the continuing importance of literary critique in modern society than the aftermath of this story. Though “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter” presents a complex, confusing, and absurd world, a reading of the text while employing a Foucauldian perspective reveals a deep and thoughtful story. A story that asks us to examine ourselves, why we perform the actions we do, and what happens if we break from these. It reveals that perhaps this world is no stranger than our own.

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God is a Woman: The Feminine in Anne Bradstreet's Poetry

By Molly Thomas

Art is not created without the influence of the surrounding culture, and that rings especially true for the many writings of 17th Century New England. This unique time and place gave birth to works eventually iconic to the American experience, such as *A Model of Christian Charity*, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, and *The Tenth Muse*. This last work is most interesting, as it was written by a Puritan woman, Anne Bradstreet. She was the wife of Simon Bradstreet, the last governor of what was the Massachusetts Bay Colony, positioning her as an exemplar of Puritan values. Anne Bradstreet was known as a devoted wife and mother, as a devout Puritan and later as a prolific poet and even proto-feminist by some. Bradstreet's book of poems, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* was famously published without her knowledge by her brother-in-law, sending her verse to national fame. Though her book gained much acclaim, it garnered much criticism too, namely because it was un-Puritan and unfeminine for a woman to write poetry, particularly published work. Bradstreet's intent and morals have been hotly debated since, giving her a reputation either as a pious and devoted wife or as a rebellious feminist.

The binary of Bradstreet that teetered between homemaker and burgeoning female leader reduced her to parts, ones that she attempted to combine through her verse. Her poetry picked apart these aspects of her identity while fusing them to explore how they were otherwise unable to coexist within the culture of Puritan New England. Anne Bradstreet used her womanhood as an artistic device in her poetry to interpret her religious environment. This way of interpreting her work can be best understood using three lenses: historical, feminist, and theological. These frameworks continue to separate and intersect throughout her poetry, making their constant use a necessity in understanding her work. Bradstreet created poetic tension between her womanhood and religious culture, making her poetry a reflection of the struggle to reconcile those two ideas.

The context in which Bradstreet wrote her poetry is integral to understanding the meaning of her work. The culture of New England throughout the 17th century was tied to Puritanism, as many Puritans had sailed over to escape persecution in Europe the century before. This sect of Christianity was the dominant religion and primary governing force for most of Massachusetts. Despite Puritanism having great influence over the surviving writings of the period, it is viewed now as being limiting to women. In the context surrounding Bradstreet's poetry, Puritan culture may be analyzed as being limiting in three ways: physically, spiritually, and socially. It is important to note, however, that when looking at the poetry of Bradstreet, she came from an educated and upper-class background, giving her writing privilege over other female authors of her time whose work may not have survived.

First, Puritanism was physically limiting for women. The physical limitations that Puritanism often had over women is a consequence of the spiritual and social conventions. Foremost, Puritanism limited the spaces in which women were allowed to participate in, even enter. Historically, women had been confined to the domestic sphere: the home and garden, church, and market. Abram van Engen notes the difference between public and private spaces as defined by William Perkins and William Ames, Puritan figureheads (48). This divide was constituted by the number of people present: "The more people present, the more public an event, space, or act becomes" (48). This difference is important to note as it was of great concern for Puritan thinking and dictated the types of spaces a woman was allowed to be present in. Van Engen continues, remarking that "the family and familial duties were considered to be private" (49). Women were famously relegated to caring for the house; thus their personhood being designated to private spaces.

These physical limitations extended even to the female body. During this period there was a limited understanding of health and science, and as Jean Marie Lutes points out, "the first line of defense against disease was prayer" (311). While the understanding of the human body was beginning to expand during the 17th century, the understanding of the female body remained shrouded in religious

rhetoric. Lutes connects that “a doctor could trace almost any illness, from headaches to heart attacks, to a problem with the female reproductive system” (317). This was due to the common belief by many scientists throughout the ages, that the female body, i.e., the womb, was inferior to the male body and caused all illness. This view of the female body, as supported by Puritan doctrine, was physically limiting as the care and resources many women needed were not provided because things were written off as innate inferiority. This view directly influenced the way women as mothers were treated as well, where the physical and the spiritual intersect. Famously, Anne Hutchinson preached outside of the church and was labeled as a religious dissenter, later having a deformed miscarriage child. The idea that the child she had was connected to her sinful nature sprung from this belief and was supported by government officials, John Winthrop saying of Hutchinson’s birth, “as she had vented misshapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters” (113). As Laura Major points out, there was a “vulnerability towards the ‘public’ view and censure of their ill-formed children” (113). This incident would not have gone unnoticed by Bradstreet as critics such as Jean Marie Lutes and others believe that she would have been aware of the controversy. There are lines in many of her poems, particularly her most famous *The Author to Her Book*, in which she mirrors Winthrop’s claim in calling “Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain” (1).

Though there were discernible limitations of the physical spheres women were allowed to occupy, they manifested from spiritual and social conventions. To boil Puritan doctrine down to simple ideals is of course reductive, but Lawrence Stone does so concisely, positing, “Simplicity and anonymity were the rule” (3). As a result of these fundamental beliefs, Carrie Blackstock notes that “Puritanism mandated self-subordination to God” (222), a theme Bradstreet explored in poems such as *Before the Birth of One of Her Children* and *Upon My Son Samuel His Going for England*. The implications of these core beliefs were that people were expected and required to serve God above all else, including any marital ties. To adhere to these standards for living meant that much of the earthly pleasures available, such as dancing, poetry, or sex and love, were

looked on as excessive and un-committed to the pursuit of Godliness. This was limiting to the physical experiences of life, though it was ten-fold for women during this time, as they were expected to serve their husbands and God, often making this expectation paradoxical. In his sermon *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, Samuel Willard asserts that “To do any thing Sinful for this, is too much, and will displease God” (612), meaning that if a wife does not properly support and serve her husband, it should be considered an act against God. To be submissive to her husband is to act in God’s will. However, he continues “God, whom we ought to Reverence more than any Creature whatsoever” (612) meaning that these beliefs put women in a limiting place, as they were urged to serve God, even before their husbands, ultimately disconnecting them from actual relationships.

This disconnect from the physical world was another core facet of Puritanism, as connection to God was the primary consideration of most people. The connection with God was a way to reach Heaven, and many Puritans strove to be a part of “the elect.” One way to do this was to “wean oneself of one’s love for the world, one’s possessions, and even one’s family” (Major 115). This “weaning” from the physical speaks to the belief in simplicity and anonymity, as the only way to truly connect with God in the afterlife was to give up one’s physical comforts in everyday life. This was especially limiting to women because their spaces were relegated to the private and domestic, and to give up one’s family in favor of God would be to give up everything. This is a theme that Bradstreet struggles with in many of her poems, employing the doctrine of Puritan “weaning” to combat her attachment to her life and livelihood.

Finally, and most pervasively, Puritanism was socially limiting to women. As with the physical and religious limitations, both point back to the social structure that Puritanism created for women, that is, the confinement to the private. As noted, Willard asserts that “The Duty of the Wife, as she is Inferiour, is frequently in Scripture called *Submission*” (611). This biblical interpretation directly states that women are the lesser sex and therefore should be submissive to their husbands. This fueled the belief that women were supposed to be confined to the home, only serving their families. Summer Lizer notes

that “This issue was particularly important to Puritan women, whose role in life – fostering family cohesion – made them uniquely concerned with the preservation of family unity” (536). Bradstreet in particular wrote many of her poems about her family and their connection to each other and God. This leads back to the religious limitations that to reach salvation, people had to give up all earthly connections. Within both limitations, there was a denial of the ability of women to work, especially write poetry like Bradstreet, as these acts were directly against the role of the wife and the weaned affections to worldly sensations. It is important to note that many women did work out of necessity, however, and that within the context of Bradstreet’s writing, the idea that women should only work in the home was one for middle- and upper-class households.

The ideal that women should have been confined to the domestic is expanded upon as “an ideological privacy composed of several factors: a lack of visibility, a lack of circulation, a lack of social calling, and a separated space (within the home)” (Van Engen 51). Not only were women expected to stay within domestic spheres, but they were castigated for having ambition towards things other than motherhood. By keeping her writing private, Bradstreet grappled with the expectation for “lack of social calling” while still finding a way to express herself until her book was published without her knowledge. Bradstreet’s book of poetry exploded in popularity throughout the colonies, which went against the other two factors, the “lack of visibility” and “lack of circulation” (51). In accordance with Puritan ideals regarding the simplicity and anonymity of the elect, the publication of any private writing, especially by a woman, would be in direct opposition to the belief that women should be invisible and not circulated. A famous case of negative reaction to a woman’s writing is that of Anne Hopkins and governor John Winthrop’s response to the publication of her book. Winthrop argued in his private journal, “if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way to meddle in things as are proper to men...she had kept her wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God had set her” (1649). Winthrop’s reaction to Hopkins’ book speaks to the larger attitude toward women, in that their place was sanctioned by God and if they

strayed, were then depraved and dishonorable, valuing the subservience to her husband over God. It is to be noted that there was a degree of hypocrisy within these standards, as Bradstreet’s writing was generally regarded with more warmth as hers was published by a male family member without her knowledge. To combat insinuation that Bradstreet may have prioritized writing over domestic work, as Ann Stanford notes, “[the publisher] assures the reader that these poems were not written during hours which should have been devoted to work” (377). These factors made all the difference in the acceptance of these women’s work because Bradstreet was not the perceived example of vanity in publishing and did not neglect her primary and Godly duties as mother and wife.

It is within this cultural and religious context that Bradstreet writes her poetry centered around her womanhood, and more specifically, motherhood. As some may argue, womanhood and motherhood are not necessarily congruent, but during the time in which Bradstreet wrote, ideas on gender were fiercely essentialist. Therefore, Bradstreet’s depictions of her womanhood and motherhood are intrinsically connected by an essence of femaleness. Motherhood within Bradstreet’s poetry manifests in two ways: literal and metaphorical, often with them being connected. Of her poetry, “Domestic *tropes* become household *settings* as actual mothers replace maternal figures” (52) Van Engen notes. Bradstreet directly references her children and her status of mother in many of her poems, most notably “In Reference to Her Children,” one of her most famous works. While externally referencing her children, she uses an extended metaphor of a mother bird and chicks, writing “I had eight birds hatched in one nest” (1). Bradstreet continues this metaphor to lament the birds that “took [their] flight” (9) connecting her to her children through love. She continues “If birds could weep, then would my tears/Let others know what are my fears” (43-4), using the metaphor of a mother bird to express her worries for her children. These lines hark back to the limitations that Puritanism put on mothers when “weaning” life’s affections, as Bradstreet seems to hint at struggling with. This is a theme that comes up repeatedly in many of her poems, though lines 43-44 are especially clear. Bradstreet uses the metaphor of a mother bird to cover her true attachments to her

children, even hinting towards her inability to cry to show others her true feelings for them. This stifled connection that Bradstreet hints towards is an attempt to make sense of the imposed doctrine of Puritanism in a way that is socially acceptable: within the private sphere.

Lizer brings up that historically – and in Bradstreet’s writing – “many Puritans in New England began to develop a controversial set of beliefs that held the family, not the individual, as the unit of salvation” (536). Bradstreet toys with this idea:

And from the top bough take my flight
Into a country beyond sight,
Where old ones instantly grow young,
And there with seraphims set song;
No seasons cold, nor storms they see;
But spring lasts to eternity.
When each of you shall in your nest
Among your young ones take your rest. (77-84)

These lines describe a heavenly afterlife, one that Puritan doctrine touts for the elect, though Bradstreet manipulates the Puritan idea of afterlife by joining herself again with her young ones in Heaven. Although, if Bradstreet had no contention with the ideas of the afterlife, she would not concern her poetry with the idea of reuniting with her beloved children, as individual salvation should have been her main concern.

In continuation with Bradstreet’s concern for familial love and salvation over God, she ends the poem with saying “Farewell, my birds, farewell adieu, /I happy am, if well with you” (95-6). Here Bradstreet is saying that her happiness lies within the contentment and wellbeing of her children, not, even in the face of an approaching death, within personal salvation in Heaven. By employing the literal experience of having children and raising them, Bradstreet explores the ideas that Puritanism established surrounding the import that is placed on earthly familial ties. She continues to explore this theme in “Upon my Son Samuel His Going for England.” Again, this poem makes direct reference to the physical experience of motherhood as

she is referencing her son. Bradstreet’s principal concern of the poem is Samuel’s safety, in which she pleads directly to God to deliver him without harm. This poem is rife with ideological contradictions that Bradstreet attempts to unravel through her dialogue with God. Foremost, Bradstreet relegates her son’s safety to God, saying “He’s mine, but more, O Lord, Thine own” (9). In this way, Bradstreet is not disputing the Puritan idea that people belong more to God than to each other. However, she contradicts her total belief in this idea by continuing “And if Thou shalt spare me a space / That I again may see his face, / Then I shall celebrate Thy praise” (15-7). Though she appears to be giving her son up to the will of God, her praise for his will is contingent upon seeing her son again. Only if God reunites her with her son is he worthy of praise. Again, these lines act as a way for Bradstreet to explore potentially unacceptable ideas while still within the safety of a shrouded domestic verse.

These connections between family and religion are also explored in Bradstreet’s infant elegies, a set of elegiac poems in honor of her deceased grandchildren. There was some controversy surrounding these three poems at the time as Bradstreet referenced Heaven in them. This seemingly aligns with traditional Christian views of death, but as Lizer points out, “Puritan religious teachings emphasized the innate depravity of all people, including newborn babies...Puritan parents could not hope to cleanse their newborns by baptism” (535). Bradstreet seems to question this practice in her infant elegies:

Farewell fair flower that for a space was lent
Then ta’en away unto eternity. (8-9)
Thou with thy Saviour art in endless bliss. (22)
Go pretty babe, go rest with sisters twain;
Among the blest in endless joys remain. (15-6)

By insinuating that her grandchildren will go to heaven, Bradstreet challenges the notion that babies cannot and should not be saved. In her elegy for Elizabeth, the first of her grandchildren to pass, Bradstreet wrestles not only with the Puritan belief of total original sin but God’s justness as well. Bradstreet writes, “But plants new set to be eradicate, / And buds new blown to have so short a date, / Is by His

hand alone that guides nature and fate” (17-9). A common interpretation of these lines is that Bradstreet is comparing the naturalness of plants’ life cycles with the unnaturalness of an infant passing. To read into this interpretation further, she may even be concealing her supposition that God, in doing something like this, is unnatural. As Lizer notes, “God is above nature – he guides both nature and fate – and yet also below. In striking down a child, God’s behavior is apart from the natural, it is monstrous” (538). In her elegy for her grandchild Simon, the last of her grandchildren to pass as infants, Bradstreet keeps up this line of thinking, famously writing “Cropt by th’Almighty’s hand; yet is He good” (8). In her sorrow for the loss of a grandchild – an extension of motherhood – she frames the goodness of God’s will almost as a question. By stating that God is good, Bradstreet adheres to Puritan doctrine, but by framing it as a question, she allows herself the freedom to potentially criticize the will of God. She does this again in the following lines, “With dreadful awe before Him let’s be mute, / Such was His will, but why, let’s not dispute” (9-10). Bradstreet employs double meaning in her choice of words for “dreadful awe,” as they may mean to revere the mighty power of God, or to be disgusted with the cruelty of his actions. Furthermore, she uses “but why” in much the same way as “is He good” in that it is a statement framed as a question. Ann Stanford observes of this line as well, noting “the clause, “but why, let’s not dispute” indicates there could be room for question. Bradstreet is trying to stifle her doubt and grief by a statement of dogma” (387). By weaving in doubt to her verse through her diction, Bradstreet lets her earthly connections via motherhood outweigh the ideologies of Puritanism.

That Bradstreet is bound to her earthly experiences is vital in fully understanding the ways in which she presents womanhood. This ties in that she presents her motherhood literally, as with her verses about her son, and figuratively in a way that likens motherhood to the creation of art. In this way, she is using her skills in the domestic to express the creativity Puritanism often denied women. The clearest example of Bradstreet using her motherhood as a metaphor for creation is in “The Author to Her Book.” From the first line, Bradstreet makes it clear that her poems are a product of her creation, likening

the book to a child by saying “Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain” (1). She refers to her writing as her “rambling brat (in print) should mother call” (9), again, very clearly using motherhood as metaphor to express the creation of art. As Jean Marie Lutes notes, “Her brain is the source of this child, not her uterus, and no masculine creative force” (333), pointing towards the delicate subversion of Puritan expectations of women. By producing something not from her womb – outside of domestic expectations – Bradstreet resists the expectation that women should not use their energy to create art. Lutes continues, arguing that “[her ideas] arise not from the material in her womb reacting to a masculine force but, rather from the material in her mind reacting to her own need for self-expression” (333). By using motherhood as a metaphor for artistic labor, Bradstreet justifies her non-material/non-womb creation.

While these descriptions make clear her metaphor, they are interesting due to the negativity that she expresses of her “child.” By describing her creation as “ill-formed” (1) and “one unfit for light” (10) Bradstreet condemns the poems she risked herself writing. As noted, Bradstreet’s first book of poetry was published without her knowledge, and therefore she had no real agency over what was done with the work or how it was received by others. While she was not the one to publish the work which more easily garnered sympathy, writing at all could be dangerous for women during this time. Bradstreet even mentions that “(all may judge)” (8). Not only does she refer to society judging her creative endeavor, but God as well because her actions would have been seen as un-Puritan. Therefore, it would have been wise for her to condemn her own writing, as Blackstock points out that “Self-denunciation is necessary rather than optional for her act of assertion” (223). Bradstreet’s condemnation of her work as ugly is a form of repentance for her subversion of the religious hierarchy. It is also worth noting the connection between the ugliness of Bradstreet’s un-Godly “child” and the “monstrous” birth of Mary Dyer (Lutes, 337).

Although she reproaches her child, she still finds it to be worthy of care – if not “light.” Her use of metaphor complicates the relationship between her poetic work and her domestic work. By

reproaching her child, she acts in a non-maternal way, subverting the expectations for women to be caretakers. However, by continuing to care for the work, she is reinforcing the Puritan expectations for women to be good mothers. Although it is necessary for Bradstreet to denounce her poetry as poorly written, she still finds it to be a labor of love, adding to her metaphor of motherhood. This is further acknowledged in line 23, directing the child “If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none.” Bradstreet claims full ownership of her work, making a stand against the expectations of marriage and parenthood, while also playing into them, as she ultimately is the sole caretaker of the child. Major points out that “the fatherless poems are illegitimate...the metaphor of motherhood re-legitimizes her in the context of Puritan society” (114). As it was a man’s job to write, without a father to the poem it would not even be considered real art, but, as Major argues, recontextualizing it within the ward of the mother allows for some type of worth (within the confines of society) to be applied to her creations. Bradstreet must embrace traditional roles of womanhood in order to criticize it.

All things considered, Bradstreet was a product of her time, as any writer is. She, however, had the added burden of womanhood to contend with. As Puritan doctrine limited the spaces women could occupy, Bradstreet had to use her poetry discreetly in order to critically engage with her surroundings. Her understanding of her cultural environment was influenced by her womanhood, primarily through her role as a mother, and that is how her poetry is interpreted today. Through her use of her womanhood as a poetic lens, Bradstreet picked apart the ideals of Puritan beliefs that may not have been otherwise safe or as poignant. Bradstreet accomplished much of what she would have denied wanting: a voice for Puritan women and a lasting legacy.

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Honeysuckles Embracing the Thorns: Bronte Sisters' Protofeminism

By Melanie Miller

It is no secret that the Brontë sisters were heavily influenced by their personal lives and surroundings when creating their novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. They draw on inspiration from the imagery of the moors they grew up around in their town of Haworth, England. However, both novels serve as representations of their respective authors as well. Much like Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* is a novel that exudes bravery and liberation. On the other hand, *Wuthering Heights* mimics Emily's secluded and perplexing nature. Simultaneously, both books share an overlapping importance regarding their themes of language and duality. This leaves us questioning what the authors are trying to share with readers. More specifically, why the Brontës put such an emphasis on duality and language in relation to their own experiences leaking onto their books. It is a question that cannot be answered simplistically. One must examine the nuances of not only the Brontës themselves, but the society in which they existed and the relationship with the novels. *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are proto-feminist texts that subvert the patriarchal paradigm by reflecting Charlotte and Emily's contrasting "feminine experiences" using language and duality.

Proto-feminism, as defined by Wikipedia, is "a concept that anticipates modern feminism in eras when the feminist concept as such was still unknown" ("Protofeminism"). In other words, it is a form of feminism enacted before the modern understandings of feminism that are commonly referred to in "waves." Before beginning to understand how this early feminism movement affects literature and audiences, it is imperative to have a base understanding of the feminist concept overall. Kenny notes that feminist criticism must address numerous questions and issues regarding women and femininity. However, the main thing that feminist seek is to reverse the invisibility of women authors and characters throughout literature (Kenny 8). To do this, the Brontë sisters first "set [themselves] free from patriarchal oppression," through their language (Kenny 16). Before a proper analyzation of how feminism appears in their work can be conducted, a look into their lives and childhoods must be inspected.

Emily and Charlotte's themes within their novels overlap so intrinsically that it may appear that one is reading a book by the same author. However, "these two sisters were fundamentally poles apart" (MacCarthy 22). Charlotte was a traveler, a busybody, a "people's person," and Emily was quiet, reserved, a "homebody." The sisters' natures reflect a direct result of their childhoods that forked into two opposite roads. Growing up without a mother, the girls and their siblings were left in the care of their father. However, their father was a "dour, rigid, humourless man, without any understanding of children" (MacCarthy 17). Their father, Mr. Brontë, secluded himself in his room for most of the day to attend to his writing and, ultimately, leaving the Brontë children to amuse and care for themselves and each other. The children are noted as having created fictional realities during this period, literary fantasies by which they would fill the days of their youth. Later, Charlotte would go on to become a schoolteacher at the Roe Head Girls' School where Emily attended as a student. This was Charlotte's one of many instances of travel throughout her life, but only Emily's one of three in her life. After just a few months, Emily was sent home under the diagnosis of "nostalgia" by Charlotte who feared "she would die if she did not go home" (Austin 573).

The nostalgia, commonly known as homesickness, of Emily is seen throughout the Brontë sisters' novels. Most notably, the sisters use language and duality to show a nostalgia for their homes. This coincides with feminism, Kenny quoting Elaine Showalter's claim that "women writers... [are] forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again consciousness of their sex" (9). *Wuthering Heights* shares this sentiment most explicitly through the voice of Catherine, lamenting her wish to be "a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free..." (E. Brontë 180). The Brontës consistently relate girlhood and youth to freedom, much like their own youth. Traversing the opposition of girlhood and adulthood to freedom and entrapment, the sisters implement the use of language and duality to find a middle ground as if to take their freedom into their mature lives. This is seen in not only their literature, but their real lives. Under the male pseudonyms Ellis and Currer Bell, the Brontës implemented duality all around. Kenny notes that "Patriarchal language is consumed by binary logic," placing men as the "the [winners], leaving no space for women" (17). It is through the duality of the Brontës androgynous aliases and language they can create their own space.

Duality appears in both novels, but perhaps is most transparent within *Wuthering Heights* and its "window figure." Much

like its author, *Wuthering Heights* is a secluded story. It takes place in the moors of northern England and follows the story of two families, the Earnshaw and Linton families. Emily places emphasis on the interrelatedness of binaries being represented, contributing to its classification in the British Gothic genre that relies heavily on sublime and liminal spaces and characters. We see doubleness in the names being repeated for other characters, the doubleness of characters being neither good nor evil, and the doubleness of Heathcliff being both a part of Catherine and apart from Catherine. However, the subtleness of windows sparks a larger, more hidden conversation on duality. In just the first chapters of the novel, Mr. Lockwood resides in his room at *Wuthering Heights* and takes notice of a windowsill with names etched in the paint in various styles and diverse variations:

"This writing, however, was nothing but a name repeated in all kinds of characters, large and small—*Catherine Earnshaw*, here and there varied to *Catherine Heathcliff* and then again to *Catherine Linton*. In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw—Heathcliff—Linton, till my eyes closed; but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid spectres—the air swarmed with Catherines..." (E. Brontë 15-16).

The writing of Catherine's name into variations of Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and Linton represent her stages of life where she has transformed. Van Ghent explains that the windowpane is significant in that it symbolizes "the medium, treacherously transparent, separating the 'inside' from the 'outside,' the 'human' from the alien and terrible 'other'" (190-191). The transitions of Catherine show that the window is a transitional object, one where transition can and does occur.

Likewise, *Jane Eyre* has its fair share of duality. Although not as abundant as *Wuthering Heights*, Jane's duality takes its form using many things such as Bertha, Mr. Rochester's wife, as Jane's "shadow self." This claim, I notice, is quite often overused in the literary criticism surrounding Jane. Instead, I perceive that Jane is quite dual herself as "quest beckons her...to head out in search of stimulus and adventure," as well as "romance [inviting] her into the patriarchal home" (Monahan 590). Much like Charlotte, Jane embarks on adventures to fulfill the preconceived notion of "manliness" associated with it while also favoring a life in the home, tending to the people in her life. It is in the events leading up to Jane's running away scene

that readers understand this most. Up to this point, Jane has been the obedient governess of Thornfield Hall, commanding all her duties and tasks laid before her by Mr. Rochester. However, once she finds that Rochester has been hiding his marriage, she obeys him no longer as shown in the dialogue exchanged between the two:

“...I must renounce love and idol, One drear word comprised my intolerable duty—“Depart!” “Jane, you understand what I want of you? Just this promise—‘I will be yours, Mr. Rochester.’” “Mr. Rochester, I will *not* be yours.” Another long silence.” (C. Brontë 283).

After this exchange, Jane departs from Mr. Rochester and becomes what she has always wished to never become: poor. She travels the streets of northern England in search of the meaning to why she has been so unfortunate. Jane’s departure is not only a signal of her masculinity through travel, but Jane eventually finds her family and becomes independent and financially stable. Still, Jane is not entirely masculine, like Catherine is not entirely Earnshaw, Heathcliff, or Linton. Jane craves love and home and searches for Mr. Rochester again. When she finds him, Mr. Rochester has been critically disabled. Jane has, again, taken on both masculine and feminine roles in the presence of Rochester. She is a guide for him as his masculine traits have been lowered but continues to embrace her femininity of nurturing him.

The duality of the stories and lives of the Brontës is not the only way in which they subvert the patriarchal nature of literature. As stated earlier, language has been dominated by the patriarchal stance of binary thinking. To subvert this, the sisters gave a unique tone to the language of their novels. *Wuthering Heights* is written in a more subtle fashion than *Jane Eyre*. Readers of this novel are unaddressed, only hearing and seeing things as they are told to Mr. Lockwood. This, in turn, appeals to the masculine readers that may be reading as Mr. Lockwood as a masculine character affirming the things happening and being told, such as how he recalls Heathcliff to be “relaxed a little in the laconic style of chipping off his pronouns and auxiliary verbs” (E. Brontë 6). Emily knows that she must appeal to men, having been forced to write under a male pseudonym to even be published. However, this is merely a cover. The one who tells the story is Nelly Dean, the all-seeing eye of *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange. Nelly has something that Mr. Lockwood wants, and he cannot have without her: the story. Emily gives Nelly, and women, the traditional male role of storytelling as a sort of subversion of

patriarchy without being too overt as to be caught. Mr. Lockwood is just a medium to make the novel digestible to masculine readers. Nelly makes the sharp remark to Mr. Lockwood that “[he’ll] not want to hear [her] moralizing...[he’ll] judge as well as [she] can, all these things: at least, [he’ll] think [he] will, and that’s the same” (E. Brontë 159). What Nelly is saying is that she and Mr. Lockwood will both take what meaning they want from the story. This meaning may be the same, or vastly different, but will be their own. Through these subtle tactics, Emily is providing a story that will appeal to men enough to reach the ears of women, as Nelly says, “It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles, but the honeysuckles embracing the thorns” (78).

Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, much like herself, is more daring in its tone and language. The novel was originally published with the subtitle “An Autobiography.” This could have led many to suspect the author of *Jane Eyre* to be a woman. Yet, Charlotte’s novel outperformed *Wuthering Heights* during their time. This aside, *Jane Eyre* deliberately speaks to its reader, consistently including the words “Dear reader” throughout the book. Readers experience the growth of Jane’s speech and language development from her childhood through adulthood. Early in the novel, Mr. Rochester notices that “The Lowood constraint still clings to [her] somewhat” (C. Brontë 125). Jane does not feel comfortable speaking everything that is truly on her mind around those that are different than her. The places where Jane does feel comfortable, however, are in the presence of other women, specifically Helen. It is only with Helen and those that she feels an injustice has been committed that Jane’s voice becomes stern:

“...you are good to those who are good to you. It is all I ever desire to be. If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard...” (C. Brontë 53).

With Helen, Jane shares her private, most passionate ideas and thoughts. Charlotte is sharing these thoughts of her own through Jane with women in the medium of a book aimed for women. It resembles a form of diary writing or “girl talk” but differs in that it is presented to the public, as Jane notes “Young ladies have a remarkable way of letting you know that they think...without actually saying the words”

(C. Brontë 205). Charlotte recognizes that these ideas that girls hold innately and share in private will never gain true traction until presented in public. It is through Jane's language that Charlotte can "free" the feminist thoughts and beliefs she holds to the public. Jane and Charlotte Brontë's personal lives, thoughts, and ideas fill the pages of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* in a multitude of ways. Through a closer inspection of their lives, it is revealed that the Brontës spent a significant amount of time by themselves in the company of one another, bouncing off ideas and tending to each other's needs. While Emily is more secluded than the livelier Charlotte, both sisters show feminism in their own ways, ways that oftentimes overlap. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* follows the life of a young governess who grows in her language and shares her feminist ideas with women characters as well as the intended women audience. Emily's *Wuthering Heights* follows the narration of Nelly Dean who is given importance for her ability to share a story with the curious Mr. Lockwood. Both novels involve duality, whether through the "window" symbolism, acting as a portal between the worlds of Catherine's identity, or Jane's masculine and feminine characteristics. This duality is reminiscent of the Brontës' own duality, having published under male pseudonyms to share their message. In a world where, as stated before, "Patriarchal language is consumed by binary logic," the Brontës subvert this paradigm through their use of subtle dualism and language that makes readers question who the novels are intended for. Instead of explicitly coming to the forefront with feminist views, the Brontës display a proto-feminist approach to the novel that suggest "women feel just as men feel" (C. Brontë 99). These sisters did not bend to that of their male literary counterparts. Instead, they brought novels that could appeal just enough to the masses while secretly tucking away bits and pieces of themselves and their feminist views to spark what become the first-wave feminism.

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High School Selections

The Legacy of Korean Picture Brides

by Gene Yoon

Did she simply close
the door of her father's house
and walk away? And
was it a long way
through the tailor shops of Pusan
to the wharf where the boat
waited to take her to an island
whose name she had only recently learned,
on whose shore
a man waited
turning her photograph (Song 8).

In her award-winning 1983 poetry anthology *Picture Bride*, Cathy Song portrays the journey of valiant women from their homes in Korea to the brutal sugar plantations in Hawaii. These women were fearless pioneers who made an impact in the future generations of Korean-Americans. In breaking the boundaries of their traditional, Confucian gender roles, they built the first Korean-American communities, and remain unsung heroes who helped their colonized homelands gain independence from Japan.

In 1903, Hawaii, then the world's main sugar producer, was starved of workers. Originally, the sugar planters hired native Hawaiians on a contract-labor basis to work the sugarcane fields. However, a decline in the indigenous population and their reluctance to work on plantations, combined with a global increase in demand for sugar, caused a labor shortage. The sugar cane lay unharvested, and workers

were overtaxed. Owners turned their attention to labor overseas. The search extended to East Asia and Central America, and with the combined efforts of the Hawaiian government and the plantations, more than 400,000 immigrant workers arrived from 33 different countries. More specifically, between 1876 and 1885, over 50,000 Chinese laborers arrived. Yet, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in Congress in 1882, limiting the number of Chinese allowed to enter, owners transitioned toward Japanese labor. Between 1898 and 1899, 40,000 Japanese arrived. However, employers soon criticized them for being too proud and nationalistic – in contrast to the Chinese, who were stereotyped as patient and docile. Japanese farm hands were said to take offense at workplace injustices and tended to create strikes. In the last six months of 1900 alone, there were 23 strikes involving 7,000 Japanese workers (Patterson 1994).

Looking back today, these strikes appear justified considering plantation working conditions. The cutting of sugar cane was extremely demanding, with the field workers “looking like ghosts during harvest.” Chatting with other workers was prohibited, and peasants would work ten hours a day with only a 30 minute lunch break for a whopping 65 cents per day (Patterson 2000). First-hand accounts attest that even the strongest men would end up crying after continuous tilling under the unrelenting sun.

As relations with Japanese workers worsened, plantation owners and the Hawaiian government began cooperating in an effort to find a different labor cohort. Soon they had reached out to US Diplomat and Minister Horace Allen, who traveled to Korea, holding events that promised potential workers with a better life in America. He succeeded. By 1905, 7500 Koreans, considered by authorities and their employers as far more agreeable, had immigrated to Hawaii (Patterson 1994).

Yet even though the workers had changed, the working environment had not. As new Koreans arrived, although they did not go on strike, they also suffered under harsh conditions. Consequently, many workers turned to outlets such as gambling and drinking (B. Kim 1934; Patterson 2000). Plantation owners grew concerned, and came to believe that wives for these men would settle down their unruliness

and increase productivity. This intervention had been prototyped with the Japanese. Even though it hadn't been too successful, the plantations would try again. But there was still yet another problem. There just weren't enough women. Only one in ten Korean immigrants were female, with the majority of them already married prior to coming to the US (Patterson 2000). So owners and government officials went to the drawing board and came up with a solution. They would arrange picture marriages.

The term picture marriage referred to the process in which a matchmaker would attempt to wed Korean women with Korean men living in Hawaii through the exchange of photographs. If both parties agreed, the groom would pay the appropriate fees for travel, and the "picture bride," as they were called, would voyage to Hawaii and marry at the immigration station. This system was originally created under The Gentlemen's Agreement (1907-1908), a law ratified by the US and Japanese governments (B. Kim 1934; W. Kim 1971; Patterson 2000). Seeing this process as essential for agricultural production, the state of Hawaii, along with plantation owners, posted flyers widely in local newspapers to garner support for the system.

For their part, many Korean women saw a picture marriage as an opportunity to escape from the traditional limitations placed on them. Oppression of women wasn't uncommon in Korea. Women were frequently denied opportunities, forced to be concubines, and pushed into unwanted arranged marriages. Indeed, as one picture bride, Young Oak Chung, told the sociologist Won-Kil Yoon (1994) that she "had never wanted to marry a peasant boy from the other side of the hill, nor tread the same path as other women she had seen. She thought she had been cut out for a better lot than that of a village peasant wife" (Yoon 37). Other picture brides, like Mrs. K. in an interview with Alice Chai (1979), described how "girls in my village can't walk even ten miles outside. Can't go any place, only to Sunday School...It was very unusual, because girls always only were home their whole life before they marry. Never went out, only stayed home-working, sewing, working" (Chai 2). According to Young Oak Chung, some Korean women were even beaten by their husbands and abused by mother-in-laws (Yoon 1994). Indeed, to many picture brides,

Hawaii appeared to be a place in stark contrast to Korea, where they could become the agent of their own lives, living a future of their own choosing.

But even if picture brides found the reason and courage to go overseas, they usually faced resistance from their families. The patriarchal family system abided by Confucian norms, a belief system that had started in Yuan China and came to Korea around 1392. Thus, from parents' Confucian perspectives, their daughters venturing off to a foreign land violated tradition and brought shame upon the family. A picture marriage risked breaking up the family structure, and could even bring on accusations of prostitution. In some cases, families would even threaten to disown their daughters and lock them up to prevent defiance. However, fuelled by the prospects of a better life, some women would escape from confinement, sneaking out to board ships leaving for Hawaii (Pai 1989; Patterson 2000; Yoon 1994). At the height of their immigration, namely in the period between 1910 and 1924, an estimated 1000 picture brides entered Hawaii (W. Kim 1971).

Holding onto their dreams of a better life, these women endured a 14-day sea-sickening voyage to Hawaii without food and water. Upon arrival, however, many brides were met with a shocking reality. Some grooms would send fraudulent pictures taken when they were much younger, or stage photoshoots in nice suits or with cars that weren't their own. According to Yoon, 23-year-old Soo Yun was "so surprised and very disappointed, because my husband sent his 25-year-old handsome looking picture, he came to the pier but I see he's really old, old looking. He was 45 years old, 25 years more old than I am. My heart sunk" (Yoon 41). Mrs. Yoo Song Gi left Korea to become a picture bride at 16 and her husband-to-be was over 75 years old but had claimed to be 40 (Patterson 2000). An owner of an inn where picture couples would spend their first night reported she had seen a countless number of picture brides who did nothing but cry day and night. Escaping this deceit was impossible as men would threaten to deport their prospective brides back to Korea if they did not elope.

But even if their new husband's appearances matched their pictures, when brides moved to the sugar plantations where their husbands

worked, any expectations of a wealthy paradise were crushed. One picture bride would describe their penury, stating that “[their] first stove was a tin can with a hole cut out for the pot and my home was constructed of wooden slate which offered no privacy at night.” Their new homes were “worse than the servant’s quarters” back home (Sunoo 56). Disillusioned and dismayed, many brides had no other choice but to remain married because they could not afford a fare to return to Korea. Moreover, traditional values frowned strongly upon divorce and leaving one’s family or homeland, so the brides knew that their families likely wouldn’t accept them again if they returned. Many girls were very young, and were overwhelmed to be running a household.

Despite abhorrent realities, many women showed resilience by adapting to the environment and taking on new roles. The Korean picture brides not only supported their hard-working husbands at the plantations but also took jobs outside the home, even becoming entrepreneurs. They took jobs such as laundering, cooking, and tailoring, especially as their older husbands were unable to work. As picture bride Park Soon-ha would state, “When I first arrived in Hawaii. . . I had labor in the fields too, I cut my fingers, bled all over the place. I worked in a pineapple plantation. . . My Old Man couldn’t work more than 15 days out of a month. He always had a hacking cough” (Sunoo 127). By working elsewhere, they contributed to the family finances, altering the traditional gender dynamics in Korean marriage. Indeed, these newly defined roles empowered them in new American environment. Mary Lee, who arrived in Hawaii in 1915 as a picture bride, would elaborate “I had never worked a day in my life, and now I was taking in other people’s laundry, working so hard that my hands got swollen and bled” (Sunoo 197). These changes in the power they held is apparent considering what life was like in Korea. Back home, traditional roles were very limiting and restricted their lives to at-home duties. They were prohibited from receiving higher levels of education, which discouraged their dreams of careers – something now available to them in Hawaii.

Picture brides also worked to expand their influence to the social arena, actively serving in Korean churches as teachers, Bible study

leaders, and committee members. As Margaret Pai recalls in her memoir *The Dreams of Two Yi-min* (1989), her mother, Hee Kyung Kwon found the time to start several important church organizations. Pai writes, “she helped form the Methodist Ladies Aid Society... that provided a network of services reaching every Korean family in the community.So dedicated were the Society members that no family went without food or a roof over their heads... All these services were rendered despite the fact that every woman was burdened with heavy responsibilities of her own” (Pai 7).

All this being said, it is important to note that not every bride felt that the system had failed them. Despite widespread deception, many picture brides had happy marriages with children who became successful. They improved their lives not only by working outside the home to contribute to the family finances, but also by attending school to gain educational opportunities. The system gave opportunities for these women to be the first to receive an education. Picture bride Sun-Hee Shinn says, “I finally had the education I had always wanted after all my six children had graduated from high school, had occupations, got married, and raised families of their own. I attended the Benjamin Franklin High School and was the oldest student among the graduating class of ’84” (Sunoo 9).

One situation that expressed the change in gender dynamics best was the Korean nationalist movement in Hawaii. Added to the difficulty of life on the plantations was the dreadful news that the brides’ home country was experiencing atrocities under Japanese rule (1910-1945). Safe from the Japanese colonizers’ reach, Koreans in the US launched a full-scale independence movement and rallied for American aid.

This is an enduring legacy of the picture brides: Their work for Korean liberation. Indeed, many Korean women had come to Hawaii specifically to escape from the brutality of Japanese imperialism. Some, unfortunately, even had first-hand experience. Picture bride-led organizations such as the Yongnam Puin Hoe (Youngnam Wives Society) organized nationalist activities, inviting visitors from Korea to speak at their meetings (Patterson 2000). The Young Nam Buin Hoe, in fully supporting the Korean Liberation cause, made plans to go back to Korea to participate in the movement. After realizing the

daunting logistical task of making this goal a reality, including coming up with funds to pay for their passage to Korea by boat, they elected to pay for one representative, Margaret Pai's mother, Hee Kyung Kwon, to go to Korea. Kwon, with her undeterred patriotism to "do what we can to help," would eventually be captured by the Japanese and jailed in her motherland. .

According to Yang (1984), taking inspiration from the Koreans at home who fearlessly risked their lives during the March 1, 1919 movement, picture brides in Hawaii held a similar peace march that same month. Wearing Hanbok, the traditional Korean dress, the women marched in Honolulu, singing Korean patriotic songs. After the march, brides from the Hawaiian islands met in Honolulu to establish the Korean Women's Relief Society. These women, through charity work and fundraising, raised money by going door to door, selling copies of the Declaration of Korean Independence manifesto, signed by patriots in Korea during the March 1 Movement. They also cooked and sold homemade Korean food items. Overall, they were able to raise an impressive total of about \$200,000. With this money, they helped families whose members were killed or injured in the March 1 Movement (L. Kim 2003). This organization's nationalistic movement redefined and expanded the scope of Korean independence, going beyond Hawaii to reach Korea, China, Washington DC, China, and Manchuria. Emphasizing unity and humanity as its central aim, the Korean Women's Relief Society espoused a greater, universal purpose: peace and harmony.

While the lives of many picture brides were challenging, their arrival between 1910 and 1924 was an important milestone for the Korean community in Hawaii and in America. Among their many contributions, picture brides helped bring gender parity to their communities. As a result, by the 1920s, Koreans in Hawaii were no longer dominated by bachelors. Also by 1920, 54% of the Koreans in Hawaii were American citizens born in the United States (Moon 1976). This trend helped Koreans adopt American values faster than other immigrant groups. If the Koreans in Hawaii had remained mostly bachelors, no significant second generation would have been possible, and the community would have been dominated by the values of older

traditions. By challenging the traditional and Confucius roles placed on them, picture brides ultimately had influence beyond their personal spheres and into the collective.

Unfortunately, the stories of Korean picture brides had remained in oral narratives for a long time until the bilingual second generation of Koreans recorded their history. Additionally, many picture brides were uneducated and did not possess English language proficiency (J. Kim 2020). While male leaders occupied the most visible and prominent positions in the Korean Independence Movement, the achievements and contribution picture brides made had been invisible. A close examination of these women's participation, both at the leadership and grassroots levels, not only reveals their accomplishments but also alters our understanding of Korean-American nationalism.

Although many picture brides lived unthinkable hardships, their arrival in the early 1900s serves as an important benchmark on the Korean frontier in America. Fearlessly responding to deception, hardship, and brutal imperialism on their homeland, the women responded resiliently, transforming their lives into one of prosperity and high esteem. Picture brides joined together to create a force for good when it seemed that their own lives weren't the best. Despite the many obstacles they faced, the picture brides became a model for what it meant to be Korean in America. Their dreams for wealth might not have been realized, but their humanitarian and patriotic efforts transcended America and helped people around the world. They crossed many previously unattainable boundaries as they made history for Korean women. Pioneers, they forged new paths and lifestyles for themselves away from the comfort of their homes by challenging the traditional expectations placed on them.

At the end of her novel following the lives of three picture brides, recently translated into English, author Lee Geum-Yi's *Picture Brides* symbolizes the brave and resilient nature of these women as waves. Pearl, a daughter of the picture bride Willow, renders a beautiful description of their journey. "Waves continued across the wide-spread sea," she says, "breaking relentlessly against the shore. The waves never pause, even though they know they will break. I will live

like that. Like a wave, I will collide with the world with my whole being. I can do it knowing I will always have a home, and my mother,... to encircle me in their embrace” (Lee 301).

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China's Guanxi Culture and its Influence to a Global Superpower Status

By Daniel Troy

As the world transitions to green energy, China's trade with Africa presents an opportunity to control Africa's natural resources in order to fuel China's emerging EV industry. However, China's economic imperialism in the past few years is not just limited to Africa. Ever since Deng Xioping's gradualism and pragmatic reforms (Adullahi and Phiri, 2018), China has changed from a backwards agrarian society to an influential superpower expected to remain the world's leading trading empire until 2050 (Li, 2012). Through this, China has developed a special relationship with numerous developing countries, such as Pakistan, South Africa, and Bolivia, made possible with the Chinese concept guanxi, positioning China as the world's leading superpower and increasing competition with the U.S. over economic influence around the globe. By becoming so, China's influx of profit from raw materials and trade openness will give China a newfound power to re-calibrate its income inequalities and expand the size of its middle class. Ultimately, China's trade and aid to numerous emerging economies will benefit its export-driven economy while efficiently competing against America, and enlarge its internal economic prosperity by guanxi growth.

To first evaluate China's upcoming role on both the world stage and impact on its internal politics, we must first define the terms "superpower" and "guanxi". Abdullahi and Phiri (2018) argue that while there is no one definition of a superpower, a superpower should "command vast economic potential and influence and...present a universal ideology" (p.134). In the past few years, China has certainly fit into each category defining a superpower; their investments in emerging countries epitomize its economic potential and influence, while China's shift toward a socialist market and the second-largest, export-driven economy in the world (Abdullahi and Phiri, 2018) has allowed it to strategically differ from the U.S. when it comes to its ideological concepts of trade and business.

Meanwhile, the term *guanxi* is referred to “a Chinese social concept based on the exchange of favors” (“*Guanxi*,” n.d.). “*Guanxi* growth” is the growth of the Chinese economy due to its mutually beneficial trade relationships. This is particularly important because unlike America’s stained relationships with potential trade partners, China’s aid to numerous countries is rooted in a reciprocal relationship that is completely dissociated from interventionism that shrouds America’s reputation. China’s aid to developing countries through *guanxi* comes with benefits, such as trade openness to China, giving China an upper hand as a rising superpower in the global hegemony.

As China invests more into green energy, its interdependence on the trade of emerging nations increases. China is aware of this, and has been closely monitoring their *guanxi* relationship with these nations. According to Condon, China has officiated that their investments and trade with African nations revolves around China respecting Africa’s political and sovereign integrity, ensuring that China is abiding by their *Guanxi* agreement. And unlike its Western counterparts, China assures that the countries they invest in will not experience any intervention in their internal politics. Ultimately, most of these investments towards emerging countries revolve around infrastructure, and in return, and as a superpower, China expects that these countries will allow China to import their natural resources from Africa. “Chinese Aid, like its investment in Africa, are designed primarily to secure commodity and mineral resource assets. A large proportion of it goes to infrastructure rehabilitation and development of new ones” (Ajakaiye, 2006, p. 11). China’s cobalt trade with the Democratic Republic of the Congo presents a clear example of China’s *guanxi* trade strategy. Back in 2008, China and the DRC signed a deal that in return for China’s investments in the DRC’s infrastructure, such as roads and hospitals, China would gain a 68% stake in Sicomin, a prominent DRC cobalt mining company. This would ultimately lead to over 90% of DRC’s cobalt exports going to China (Rolley, 2023), making DRC the perfect example of China’s *guanxi* relationship with emerging countries. In fact, Figure 1 shows the preceding trade relations between Africa and China from 1996 to 2013:

While this graph only shows trade relations between Africa and China, this process is repeated around the globe, where China imports natural resources needed for green energy from emerging nations. From this, the rise in imports and the explosion of investment towards green energy from China could create a major shift in the global hegemony, where the U.S. will no longer be competing with, but rather catching up to China’s reciprocal relationship with Africa.

Ultimately, China’s *guanxi* trade towards the green energy market with emerging economies may correlate to higher standards of living for Chinese citizens. In their study, Cerdeiro and Komaromi (2017) find that “countries with higher trade openness (exports plus imports as a share of GDP) tend to have higher living standards and lower income inequality” (p. 2). Currently, the majority of China’s poverty resides in rural areas. However, the influx of goods from the green energy trade may create job opportunities for the impoverished rural Chinese. For example, the importation of cobalt and copper could incentivize major battery companies to create more battery factories. Ultimately, this increased opportunity for labor may change the class development of China, as it encourages the rural population to move towards cities, further accelerating urbanization in China. Meanwhile, the decreasing rural population may bring new possibilities towards the modernization of agriculture, as the need for machinery is recognized since the human workforce dwindles. In all, China becoming a superpower will result in a tremendous change to their class structure, making them an economic sustainable powerhouse.

Although China seems to be on the verge of being a superpower, many argue that it may never be a leading superpower, as its economic growth may not be sustainable. It could be said that becoming a superpower is not just about achieving short term economic growth, but rather long term sustainability. Since 1978, China’s GDP grew by an average of over 9% a year, making China one of the most rapidly developing nations in the world, becoming a trading empire that even has a comparative advantage over America in many industries. In fact, China has been catching up to the U.S. in developed industries as well, such as semiconductors.

However, experts are skeptical whether or not China will be able to maintain this in the future, because much of this avenue of growth is being threatened from the result of America's trade war against China. In October 2023, a sanction against China that would loosen China's grip on the semiconductor industry was signed by the Biden Administration, while his predecessor imposed tariffs on Chinese imports in an attempt to lower trade deficit. Although this would indefinitely slow down the Chinese economy, it won't prevent China's inevitable rise as a leading superpower. This is because even though America is trying to stray away from overdependence on Chinese trade, it is America is still heavily reliant on Chinese trade, while Beijing is willing to invest more into the high tech industry that was stifled by America's sanction. Not only that, but China has been able to make more trade partners, such BRICS, which will likely mark a shift away from relying solely on American trade for economic growth. A world led by China, then, would create a shift from a Western trade model to an economy centralized by China.

According to Drezner (2021), "In theory, superpowers should possess a range of foreign policy tools: military might, cultural cachet, diplomatic persuasion, technological prowess, economic aid, and so on" (p.142). Currently, China's pathway to being a leading superpower checks off all these categories, as its guanxi trade relationship with emerging countries makes them able to strategically utilize its resources in the international market, while the internal growth of the middle class would make China a lot more prosperous. And although many critics argue that China will never be a leading superpower because of intervention from the U.S., it is important to note that China's ever expanding list of trade partners will make it impossible for the United States to enforce trade. Rather than anticipating how China might not become a superpower, perhaps it is more effective to wonder what the world would look like if China continued its path of rapid expansion.

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Lessons Learned: The Tuskegee Syphilis Study

by S. Maysa Johnson

Darwinism and Social Darwinism are terms that are incorrectly used to explain the so-called “degenerative evolutionary process” of African Americans and was the faulty reasoning behind why African Americans were prone to “disease, vice, and crime”(Brandt 1). In addition, some southern medical journals echoed the sentiments of “blacks” being more prone to venereal diseases due to their “lust and immorality” (Brandt 2). These erroneous assumptions of African Americans contributed to the formation of the controversial “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male,” which was conducted by the Public Health Service (PHS) from 1932 to 1972. Initially created to last six months, this 40-year long study took place in Macon County, Alabama, with a majority of patients who were poor, black, uneducated sharecroppers. The group was composed of 399 syphilitic men and 201 men with no symptoms of syphilis, who were told that they were being treated for “bad blood,” which contains a myriad of meanings such as syphilis, fatigue, and ailments (CDC). Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD), without treatment it can spread to organs, the brain, and the nervous system, eventually causing death. Some may ask, what was the controversy?

The African American men who participated in the study, did so under the pretense of receiving free medical care and burial insurance; however, the men did not receive informed consent of the experiment. The main purpose of informed consent is to provide information to patients about the risks, benefits, and intentions of medical trials in order to ensure that the entire process was voluntary. Moreover, Tuskegee University states that scientists did not provide informed consent because they believed that “few people outside of the scientific community could comprehend the complexities of research” in the experiment. This flawed excuse provided by the scientists displays the paternalistic mindset they had. By not providing informed consent to patients, it also creates a higher ethical and legal complication.

In addition, when the Tuskegee Study began there was no medically accepted treatment for syphilis. However, in 1947 penicillin became

the recommended treatment. Rather than provide the syphilitic-patients penicillin, the Public Health Service researchers were able to persuade local physicians into continuing the experiment and gave the men placebos such as mineral supplements and aspirin (Nix para. 3). Moreover, by 1969 it was suspected around 100 men had died due to syphilis. Regardless, the experiment still continued despite these deaths. In a letter from one of the monitoring doctors of the Tuskegee Study, Dr. Wenger wrote to Dr. Vonderlehr, stating that if “the colored population” knew of the exchange of “free hospital care means a postmortem, every darkey will leave Macon County” (Wenger 84). This quote from Dr. Wenger speaks volumes to the way African Americans were viewed and treated, which was that they were dehumanized, seen as not worthy and intelligent enough to understand informed consent. The underpinning of these attitudes were racist beliefs towards the marginalized sharecroppers.

It was not until the mid 1960s when the Public Health Services venereal diseases investigator, Peter Buxtun, uncovered the horrors of the Tuskegee Study. Buxtun informed his supervisors and subsequently, there was a committee formed to review the study. Sadly, the committee decided to continue the study despite the unethical qualities and planned on “tracking the participants until all had died, autopsies were performed and the project data could be analyzed” (Nix para. 5). Buxtun proceeded to reveal the truth to the Associated Press, becoming a whistleblower, leading to public outcry, and the end of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

On May 16, 1997, then-President Bill Clinton issued a formal apology to the eight surviving victims of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Not only did the study affect the lives of hundreds of African American men, but the lives of many spouses and children as well. While the story of Tuskegee is a sad and cautionary tale, it provides invaluable ethical lessons to the medical community in conducting future medical trials. After the study, the participants received around a ten million dollar settlement, the formation of new regulations to protect the participants in human trials, and the establishment of Tuskegee University’s National Center for Bioethics and Research and Health Care. While the result of Tuskegee’s Study had several lessons learned,

it also resulted in the persistent distrust of African Americans towards the medical profession.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study was a 40-year long experiment designed to monitor the effects of syphilis. The subjects chosen were poor, black, marginalized men with little or no formal education. This study is a cautionary tale of how medical studies should not be conducted. Among the lessons learned: one must learn from history. There needs to be an understanding of how the Tuskegee Study affected hundreds of lives. Without learning from these lessons, history is doomed to repeat itself. Another lesson learned is that informed consent is a necessity. Racism and paternalism led the researchers to treat their subjects with total disregard. Furthermore, before such experiments are conducted in the future, the researchers should think through the consequences of their actions. This study serves as a point in history that medical trials affecting a marginalized group must not be repeated.

Screenwriting

Columbus State University Selections

Change My Mind

by Starr McCrory

INTRO. INT - SEAFOOD RESTAURANT

Midday. The restaurant is busy but not crowded. AJANI, a black college student with shoulder length locs in his early 20s, is dressed in casual but nice clothes, staring disdainfully at the man across from him. His DATE is dressed in a tasteless button up that's fully buttoned. He is messily eating crab legs, speaking to Ajani between slurping bites.

Ajani keeps glancing at his phone then suddenly grabs it.

AJANI

Oh, my friend wants me to call him. It's an emergency. I'll be right back?

DATE

(mouth full)

Oh, ok. I'll go to the bathroom while you're on the phone.

AJANI

Perfect! I'm just gonna step outside real quick.

Ajani forces a smile as he watches his date walk away. As soon as he rounds the corner to the bathroom, Ajani frantically waves over the amused WAITRESS who had been watching the entire interaction. He put his card in her hand as soon as she gets to the table.

AJANI (CONT'D)

I'm paying for everything but please be fast. I can't do this.

WAITRESS

Of course! I was wondering how long this one would last. Almost made a bet with the chef.

AJANI

(exasperated but smiling) Laugh at my pain later and swipe the card, please. Before I complain to your manager.

WAITRESS

(laughs) You would never.

The waitress walks away and Ajani anxiously looks from the bathroom to the waitress station. He stands up as soon as she starts making her way back. He meets her halfway and takes the card with a muttered thanks then rushes out of the restaurant. Ajani looks both ways then takes off running.

INT - APARTMENT COMPLEX

A few minutes later, an out-of-breath Ajani enters a apartment complex. The complex is seven stories tall and slightly run-down but in decent condition. Ajani rushes to the elevator across the small lobby.

He presses the button multiple times until the doors open then gets inside and presses the 'close door' button until it slides shut. Once inside, Ajani falls to the floor and lays down as he tries to catch his breath, arm thrown over his face. Too busy trying to catch his breath, Ajani doesn't notice that the doors have opened until he hears NIKO, an early 20s dark skin black man with neck-length, 3c, mint green hair and dressed in a tank top and sweatpants, cough above him.

Ajani jumps to his feet, nearly hitting his head on the railing, as an amused Niko enters the elevator. Ajani hangs his head in embarrassment, peeking at the elevator number that reads 3. The duo

ride up two more floors in silence before the doors ding and slide open to the fifth floor.

Ajani attempts to rush out but Niko grabs his wrist. Ajani looks over his shoulder and is met by a soft smile from Niko.

NIKO

Hey.

AJANI

(rushed)

I was tired!

Niko's smile turns into confusion.

AJANI (CONT'D)

I- earlier, when I was laying on the floor. It's because I was tired. I don't want you to think I'm just some weirdo who like to lay on elevator floors because that's gross even though I was...doing...that. But I'm not! I was tired cause I ran away from the seafood place a few minutes away while my date was in the bathroom and- wow, I sound like a bad person.

Niko remains silent, his facial expressions giving away his thoughts as they go from confused to understanding to amused. Ajani clenches the fist of the arm not being held by Niko, licking his lips as he hurries to correct himself.

AJANI (CONT'D)

My friends keep setting me up on these blind dates and this dude was just so boring and not my type...

Ajani facepalms, cringing at himself.

AJANI (CONT'D)

I'm just- I'm gonna stop talking. Uh, hello to you, too. Bye!

Ajani pulls his arm out of Niko's grasp and runs down the hallway. He stops in front of the door labeled '247' and knocks hard on the door until it opens. A bewildered JAMIE (black, m, early 20s) stands on the other side, wearing pajamas and holding a half-eaten slice of pizza.

JAMIE

Ajani?

Ajani pushes past without a greeting and Jamie shuts the door.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(mutters) Come in, I guess.

Ajani storms into the modern yet simply decorated living room where THEO (black, m, early 20s) sits on the couch with a slice of pizza in hand, also wearing pajamas. Ajani flops onto the couch next to Theo and snatches the pizza out of his hand.

Hey!

THEO

Theo looks back at Jamie who shrugs, coming to sit on the arm of the small couch. Theo reaches for another slice.

THEO (CONT'D)

Well, then. What brings you barging into our apartment, our dearest Ajani?

JAMIE

Aren't you supposed to be on a date?

THEO

Yeah, why are you here?

Ajani glares at his friends, his mouth full of pizza.

AJANI

You guys suck.

Theo grimaces and Jamie scolds him for talking with his mouth full. Ajani swallows the pizza, then leans forward to set his slice back into the open box on the coffee table.

AJANI (CONT'D)

You guys suck at setting up dates. I'm done.

JAMIE

Done?

AJANI

Yes, done. I'm done with your stupid blind dates. I'm swearing off all dates and I've accepted that I'm dying alone.

Ajani slumps back on the couch with crossed arms and a pout.

AJANI (CONT'D)

I just won't ever find love.

Theo and Jamie lock eyes. Theo rolls his eyes, also setting his pizza down.

THEO

You're being dramatic. What was so bad about this one?

Ajani narrows his eyes, slowly standing to his feet with clenched teeth. He moves to stand in front of the couple who slightly shrink back under his seething glare.

AJANI

(gesturing wildly)

I have every right to be dramatic! Call the guys over because I will say this and I will say this once! That guy was so boring! He was a sloppy eater, uninteresting and-

CUT TO:

INT - APARTMENT

AJANI

-and he dresses like a guy whose mom still picks his clothes!

Ajani breathes heavily at the end of his exclamation, and there are two more people sitting on the sofa with Jamie and Theo. HAZE, a black, early 20s college student with an afro, sits with his arm around his boyfriend SIMON. Simon, also a black, early 20s college student, is watching Ajani with a sceptic gaze. Ajani looks around, awaiting a response, and is met with silence.

AJANI (CONT'D)

Well?

SIMON

You're seriously swearing off all men because of a bad date?

JAMIE

(cautiously)

Sounds a bit extreme, doesn't it?

AJANI

It was not one bad date. ALL of them sucked. Every last one that you tasteless people set up has failed! How did you even get with each other?? You know what, no, don't answer that. I'm sick of it!

Another ten second stretch of silence.

HAZE

I don't think you'll last a week.

Haze remains straight-faced as Ajani turns a venomous glare on him, teeth clenched and bared.

AJANI

No. More. Dates. Got it?

Everyone nods, most of them appearing mildly scared for their lives. Simon slaps a hand over Haze's mouth when he opens it, nodding quickly.

SIMON

Yeah, we got it.

AJANI

(huffs) Good.

He reclaims his spot on the couch between Theo and Simon, laying across their laps. Simon grimaces, hands hovering above Ajani's legs.

SIMON

How come I always get the legs? I don't want your bare feet near me.

AJANI

'Cause Theo always tickles them when I put them on his lap.

HAZE

Weird.

THEO

(smug)

They're not in my lap, are they?

He plays with Ajani's hair and Ajani hums, closing his eyes.

THEO (CONT'D)

Now, can we all just relax and watch a movie to distract Aja from his hopeless love li- ow! Hey, stop biting my leg!

Everyone laughs as Theo pushes Ajani's head. Ajani releases him and grumbles.

AJANI

My love life is not hopeless, and it's not like you idiots have been of any help.

JAMIE

Well, maybe-

AJANI

No. No more blind dates. No more dates period. I'm swearing off men.

HAZE

(disbelieving) All men?

AJANI

All of them. I don't need a man. I am more than happy with me, myself, and I.

Ajani smiles to himself, though it falters for a moment with a twinge of doubt. He shakes his head slightly, then looks to the tv as Jamie puts on a movie.

EXT - COLLEGE CAMPUS

Day. Sunny with thin clouds. Outdoor cafeteria area. Two weeks have passed. Ajani and friends sit at a picnic table outside of the college cafeteria with a variety of food.

Ajani pushes around his salad, deep in thought.

HAZE

So, how's the whole swearing off all men thing going?

Ajani glares at him, setting down his fork and grabbing a bag of chips from the middle of the table. He opens it and shoves a few chips in his mouth before answering.

AJANI

It was going fine.

Jamie tilts his head as he takes a swig of his drink.

JAMIE

Was? Why was?

Ajani turns to him and pauses when he sees the way Jamie and Theo are sitting. Theo eats with one hand, his other arm around Jamie's shoulders. A scowl flashes across Ajani's face before he catches himself and shakes his head then sighs.

AJANI

Well, the first two weeks were fine. I had no stress thinking about stupid dates, and even took myself on a couple. It was great!

JAMIE

But?

AJANI

(deflated)

But then Tyler proposed to Amy during class today and killed my mood. Of all places, a dance studio? During class? Really? And we're college students for God's sake, who gets married at this age?

Haze opens his mouth as if to answer the question but stops when Ajani turns another, sulky, glare on him.

AJANI (CONT'D)

I was doing just fine, then the universe decided it hates me.

Again.

Jamie frowns, contemplating. His face lights up.

JAMIE

Oh! I met this transfer student yester-

AJANI

No, I won't give him a chance.

JAMIE

Wait, just hear me ou-

AJANI

Absolutely not.

JAMIE

(frustrated) Really?

AJANI

Yes, really. You guys have set me up for the last time.

JAMIE

(huffs) Fine.

Ajani crumples his bag of chips then stands, gathering the rest of his trash. He flashes his friends a strained smile.

AJANI

I'm gonna go work on my routine. The showcase is only a couple months away, and I'm still not set on choreo. I'll see you guys later, ok?

His friends call out a collective goodbye, waving as Ajani walks off.

EXT. FINE ARTS HALL

Evening that same day. Ajani steps out of the building just as the sun begins to set. He turns and jumps in surprise when he comes face to face with someone. The person is vaguely familiar and Ajani racks his brain to remember where he's seen this cute man before. He gasps.

NIKO

(smiling) Hey. Again.

Hi-

AJANI

(voice crack)

Ajani clears his throat, visibly embarrassed.

AJANI (CONT'D)

Hi...again. What- uh, what brings you here?

Ajani cringes at himself for the seemingly obvious question. Clearly this guy is a college student, he's holding a bookbag. Niko remains amused, a flirty edge entering his voice as he responds.

NIKO

You.

Ajani blinks, caught off guard.

AJANI

I'm sorry, what?

NIKO

Sorry, that was a little too forward. My name is Niko.

(extends hand)

I wanted to introduce myself to you the first time we met but you ran off.

Ajani looks at Niko's hand for a moment before shaking it.

AJANI

I'm Ajani. It's nice to meet you...again.

NIKO

It's nice to properly meet you, Ajani. That's a beautiful name. Very fitting for you.

Ajani blushes, withdrawing his hand.

AJANI

Oh- um, thank you.

NIKO

A new friend told me one of his friends was looking for a boyfriend and it's just my luck that he was talking about you.

AJANI

(confused)

New friend? Wait, is this new friend named Jamie?

NIKO

Yeah! We share a class. You're heading out, right? We could grab some food together, if you're down.

AJANI

Like a date?

NIKO

(shy smile) It can be.

Ajani opens his mouth to say yes before he closes it, a look of conflict crossing his face. His internal debate is visible through his ever changing expressions.

AJANI

I want to say yes.

NIKO

(faltering smile)

But?

AJANI

But I kinda swore off all men. Dating and everything.

NIKO

Oh. Well, I can't lie and say I'm not disappointed. Can I ask why?

AJANI

(shakes head)

My friends kept setting me up on blind dates and they were always the worst. I've also tried the hellscape that is dating apps and I just- I'm over it. Men suck.

NIKO

(chuckles)

You're definitely not wrong about that. So there's nothing I can do? No way to shoot my shot?

AJANI

I challenge you.

NIKO

Challenge?

AJANI

Yes. I have a multitude of reasons that I swore off men, but I think it's pretty obvious that I find you attractive. So, I want you to prove to me that all men aren't a lost cause.

NIKO

What do I have to do?

AJANI

Change my mind.

INT. DORM - MIDDAY

Ajani is laid upside down on his bed with crossed arms and a pout. Haze is sat in the desk chair next to him, looking unamused.

HAZE

You're an idiot.

AJANI

I know...

HAZE

You totally blew it.

AJANI

I know.

HAZE

What were you even thinking?

Ajani sits up.

AJANI

Ok! Y'know, as a best friend, you suck at giving comfort. I get it. I messed up, but stop reminding me.

HAZE

Ok, so you challenged him to change your mind about dating...how is he supposed to do that?

AJANI

I don't know, dude! I was internally panicking that entire interaction!

HAZE

Well...ok, different question. What are you looking for in him that will change your mind on accepting a date?

AJANI

(sits up)

Um...wait, that's actually a good question. For one, I'm sick of dudes who think with their dicks. But Niko already isn't like that. He was flirty in a cute way from the start.

HAZE

Ok, what else do you want?

AJANI

I dunno! I just want someone who genuinely cares.

HAZE

About?

AJANI

(sarcastic laugh)

Everything? Me. I mean, it would be nice to talk to a guy who doesn't have an ulterior motive. For once, I have a good feeling about someone though so that's a good sign, right? And you guys had nothing to do with it.

HAZE

Didn't Niko find out about you through Jamie?

AJANI

That's not important.

HAZE

Yes, it-

AJANI

Good talk, bye!

HAZE

You can't do that every time you're about to lose an argument!

AJANI

Oh, but I can. Love you, bye!

FINE ARTS HALL - EVENING

Ajani is walking down the empty hallway when he suddenly hears his name.

NIKO

Hey, Ajani!

Ajani startles and spins around. He relaxes when he sees Niko jogging to catch up with him.

NIKO (CONT'D)

Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.

AJANI

Oh, you're good. I just wasn't expecting to hear my name. Usually, I'm the only person in this wing super late.

NIKO

Really? It's not lonely?

AJANI

I mean...sometimes it is but I'm usually in here practicing dance.

NIKO

Right, you're starring in the showcase, aren't you? That's so cool.

AJANI

Oh, you must've seen the poster. Thank you, but I'm terrified. Don't get me wrong, I'm excited but this is my first solo piece I'm choreographing all by myself. It's nerve-wracking.

NIKO

I'm sure you'll do great. Would you mind some company? I was gonna head to the art studio to work on a piece for that showcase but I'd love to spend some time with you.

AJANI

I would like that, actually. You gotta promise not to laugh at me, though. My process for choreographing is a little chaotic.

NIKO

I promise.

Ajani and Niko spend the night talking between dancing and drawing. They share a lot of laughs and the silences are comfortable. They sneak glances at each other and share small smiles when they accidentally lock eyes a few times.

Montage of Ajani and Niko spending time together in the studio. Different clothes to indicate different days. Between montage clips, there are dialogue moments.

AJANI

Surprisingly, I've never broken a bone.

NIKO

Why is that surprising?

AJANI

Because I was a dumb kid! On top of being a dancer, I just loved jumping off of shit for no reason. Swings, trees, furniture- I swear I gave my mom a mini heart almost every day.

NIKO

(laughing)

That's so funny. I was so reserved as a kid. Just sat in the corner with my little sketchpad.

AJANI

Really? When did all this confidence become a thing, then?

NIKO

I don't know, actually. Maybe high school? I was never really insecure or anything, but I did become more sociable around high school. So, you've been dancing your whole life? What age did you start?

AJANI

I started at five. The typical training stuff, y'know, ballet, tap, all that jazz...literally.

Niko laughs and Ajani shakes his head, trying to hold back a laugh.

AJANI (CONT'D)

No, don't laugh at that. It was such a bad joke.

NIKO

No, it was actually funny!

AJANI

You're biased.

NIKO

And you're hilarious.

Montage resumes.

INT. DORM - NIGHT

Niko drives Ajani back to his dorm and they have a hesitant goodbye. Ajani rushes upstairs, simultaneously texting his friends to demand a facetime session. He jumps onto his bed, face propped up on one hand as the other holds his ringing phone.

THEO

This is the third night in a row you've called to gush about this guy.

AJANI

Ok and you still picked up the phone.

THEO

It was against my will.

JAMIE

Hey!

Theo looks at Jamie over his shoulder and blows a kiss. Jamie glares for a moment before returning the air kiss. Ajani clears his throat but is cut off by Haze.

HAZE

Aja, it's obvious you really like this guy.

SIMON

Yeah, why not end this stupid little challenge and go out with him?

AJANI

There's no point for me to deny liking him but I can't just throw away this challenge. We've only been getting to know each other for two weeks. As far as I know, this could be a front to try and get in my pants. I need more time.

Jamie grabs the phone from Theo, flashing a smile at Ajani.

JAMIE

He's right. Two weeks isn't enough to fully know someone's intentions. But I can also spill that he talks about you too, Aja. Thinks you're the sweetest thing ever.

Ajani attempts and fails to hide a smile. Haze scoffs, playfully judgmental.

HAZE

Now, how did you manage to convince him of that?

Ajani's smile falls as he rolls his eyes. He flips the bird at Haze and everyone laughs.

EXT. CAMPUS - MORNING

The sunrise has just ended. There are few people milling about, some walking, others standing and talking. Ajani walks alone with his dance bag slung over his shoulder. He's clearly tired and is dressed in oversized, slightly disheveled clothes. He hides a yawn in his hand, his eyes closing. When he opens his eyes, he sees Niko walking in his direction. They lock eyes and Niko's face lights up.

NIKO

Ajani! Hey, I didn't know you were on campus this early.

AJANI

(tired laugh)

That's cause I'm usually not.

(MORE)

AJANI (CONT'D)

I wanted to get an early morning practice in for my routine since I'm using today to catch up on homework I've been neglecting.

NIKO

Have you had breakfast yet?

Ajani shakes his head.

NIKO (CONT'D)

Do you wanna grab some real quick? I doubt it's good to dance on an empty stomach.

Ajani contemplates for a second before nodding, a smile coming to his face as he playfully bats his eyelashes.

AJANI

You'll pay for me?

NIKO

(laughs and nods)

Of course, it's why I offered.

Ajani and Niko walk together to the campus coffee shop.

INT - CAMPUS COFFEE SHOP

A few minutes later. Ajani holds a cup of iced coffee in one hand and a bagel in the other, more awake. He talks animatedly and Niko watches raptly with an endeared smile.

Conversation flows easily between them as they eat, continuing as they gather their things and leave.

Niko walks Ajani to the fine arts hall. They face each other and Niko wears a hopeful smile.

NIKO

Before you go in, I was wondering something.

AJANI

Wondering what?

NIKO

If it's still too early to ask for your number? I know where I can find you most of the time on campus, but if we wanna meet up somewhere else it would be helpful, y'know? If not, that's totally fi-

Niko cuts himself off as Ajani giggles. His smile turns a little embarrassed.

AJANI

You don't need to plead your case, Niko. I meant to give you my number sooner but it slipped my mind.

Here, gimme your phone.

Niko pulls his phone from his back pocket and hands it over to Ajani after entering the passcode. They smile at each other then Ajani looks down to enter his number.

DANCE STUDIO MONTAGE:

INT. LATE AFTERNOON

Niko walks in on a frustrated Ajani sprawled on the floor. He sits next to him and starts playing with his hair. Ajani visibly relaxes.

INT. EVENING - A FEW DAYS LATER

Ajani dances in front of the mirrors as Niko sits in the back and paints. Hidden behind his easel is a notebook that he doodles in while secretly glancing at Ajani.

INT. NIGHT - TWO DAYS LATER

Niko and Ajani eating and laughing under dim studio lights. Forgotten homework surrounds them on the floor.

INT. NIGHT - HOURS LATER

Ajani and Niko are delirious and giggling at each other as they pack their stuff to leave. Ajani trips over his own feet and Niko steadies him. Ajani leans into him and Niko wraps him in a hug.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON - DAYS LATER

The seasons have changed. Ajani is layered in a hoodie, jacket and blanket. He sits on the studio floor, watching back a video of himself dancing. Niko walks in with hot cocoa. He sits next to Ajani and looks over his shoulder to watch the video. When it ends, he hands Ajani the hot cocoa and is given a smile. Niko points at Ajani's phone and can be seen saying "teach me?"

INT. NIGHT - THE NEXT DAY

Ajani and Niko are standing side by side as Ajani attempts to teach a clumsy Niko how to dance.

INT. NIGHT - LATER

Niko sits with his back against the mirror. Ajani sits between his legs with Niko's sketchbook on his lap as Niko shows him a few drawings. Ajani asks to draw in it and Niko nods, handing over his pencil. Ajani doodles a poorly drawn cat then proudly holds up the sketchbook to show it off. Niko smiles endearingly.

INT. NIGHT - THE NEXT DAY

Ajani is frustrated. He has a mental block and cannot think of choreography. Niko watches him struggle for a while before he lets out a frustrated yell and shuts the music off, falling to the floor.

Niko sets down his sketchbook and sits next to Ajani.

NIKO

What's wrong, Ajani?

AJANI

I can't do this! I can't do it! I should drop myself from the showcase.

NIKO

You can't be serious.

Ajani looks at Niko with tears in his eyes.

AJANI

I can't do it, Niko, I'm in over my head.

NIKO

You're having a mental block that's stopping you from creating.

Everyone gets them, it's ok. Just take a break and come back to it later.

Ajani shakes his head, his chest heaving as his breaths become more frantic.

AJANI

I don't have time. The showcase is coming up so fast and I have to have a routine or else I'm gonna go out there and look stupid.

Niko lays down next to Ajani and pulls him into a hug. Ajani protests for only a second before he huffs and allows himself to be held.

NIKO

Breathe with me, Aja. I don't want you to have a panic attack. Breathe in for four seconds and then out for four, ok?

AJANI

(mumbled)

Ok.

They breathe together until Ajani's breathing is even and he's calm.

NIKO

Better?

AJANI

Much. Thank you.

NIKO

Of course. Let's call it a night, yeah? We've been here for hours, it's a miracle neither of us have gone completely stir crazy right now.

Ajani giggles and Niko smiles before sitting then standing up. He holds a hand to Ajani who accepts the help. They gather their things and exit.

INT. NIGHT - DAYS LATER

Ajani has made significant progress with his choreo. Niko applauds him when he finishes dancing and Ajani smiles at him through the mirror.

INT. EVENING - HALLOWEEN

Niko walks in holding a bag of candy. Ajani stops mid-dance to run over and snatch a Snickers bar. Ajani focuses on dancing and Niko on painting.

He continues to secretly doodle. He flips to a different page when Ajani comes over during a break.

Ajani leans on his shoulder and Niko uses his sleeve to dab away some of the sweat on Ajani's forehead.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON - A WEEK LATER

Niko enters the room to see Ajani on the floor with his face in his knees, crying. He drops his stuff and runs over to him. Niko hugs Ajani, whispering to him. Ajani shakes his head and Niko nods, pulling him in closer.

INT. EVENING - LATER THAT NIGHT

Ajani is dancing. Niko watches. Ajani keeps messing up the same part of his dance and becomes increasingly more frustrated. After the third mess-up, Niko stands and walks over to Ajani, pulling him into a hug. They stand and hug for a few moments before Niko steps back and gives his arm an encouraging pat.

Niko sits back down and Ajani takes a deep breath before he tries again. Niko watches intently. Ajani finishes the dance without messing up and Niko jumps up to hug him.

END MONTAGE

EXT. CAMPUS - MIDDAY

Late fall. Overcast and windy. Ajani, Niko and friends eat together outside. Everyone wears hoodies or jackets, some with hoods, others with beanies. Niko wears a thick hoodie and a scarf. Ajani is the most layered up and wearing gloves.

AJANI

I'm finally done with my choreo!

The table cheers and Ajani bows playfully.

THEO

When do we get to see it?

NIKO

It looks amazing. I honestly can't understand why you were so stressed, Aja.

Ajani's friends share confused gazes as he blushes and knocks his shoulder into Niko's.

HAZE

As the best friend, I am mildly offended that I was not the first person to see this choreography.

AJANI

(shrugs)

He just happened to be there as I was making it.

HAZE

Oh, please, you hate for anyone to witness your “process”. Just say he’s special and go.

Ajani neither confirms nor denies this claim. Niko coos teasingly, nudging him.

NIKO

I’m the first person to watch you create choreo? I’m so honored.

AJANI

Shush.

Ajani shivers and Niko takes off his scarf, wrapping it around him. Ajani mutters his thanks, tucking the lower half of his face into the scarf.

THEO

I told you we should have eaten inside.

AJANI

I hate how it smells in there, though. I’d rather suffer.

NIKO

Or, I could just help keep you warm.

Ajani’s bright red ears turn redder and Haze lets out a theatrical groan.

HAZE

Anygays, when’s the showcase, Aja? I need to make sure I have that day off.

AJANI

November 14th. Ten days from now.

Niko’s face scrunches in thought before he gasps. His lips fall into a pout as everyone looks at him.

NIKO

Oh no, I think that’s when the art show is, too. Shit, I wanted to come see you but I’ve already submitted my piece...

Ajani tries to hide his disappointment with a smile.

AJANI

Oh, that’s...that’s fine. I mean, it sucks, but you can’t miss your art show. You’ve been working so hard on your painting.

NIKO

I know, but I wanted to come see you dance.

(checks watch)

Oh shit! I’m gonna be late to class. I’ll talk to you guys later! Bye, Aja!

Niko quickly stands from the table. Ajani goes to wave before remembering the scarf.

AJANI

Oh, wait, your scarf.

NIKO

Keep it. You need it more than I do. Plus it’s cuter on you.

Niko winks them leaves before Ajani can respond. Friends wait until he’s out of earshot to turn on Ajani.

SIMON

You guys are basically dating at this point.

JAMIE

You guys are adorable. You literally make the cutest couple.

HAZE

Yet you're still holding onto that challenge. From the looks of it, he's changed your mind already.

What's the hold up?

AJANI

What do you mean?

HAZE

Why not just tell him he won and ask him out?

Ajani shakes his head. He looks in the direction that Niko walked off in.

AJANI

Well, I had a plan but now he's not even coming to the showcase...

THEO

You guys really have been spending a lot of time together. Sometimes I start thinking you forgot about us.

AJANI

(sarcastically)

Oh please. I quite literally could never forget about you guys. You'd hunt me down.

HAZE

(with a mouthful of food) Damn straight.

JAMIE

(overdramatic gasp)

How dare you use the s word in this group's presence?

Haze rolls his laughs as the rest burst into laughter. Ajani plays absentmindedly with the scarf as conversation continues.

INT. DANCE STUDIO - NIGHT BEFORE THE SHOWCASE

Near midnight. Ajani is alone in the studio. Niko's scarf sits atop his duffle bag. Ajani is sweaty, slowly walking in circles with hands on his hips as he tries to catch his breath.

He keeps glancing between the door and his watch intermittently. His eyebrows furrow as he chews his lip then glances at his duffle bag. He stops walking, stares at the door for a few seconds, then shakes his head and starts walking to his bag. His phone buzzes just as he reaches it.

A text from Niko reads: "You still in the studio?" Ajani texts back: "About to leave. Why?"

He taps his fingers on the sides of his phone as he watches the typing notification. Niko responds seconds later: "Stick around for a little, please. I'm on my way with snacks."

At the word snacks, Ajani's stomach grumbles. He places a hand over it before replying: "Kk, see you soon"

INT. DANCE STUDIO - FIVE MINUTES LATER

Ajani looks up from his phone when he hears Niko enter. Niko flashes a tired smile. There are bags under his eyes. He sits next to Ajani in front of the mirrors and leans over to hug him.

NIKO

Hey.

AJANI

Hey. You look exhausted.

NIKO

I feel it, too. I missed hanging out with you this last week.

AJANI

(soft smile)

Me too, but you had to finish your painting. Even I can admit I'm a bit of a distraction.

NIKO

Well, it's all done now. I wish I could've shown you the finished project in person but I had to submit it to my professor today.

AJANI

That's fine. Looks like we're both missing out on each other's finished projects.

Ajani's laugh is a bit forced and Niko notices immediately. He hugs Ajani again.

NIKO

Don't say it like that, Aja. Look, I brought cupcakes so you can't be sad.

Niko lifts the bag he brought with him and takes out the items inside. He pulls out two individually boxed cupcakes.

One is labeled "Red velvet cheesecake" and the other "German chocolate". He also pulls out a sleeve of six variously flavored macarons.

Ajani's eyes light up.

AJANI

What's all this for?

NIKO

Since I might not be able to see you perform, I thought we could celebrate ahead of time. We both know you're gonna kill it, so I wanted to get you something for working so hard.

Ajani's eyes water and he blinks rapidly to clear them. He throws his arms around Niko's neck in a hug.

AJANI

You're the sweetest person ever, it's not even fair.

NIKO

You deserve it. I'm proud of you, Aja.

Ajani leans back with a bright smile.

AJANI

I'm proud of you, too. We worked our asses off this semester.

He lifts a macaron in a toasting motion. Niko laughs but grabs one and lifts it as well.

AJANI (CONT'D)

To us, for getting through this semester and our projects.

They tap the macarons together. Niko watches Ajani's reaction to the macaron as he takes a bite and makes a delighted sound, his eyebrows shooting up. Niko's smile widens.

NIKO

To us.

INT. AUDITORIUM - SHOWCASE

Late afternoon. The auditorium slowly fills with people. Ajani peeks through the curtains from backstage, scanning the crowd. He is nervous but tries not to show it.

Ajani looks down at his hand as his phone buzzes, excited and then disappointed when he sees the text from Haze. “Fourth row, dead center. You got this!!”

Ajani looks through the curtain and sees Haze, Simon, Theo, and Jamie all sitting together. There’s an empty seat next to Jamie and Ajani stares at it for a moment before shaking his head. Someone calls his name and he steps back from the curtain.

PROFESSOR JACKSON approaches Ajani and gives him a thumbs up and a smile. Ajani returns a nervous smile.

PROFESSOR JACKSON

How are you doing, Ajani? Feeling ready?

AJANI

As ready as I can be, sir.

PROFESSOR JACKSON

You have nothing to worry about. Your routine is beautiful and the crowd is going to love it. Don’t tired yourself with all this pacing, alright? Chill out, watch the performances and then go out there and own it. Got it?

Ajani’s smile is more genuine as he nods.

AJANI

Got it. Thanks.

PROFESSOR JACKSON

Good. Now, let’s get this show started, shall we?

Professor Jackson goes out onstage and a cheer goes up as he does the opening speech for the showcase. Ajani walks off to the dressing room to calm down some more.

SHOWCASE MONTAGE:

A boy and girl duo dance together. A small ensemble performs a song.

Ajani peeks intermittently through the curtains, his eyes always landing on the empty chair.

A few more group performances separated by Professor Jackson’s introductions.

The second to last performance before Ajani. Niko enters the auditorium and quickly and quietly makes his way to the empty seat next to Jamie. Ajani is busy stretching backstage and does not see.

Niko hides a bouquet of flowers at his feet and he holds his sketchbook in his lap.

END MONTAGE

Ajani finishes stretching as the people ahead of him finish and Professor Jackson goes back onstage. He takes a deep breath then opens his eyes, getting into position and awaiting his cue.

PROFESSOR JACKSON

Last but not least, we have the star of this semester’s showcase! This student has shown a tremendous about of talent and hard work and has most definitely earned this spot. He choreographed this piece by himself! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ajani to the stage!

The crowd cheers as Ajani walks out onto the stage and gets in position. He looks into the crowd and his eyes widen subtly in shock when they land on Niko. He can’t stop the smile that breaks out on his face.

Niko winks, giving a thumbs up and the music starts. Ajani, more focused and confident than ever, begins to dance. In the crowd, Niko dances in tiny, having memorized much of the routine.

When Ajani finishes, he receives a standing ovation. His friends scream the loudest but his eyes are only on Niko. Niko cups his hands around his mouth to cheer for him and Ajani bows several times before heading backstage.

INT. BACKSTAGE

Ajani is surrounded by the rest of the performers as soon as he gets behind the curtain. He is distracted as he accepts compliments and hugs and thanks everyone. Professor Jackson high fives him.

PROFESSOR JACKSON

See! You killed it out there! Good job, Ajani!

AJANI

Thank you, sir!

Ajani whirls around when his name is yelled from across the room. He sees his friends and Niko waving him over. He jogs over to them and is pulled into a group hug.

His friends talk over each other as they shower him with compliments, Ajani laughing all the while.

AJANI (CONT'D)

Ok, ok! Thank you guys but I'm suffocating!

Ajani is freed from the group hug and finds himself face to face with Niko. Niko holds out the bouquet and Ajani accepts it with a shy smile.

AJANI (CONT'D)

Thank you...what about your art show? Wasn't it today?

NIKO

I got lucky with timing. Only had to be there long enough to show off my piece and then I booked it here just in time to watch you perform.

Niko holds up his sketchbook.

NIKO (CONT'D)

I have another gift for you.

He pulls a small painting from between the pages. It's a mini, hand-painted collage of Ajani from the many night they spent in the dance studio. One shot is of Ajani laughing, another is him elegantly captured mid-dance, another of him half-asleep and laying on his duffle bag, and another is of him with bright eyes and an open-mouthed smile with a cupcake in his hands.

Ajani's jaw drops as he stares at the painting. He looks up at Niko who watches him with anticipation. Ajani throws his arms around Niko's neck to hug him, momentarily catching Niko off-guard before he hugs him back.

NIKO (CONT'D)

You like it?

AJANI

(nodding against his shoulder)

I love it!

Ajani leans back but keep his arms around Niko. They stare into each other's eyes. Niko's eyes flicker to Ajani's lips and Ajani does the same.

NIKO

I have a question, Aja.

Niko pulls Ajani closer. They watch each other for a few seconds. Niko opens his mouth and Ajani cuts him off with a kiss.

Their friends cheer. Ajani bumps their noses together when he pulls back.

AJANI

Yes, I'll go out with you.

NIKO

(breathlessly excited) Really?

Ajani nods.

AJANI

You've successfully changed my mind.

END.

Back to You

by Christina Ricks

`ACT 1 TEASER

INT. OFFICE OF A DESIGN COMPANY IN ATLANTA, GA -
MORNING

We see Derion Greene (Late 30's) sitting in a chair in front of his boss's desk holding his hands together neatly in his lap. As he sits, his boss Cayman (Early 50's, country) walks in and sits in front of him.

CAYMAN

This part of the job is never easy.

DERION

Did I do something wrong sir?

CAYMAN

No sport. Don't think of it that way. You've been one of the best janitors this company has seen. I took a piss this morning and the toilet was so clean I could see how yellow my teeth actually are.

DERION

Why thank you sir.

CAYMAN

That being said, we had to make some cuts within the company. I'm sorry Darius but we have to let you go.

DERION

Sir my name is Darion, and please don't do this to me now. My Wife wants to start a business, my son is just starting high school an-

CAYMAN

Pal you know how it goes. Last one hired, first one fired.

Derion tries to withhold what's left of his dignity and refrains from crying.

DERION

Well thank you for this opportunity sir.

Derion rises to leave and Cayman stands from sitting to shake his hand before he leaves.

CAYMAN

By the way, would you mind taking the rest of the trash out before you leave? We don't have anyone else who can do it.

DERION

Sure.

Derion exits and as he leaves he pulls out his phone to read a notification that reads "RENT DUE FRIDAY" His eyes began to fill with tears as he logs into his Facebook to make a post reading "I will work for any fee if shown how to do the job" As he publishes the message we transition to Lamarcus Greene (60, uptight) On the phone with Mr. Washington, the owner of the Sunny Side power plant in Atlanta Georgia where he works.

INT. LAMARCUS GREENE'S OFFICE - MORNING

LAMARCUS

Hello Mr.Washington how can I be of service to you?

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Hi Lamarcus, I'm glad you asked.

LAMARCUS

Yes?

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Would you say that the men and few women who work at your plant are eager beavers?

LAMARCUS

They're hard workers sir.

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

How hard?

LAMARCUS

Mr. Washington I'm afraid I'm not understanding what you're asking of me.

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

There's a new chemical that needs to be tested in the basement of my Atlanta location. As the manager there, I need you to find someone young and dumb enough to test it out.

LAMARCUS

I don't know if that would work sir. Last time that happened It was jus-

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

I don't pay you to know. I pay you to do what I ask you to. Now can you complete the task or not?

LAMARCUS

Yes sir I can.

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Now last time you chose someone it didn't end well and I almost lost thousands of dollars. If you mess up this time there won't be a next one for you at my plant. Do you understand?

LAMARCUS

Yes I do sir.

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Now get off the phone and get to work. This could be your opportunity for a manager's increases in pay.

LAMARCUS

Thank you sir. I hope you enjoy your day.

Lamarcus hangs up the phone and punches the table he's sitting at. He calls in his assistant Stanley (Early 20's, nervous)

LAMARCUS

Stanley bring your little narrow ass in here.

Stanley runs in nervous with an iPad and apple pen.

STANLEY

Yes?

LAMARCUS

Yes what?

STANLEY

Yes sir.

LAMARCUS

Why didn't you give me a heads up about the call from Mr. Washington. You know I need at least 10 minutes to mentally prepare to talk to him.

STANLEY

It wasn't on the schedule sir. He never schedules his phone calls.

LAMARCUS

I don't need an excuse from you right now. I need you to make a list of all the dumbasses who work here and put it on my desk by tonight.

STANLEY

May I ask what for?

LAMARCUS

I need someone to test out a new chemical In the basement.

STANLEY

But sir the last time we did th-

LAMARCUS

Never mind the last time. Just do what I asked you to damnit.

STANLEY

Yes sir. I'm on it.

Stanley exits and heads back to his cubicle in front of Lamarcus's office. At the cubicle we see him make a list of names along with their email address. He takes the list and brings it into Lamarcus office

INT. LAMARCUS OFFICE LATE AFTERNOON

An hour passes after the email is sent and Lamarcus begins to read all employee emails which have responded saying they decline to participate in the testing. Lamarcus hits his desk and Stanley enters.

LAMARCUS

I just received my tenth rejection email from the men here in the company. What the hell am I gonna do now?

As Stanley tries to speak Lamarcus receives a notification from his Facebook. He scrolls down his feed and comes across the post Derion made earlier.

LAMARCUS

I think I just found someone.

End Teaser.

ACT 1 INT. GREEN FAMILY KITCHEN- EVENING

We see Dana Greene (Mid 30's, loving) sitting at the dinner table with her son Asher (14, Energetic) who is sitting next to his sister Norah (8, inquisitive).

DANA

I'm sure the first day of school couldn't have been that bad.

ASHER

Mom it's the first day of high school and all the guys already have better kicks than me and more instagram followers. If I don't make the football team they gon' think I'm lame.

DANA

I'm sure you'll make the team but you need to ask your father first.

NORAH

Yea where is daddy?

As Norah asks, Derion walks into the house with his head hung low, and immediately pretends to be okay when his daughter Norah leaves the table and runs up to hug him.

NORAH

Daddy I missed you! Asher's complaining again.

DERION

Oh is he?

Derion and Dana giggle as Asher rolls his eyes. Derion sits at the head of the table and Norah rushes to sit next to him.

DANA

Asher was just filling me in on his first day of high school. How's the new job?

Derion tries to hold back tears as he remembers Mr. Caymans words earlier. He lies to seem strong for the children.

DERION

Oh it's going great.

DANA

Asher why don't you and your sister go up stairs so I can talk to your father alone?

NORAH

But daddy just got home!

ASHER

I'll take her ma.

Norah hugs her mother and kisses her father goodnight. Asher slowly trails behind to stop and asks his dad a question.

ASHER

Pops do you think you can start helping me train for football try outs?

DERION

Football is dangerous son, I don't think it's the sport for you. Pick another activity and I'll be willing to help.

ASHER

It can't be that dangerous if You played back in the day. Why can't I do it too?

DANA

Asher you heard your father. Go check on your sister upstairs

Asher sucks his teeth and stomps upstairs.

DANA

Walk softly son. Now back to you.

Dana gets up from her seat and moves closer to her husband

DERION

Like I said babe everything is fine.

DANA

You may be superman to the world, but you're my husband and I know when you're lying.

Derion begins to tear up as he talks to his wife. She hugs him as he cries into her shirt

DERION

I was fired from the job as company janitor today. Ever since I lost my position as a salesman it just seems like we're drowning in debt.

DANA

Babe I can try to pick up extra shifts at the nursing home.

DERION

No, I can't let you do that. Besides I know that you want to start your baking business.

DANA

I've been waiting for fourteen years, I can wait more.

Before Derion can speak, he receives a Facebook message from Lamarcus Greene saying that he has a job offer for Derion if he meets him at the SunnySide power plant tomorrow morning by 11am. Derions tears began to fade into a smile.

DERION

I think our prayers have been answered

DANA

Did Jesus just text you?

DERION

No, but Lamarcus did. I haven't seen him since the ten year reunion of Dad's death. He says he has a job for me at the power plant he manages.

DANA

Babe I don't know. If something seems too good to be true it usually is.

DERION

Everything will be fine. Besides bills are due Friday and we could use the extra money.

Derion kisses his wife's forehead and she stays behind sitting at the the table pondering, as her husband excitedly runs upstairs.

INT. GREEN FAMILY KITCHEN- NEXT MORNING

Derion is in the kitchen making lunch for his children with a grin on his face, when Both Norah and Asher run downstairs in a rush.

DERION

Slow down you two. I've made lunch for the both of you before the bus comes.

NORAH

Thank you daddy!

ASHER

Aye pops can I have five dollars for taco Tuesday today? There's a taco truck by school I wanna try.

DERION

But son I just made lunch for you.

ASHER

First I can't play football and now I can't get five dollars?

Derion pulls his phone out of his pocket to check his online banking app. On the app he notices that he only has six dollars in his account.

DERION

Son, How about I make my famous homemade spaghetti tonight so you don't have to buy a taco?

ASHER

Uhh!It's no taco, but I guess that's fine

NORAH

I can't wait for your famous spaghetti! I'm gonna dream about it all day in class.

As Norah gives her father a tight hug, Dana enters the kitchen from upstairs.

DANA

Right now you two need to be dreaming about catching the bus.

Norah & Asher

YES MA'AM!

DERION

Have a great day at school kids! I love you and I'll see you later.

NORAH

Bye daddy!

ASHER

Bye pops

Asher and Norah both grab their lunch bags from Derion, give their parents a quick hug, and run out of the door in a rush for the school bus.

DANA

Babe I had time to sleep on it, and you're right! This job from Lamarcus is an answer to our prayers.

DERION

Yeah. I can't help but feel a little nervous though. I'm not sure what He needs me to do.

DANA

You're a fast learner and a hard worker. I know your first day will be great.

DERION

Thank you honey. I look forward to telling you all about it while I cook my spaghetti tonight

DANA

I look forward to hearing it. I gotta go before I'm late to work, but I love you.

DERION

I love you too.

Dana begins to exit before she turns around to tell Derion one more thing

DANA

Oh, and if any women at this new job think you're handsome be sure to show them your ring finger.

Derion giggles and hugs his wife

DERION

Trust me I will.

The couple kiss and Dana leaves for work before Derion follows her out.

INT. SUNNYSIDE POWER PLANT - LAMARCUS'S OFFICE

Lamarcus is in his office pacing back and forth as he speaks with Mr. Washington on the phone.

LAMARCUS

Yes sir, I have found someone to test the new chemical in the basement.

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Perfect. Once the testing is completed call me back with the results.

LAMARCUS

Sir are you sure you still want to go through with this ?

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

If I wanted to hear someone question my choices I'd call my mother. I'm hanging up and I expect to hear the results of the testing from you by tomorrow morning.

LAMARCUS

I'll get my raise once it's completed right?

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Increase in payments will be discussed later.

Mr. Washington ends the phone call and leaves Lamarcus alone with his thoughts In the office. As he thinks, Stanley knocks on the door and comes in with Derion.

STANLEY

Good afternoon sir. This man says he's your nephew and he's here to see you.

LAMARCUS

Yes come on in David.

Stanley leaves the men alone as Lamarcus and Derion hug.

DERION

Uncle Lamarcus I know it's been years but did you just call me David?

LAMARCUS

No of course not. I definitely said Derion. But anyways, Boy is it great to see you! I wish my brother had lived to see you now. He would be so proud of you.

DERION

Thank you. Just tell me what you need me to do and I can get started right away.

LAMARCUS

Ah, I see you still have the work ethic of all of us Greene Men. Listen there's a new chemical in the basement that needs to be tested and you're the only man strong enough to do it.

DERION

When would the testing start?

LAMARCUS

We can start right now actually. Let's take a quick trip downstairs.

Derion and Lamarcus exit the office and we immediately cut to them in the basement outside of the testing room.

INT. TESTING ROOM DOOR- BASEMENT

The fumes downstairs are strong and Derion begins to cough. Lamarcus pulls a mask out of his suit pocket and places it over his own nose.

DERION

Won't I need a mask too?

LAMARCUS

No you'll be fine. Now look, all you have to do is go inside and flip a switch to activate the chemicals. The company needs the research information.

DERION

The room doesn't look secure Unc. Is there any work I can do for you upstairs?

LAMARCUS

I don't need you upstairs I need you down here. Now go in the room. I'll be right outside the door if you need me.

Derion takes a deep breath and step by step, he finally opens the door and enters the room. While inside he can only see with the help of one light and the strong stench of the room fills his nostrils and began to choke him. He reaches for the switch but his skin begins to tingle and he calls out to Lamarcus

DERION

Are you sure there's no one with more experience who can do this task for you? I don't think I'm qualified

Lamarcus voice deeps and his change in demeanor is heard through his voice. The change in tone frightens Derion

LAMARCUS

Stop acting like a little sissy and keep your ass in that room. My brother is turning over in his grave at the thought of his only son being scared of a little testing room. How do you think your wife and kids are going to feel when they find out you're a quitter.

DERION

But I'm not a quitter I jus-

LAMARCUS

Well you for damn sure aren't a do-er. Now you can be a man and stay in that room or you can ruin your fathers legacy by quitting.

DERION

Fine! I'll stay in, but can I text my wife first? I normally keep her updated through out my day.

LAMARCUS

No you can text her when you leave the room. There's no signal in the testing room anyway.

Derion pulls his phone out of his pocket, looks at the screensaver of his wife and children, and then squeezes the phone tightly as if to hug the image of them.

DERION

Ok I'm ready

He coughs and begins to cry as he feels that he has been set up by his uncle. He says a quick prayer and reaches for the switch in the dark room that only has one light above the switch

DERION

This is for my family.

Derion flips the switch and immediately a loud bright bang occurs. We hear a horrific scream from Derion and cut to Lamarcus in the Hallway.

INT. TESTING ROOM DOOR- BASEMENT

LAMARCUS

Hey if you don't plan on being a preacher you need to quit all of that screaming!

Lamarcus begins to notice that he no longer hears footsteps moving inside of the room.

LAMARCUS

Derion? Derion stop playing boy come on out! Derion?

He slowly begins to walk to the door. When he makes it to the door he opens it and begins to scream as if he saw something supernatural.

LAMARCUS

Damn! Damn! Damn it! I'm gonna lose my job for this. Derion wake up! This is not funny wake up!

INT. GREENE FAMILY KITCHEN- EVENING, SAME DAY

Dana, Asher, and Norah are all at the table eating take out and wondering where Derion could be.

NORAH

Mommy where's daddy?

DANA

I'm not sure sweetie. He normally texts me around noon but he hasn't

ASHER

Wait, dad didn't text you back? He normally responds within ten minutes.

NORAH

He said he was gonna make his famous spaghetti tonight. Maybe he's at the grocery store?

DANA

Look I don't want you two worrying okay. I'm sure he'll walk in any minute now.

A loud ding is heard from the doorbell in the front of the house.

DANA

See I told you! He must of forgot his keys at work.

Dana, Asher and Norah rush over to the door to greet Derion. As they get closer to the door they begin to see red and blue lights.

NORAH

Mommy I'm scared

ASHER

Why would pops be with the police?

EXT. FRONT DOOR OF GREENE FAMILY HOME

Dana opens the door with the children behind her to see a police officer standing in the doorway with a face of sorrow.

OFFICER

Are you the family of Derion Greene?

Dana and the children all nod in agreement.

OFFICER

He was involved in an accident today at work. We need you to come identify the body.

ASHER

That's not funny. Where is he?

NORAH

No. Not daddy.

Norah begins to cry as Asher comforts her. Dana stands in the doorway frozen until the officer speaks to her

OFFICER

Ma'am can you come with me to identify the body?

Dana tries to speak but tears come out instead of words. She feels the room spinning and faints at the door.

NORAH

Mommy!

ASHER

Ma please wake up.

END ACT 1

ACT 2

INT. GREENE FAMILY KITCHEN- NEXT DAY

Dana is sitting at the table reading the last text message Derion sent before he went to the power plant. The message reads " I love you. Nervous and excited about this new job but I 'll tell you how it goes tonight". She cries and mouths " I love you too" As she is reading, Asher comes into the kitchen followed by Lamarcus Greene

LAMARCUS

Thanks for leading me in young man. You look just like your father
Asher hears the word father and drops his head while he exits.

ASHER

Uh thanks.

Lamarcus pulls his seat up next to Dana as she is sitting at the table somewhat frozen.

LAMARCUS

Hey, I don't know if you remember me or not? I'm Lamarcus. Your husband's father was my older brother.

DANA

Yes I remember you. You were the one to give Derion a new job. I would say thank you but I can't

LAMARCUS

No trust me I understand. When my older brother died the sky turned grey and has stayed that way ever since

DANA

Were you the last one to see him before he uhhh...

LAMARCUS

Died?

DANA

Yea I'm sorry. I haven't been able to say it since the officer left last night.

LAMARCUS

He was in the room alone when it happened.

DANA

So he died alone? Where were you?

LAMARCUS

I was in my office when it took place. I heard the commotion from downstairs and I immediately called the cops. You know this is so hard for me because I told him not to go to that basement but he did it anyway. He knew the company needed help down there so he went.

DANA

He was always so helpful. Maybe if he wasn't he would still be here.

LAMARCUS

Regardless of what happened, you should know that your husband was an exceptional man.

DANA

I know. It's just hard to say " was" instead of "is". One accident made me a single mother of two and a widow.

Lamarcus pats Dana on the back and his phone begins to ring.

LAMARCUS

Look I have to take this Call, but if you, Apple or, Nina ever need anything please let me know.

DANA

Their names are Asher and Nora, but thanks for the offer.I've never been one for handouts.

LAMARCUS

Please think of it as a hand up, not a hand out. I have to leave but keep me updated on funeral arrangements.

DANA

I will.

Lamarcus rises from the table and exits the house.

EXT. GRAVESIGHT- MID DAY ONE WEEK LATER

Dana, Asher, Norah, Lamarcus, and a group of Darien's close family and friends all stand over his casket that was just placed in the ground.

DANA

Thank you all for being here today. To know Derion was to love him. When I first met him in high school I didn't think I would ever get a chance to marry the football star that all the girls wrote about in their diaries. He was an exceptional, friend, husband, and father. The world truly lost a human worth more than gold. Asher, Norah, do either of you want to add anything?

Asher adjusts the black shades he's wearing and begins to clear his throat

ASHER

Nah I'm good

NORAH

I just want to say that my daddy was the nicest guy ever. He always played dolls with me when I asked him to and he was the best at cooking spaghetti. I won't miss his farts though. He smelled worse than a dying pig.

The group of mourning individuals giggle at Norah's attempt to lighten the mood.

DANA

Thank you for sharing Norah. Well if no one else has additional parting words I think we can all le-

As Dana finishes her sentence Lamarcus steps out from the group of mourners to say something.

LAMARCUS

I would like to take the time to publicly apologize in front of the whole family for my lack of presence in Darien's life. When his father died years ago I thought I would be there for him but I couldn't because he reminded me of the older brother I lost. I promise to make up for the lack of time by being there for his family.

As Lamarcus tries to tear up, he receives a phone call.

LAMARCUS

Uh my apology folks. I need to take this. As you all can imagine, it's not easy being a black man in charge.

Lamarcus quickly runs off to his car to take the call. INT. THE INSIDE OF LAMARCUS'S CAR

Lamarus anxiously answers the phone call from his boss.

LAMARCUS

Hello Sir?

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

Why didn't you ever follow up with me after finding someone to test the new room at my power plant?

LAMARCUS

Oh um my apologies Sir it's been a busy week. There was a death in my family

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

That's interesting because I got back from vacation today and heard that SOMEONE DIED AT MY POWER PLANT.

LAMARCUS

Sir I can explain it's not that bi-

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

No it is a big deal. If you don't cover this mess up you can kiss your job at my plant and any other large company in this country goodbye. Do you understand me?

LAMARCUS

Yes sir. I'll take care of it

MR. WASHINGTON (V.O)

You have one week to clear this up.

Lamarcus ends the phone call and hits his steering wheel out of anger. As he leaves we cut to Dana, Norah, and Asher who are the only three people left standing over Darien's casket that is now in the ground.

EXT. GRAVESIGHT- SAME DAY

NORAH

What am I gonna do without a daddy?

ASHER

Everything isn't always about you Norah

DANA

This is not the time or place you two.

Dana stands in between her children and hugs them both INT.

GREEN FAMILY KITCHEN- EVENING

We see Dana sitting at the kitchen table with a note pad using the google search engine to estimate how much money self owned bakery businesses can make. She pauses her google search to research the SunnySide power plant and its owners. As she looks, a link about past deaths at the plant appear on the screen. Before she can click it, Asher comes in with a letter and interrupts her.

ASHER

Hey Ma this letter was left on the door earlier today.

DANA

Okay. Just leave it on the table.

Asher leaves the letter on the table and runs up stairs.

Dana opens the letter that reads " RENT DUE FRIDAY. EXTENSION NO LONGER VALID" She begins to shake as she reads the letter, but she remembers Lamarcus's words from his last visit at the house. She pulls her phone out and begins to call him

DANA

Hello is this Lamarcus Greene?

LAMARCUS (V.O)

If you're an associate of Mr. Washington this is the wrong number.

DANA

No this is Dana. Darien's wife

The sound of Lamarcus clearing his throat is heard over the phone.
His change in demeanor can be heard through his tone

LAMARCUS (V.O)

Oh Good evening how are you?

DANA

Honestly I'm not doing so good. I hate to ask you this, but I don't
know anyone else who could help

LAMARCUS

What's the matter?

DANA

I'm behind on rent and I was wondering if you could lend me the
money? I swear I'll pay you back it's just that things have been hard
since Derion left and I'm trying to balance the kids with my job and
being a new found single mother so-

LAMARCUS (V.O)

Just let me know how much it is okay? I can come over tomorrow to
leave the money.

DANA

Thank you so much. I promise this is the first and last time I will ask
you for a favor.

LAMARCUS (V.O)

Uh huh. Have a good evening.

Dana ends the phone.call.

CUT TO INT. DERION'S CLOSET

We see Asher in his fathers closet searching through his things when
he is stopped by the sight of a box labeled "football pre injury". Asher
grabs the box and opens it to find his fathers old Jersey and football
inside. Asher immediately places the jersey over his head and begins
to pose while holding the football in hand. He laughs while posing in
the jersey and pretending to catch the football. His laugh turns into
tears.

ASHER

It's not fair. It's not fair

Asher begins to sink in front of the mirror as he squeezes the football
he's holding.

CUT TO

INT.NORAH'S ROOM

Norah is sitting at the desk in her room drawing a picture of her father
as tears begin to flood her eyes.

NORAH

The picture is missing two wings. Daddy needs wings on his back
cause he's an angel now.

As Norah is drawing Asher enters to check on her.

ASHER

You okay cry baby?

NORAH

Stop I'm not a cry baby.

ASHER

Yes you are

NORAH

No I'm Not

ASHER

Oh yes you are

NORAH

Can you please stop arguing with me? I'm trying to draw daddy with wings

ASHER

Why would you do that?

NORAH

Because unlike you I actually miss daddy.

ASHER

Who said I don't miss him?

NORAH

You keep acting like your the incredible hulk. Me and mommy have cried but you act like you're too grown to cry.

ASHER

Pops is gone so I have to be the man of the family. Men don't cry

NORAH

That's not true! Daddy used to cry when we watched the lion king

ASHER

That was the only time!

NORAH

Do you miss him though? You were kind of mean to him the last day we saw him

ASHER

No I was not

NORAH

Yes you were!

ASHER

All I did was ask him for money! Stop acting like you know so much about me. You're just an eight year old daddy's girl with no daddy.

Norah begins to cry and punches her brother in the arm.

NORAH

Mommy! Asher's being mean to me.

Dana walks into the room to find Asher sitting on the bed next to Norah's desk with his arms folded.

DANA

ASHER! What is your problem? Didn't we already talk about you being a better older brother?

ASHER

You need to be checking her ma! She said that I was mean to dad the day he died but that's not true. I just asked him for money. I wasn't really mad at him okay? I wasn't! I loved him. I..

I..

The tough guy persona Asher has tried to uphold has began to crumble and he cries into his mothers arms.

DANA

We know you loved your father son. He loved you too.

NORAH

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry.

DANA

We just have to take this one day at a time. It's okay to feel.

ASHER

But I have to be strong for you and Norah.

DANA

Sometimes tears are the strongest form of emotion. They are a sign of strength, not weakness.

Asher begins to giggle through his tears

ASHER

Mom you sound like an inspirational Facebook post.

Dana, Asher, and Norah all laugh and the room becomes quiet.

NORAH

Mommy...do you think daddy....is in heaven? After the funeral everyone kept saying he was in a better place.

DANA

Yes my love. If anyone is in heaven it's your father. I've never met anyone as pure as him.

ASHER

He was your husband ma. You have to say that.

NORAH

I just hope he's having fun in heaven. I'm sure he's cooking his famous spaghetti for Jesus.

Dana and Asher chuckle at Norah's innocent idea of heaven.

CUT TO

INT. PURGATORY

Derion is in a dark black space but his image is visible to viewers. It seems as if he is the only person in the empty black space with no lights, no windows, and no doors.

DERION

Hello? Can anyone hear me?

Derion screams and begins to worry while walking around the empty black space.

DERION

Hello? I have a family to get home to!

Derion starts to hear footsteps move closer to him.

DERION

Who are you? Look I don't have any money if that's what you want.

The steps move closer and Derion begins to panic.

DERION

Show yourself!

The footsteps are right in front of Derion and he sees a person in the darkness that viewers can only hear.

DERION

Where are we? Are we both in hell?

VOICE OF FOOTSTEPS

Remember me?

DERION

Huh? Who are you?

VOICE OF FOOTSTEPS

You got rid of me years ago but you can't get rid of me now.

DERION

What are you talking about?

VOICE OF FOOTSTEPS

I've been waiting for you...Dad.

END EPISODE 1

Onion

by Guérin Asante

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

An alarm clock buzzes at 6:59 A.M. in a dark room. TEAL, a man in his 30s, reluctantly rolls over to turn off the alarm. He rolls back onto this back and stares at the ceiling. After a few deep breaths in absolute silence, he sits up in bed, puts his shoes into a pair of slippers, and begins his day.

As he takes a shower, he is struck by a memory--

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Teal and his husband, JOVAN, talk over a candle-lit dinner.

JOVAN

It's four.

TEAL

(using his fork to examine a serving of lasagne)

Not three? Are you sure?

JOVAN

(with one folded arm holding the other up, parking his chin against his fist)

I *did* make it, love. It's four.

(begins to make layering hand motions)

Sauce, noodles, sauce, noodles, sauce, noodles, sauce, noodles, cheese.

TEAL

(smiling)

That's nine. Including the sauce and cheese--

JOVAN

(laughingly)

Sauce and cheese don't count. Besides, it's not an abacus, T. *You and your layers*. Just eat it!

Teal smiles back heartily at Jovan as he begins to dig in.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Teal pauses in the shower, letting the water wash over his downturned head, drenching his long black locks. In the adjacent bedroom, the phone rings incessantly. He ignores it and continues showering.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Teal comes down the stairs into the kitchen. He walks over to the cupboard, picks up and refills a carafe. He then pulls down the grabs coffee beans, measures them, grinds them and begins brewing the coffee. The sound of the dogs' collars are like chimes beneath him. He grabs their food and pours some into each of their bowls. He is struck by another memory--

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Teal and Jovan are driving home from a night out. Jovan is behind the wheel of the car.

JOVAN

(exacerbated)

You don't have to keep doing this.

TEAL

It's my job, JoJo. I can't just leave.

JOVAN

Why not? It's just a job.

TEAL

(staring out the window)

It's more...than that. I just can't right now. Not yet.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

While lost in memory, the coffee pot begins to boil over. The sounds of the dogs' tags in the bowls clatter loud enough for Teal regain his attention. He turns off the pot and cleans up.

EXT. LAKE - AFTERNOON

Teal sits near the lake in a dark-colored outdoor recliner in the shade.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Teal has received a phone call from the coroner's office.

CORONER

We need you, if possible, to come and identify the body.

TEAL

I--I can. Can you tell me...?

CORONER

Yes?

TEAL

How did it happen?

CORONER

His car collided with a delivery truck...It was...instant, so in all likelihood he felt no pain...

Teal pauses over the phone, stone silent, shaking, his free hand over his eyes, rubbing his temples.

TEAL

(inhales deeply and sighs with a shudder)

Okay. I'll be there tomorrow.

END FLASHBACK:

EXT. LAKE - MOMENTS LATER

Teal begins to weep. As he does, he suddenly feels the sensation of arms wrapping around him. Their warmth makes him weep even more. He soon gathers his composure, stares out at the lake for a moment, as if he's searching for something along the surface of the water, before rising up and walking toward the house.

EXT. PIER - EVENING

After coming back outside, Teal stands at the pier, watching the sun set. As the colors of the day bleed away, he turns his attention to the water. Looking down at the now black pool, he begins to lean over the edge of the pier but does not try to stop his descent. Just before he hits the water--

BLACK

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

An alarm clock buzzes at 6:59 A.M. in the bedroom. Teal jumps up to turn off the alarm, startled. He rolls back onto his back and stares at the ceiling but is soon distracted by sounds coming from downstairs. He quickly hops up, throws on a robe and makes his way quietly down the hall, then down the stairs.

Looking up, he sees his husband, Jovan, gathering pots and pans and food for breakfast. He stares in silent disbelief, eyes wide open, as he grips the bannister tightly as if to keep himself upright.

JOVAN

(grinning with a slight smirk)

Well...look who finally got up.

TEAL

(stammering)

How...what are you...doing here?

Jovan holds up a frying pan with one hand and three eggs with the other.

JOVAN

Umm...breakfast?

TEAL

No. How are you here?

JOVAN

I live here. With you. Remember?

Teal walks over to him slowly, still unsure as to if Jovan is really there. Within a couple of feet of him, he rushes in to embrace him.

JOVAN

(holding the eggs over his head)

Careful, now! These don't come cheap nowadays.

Teal releases Jovan but doesn't take his eyes off of him.

JOVAN

What?

TEAL

(still struggling to find words)

I--I--you--

JOVAN

Sounds like you need a cup of coffee. *Maybe two.* The carafe's already full if you want some--

Jovan watches Teal walk over to the carafe, then goes over to the stove to make breakfast. On the counter, there is a cutting board, a chef's knife, and a bowl of diced bell pepper.

Jovan cracks the eggs into a bowl, whisking away at them quickly, while the pan heats up on the stovetop. Teal finishes pour himself a cup of coffee and sits at a stool, resting his forearms on the kitchen island.

JOVAN

Before you get too comfortable, I've got something to ask you...

Teal tenses up.

JOVAN

(pointing toward a basket)

Pass me that onion, please?

Teal's face changes from disbelief to bemusement. Almost something like relief.

TEAL

Which one? White or red?

JOVAN

The red one.

Teal gets up, grabs the red onion, and passes it to him. Jovan proceeds to dice it up. A memory comes rushing into Teal's mind.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

After dinner, Teal and Jovan are sitting on the sofa in a darkened room, watching television. On the coffee table, Teal's phone lights up, vibrating. The name on the caller ID says 'BOSS'. He looks down at the phone for a moment, staring at it with a concerned look on his face-- but doesn't answer. The phone eventually stops vibrating and goes dark.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

When Teal comes to, Jovan is standing over him with a full plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and sautéed vegetables.

JOVAN

Where were you just now?

TEAL

(blankly)

Nowhere, love. Just thinking.

JOVAN

They don't pay you to think on days off. (sits the plate down) You were thinking about work, right?

TEAL

No. Not really. No. It's doesn't matter. Let's eat.

As Jovan sits down, the scene cuts to Teal washing the dishes. He silently washes each dish, half-paying attention to what he's doing, half ruminating on Jovan's sudden return. A flash of the phone flashback pops in and out of his attention. As he finishes, Jovan comes down the stairs after a quick wash up.

JOVAN

(rubbing hands together)

So what's on the agenda today?

TEAL

Haven't thought about it. Maybe just take it easy?

JOVAN

I'm cool with that. How about some time at the lake?

Teal nods approvingly, returning a slight but sincere grin.

EXT. LAKE - AFTERNOON

After an afternoon montage of them talking, laughing, and playing with the dogs, the two men sit at the lake.

JOVAN

(turning towards Teal)

Hey, look. We have to talk.

TEAL

(frowning his brow slightly)

What's wrong?

JOVAN

Nothing wrong, per se. Well, nothing you need to worry about.

TEAL

(puzzled)

What do you mean?

JOVAN

(takes a slow, deep breath)

I'd like to answer your question from this morning. (sits upright and turns toward Teal) About why I'm here.

Teal's face switches from confusion to concern.

JOVAN

Actually, it's more about why *you're* here.

Jovan stands up, facing the lake and away from Teal.

JOVAN

What do you remember about last night?

TEAL

I remember...I remember...I was on the pier. And I dreamed that I fell in--

JOVAN

That wasn't a dream. (Pauses) You did fall in. And you didn't come back up.

Teal's face switches from concern to disbelief.

TEAL

What are you saying, JoJo? Are you saying that I'm--

JOVAN

Dead. Yes.

TEAL

And you're--

JOVAN

Dead. Also yes.

Teal shakes his head in utter disbelief.

TEAL

(incredulous)

So where are we right now? What is this place? Cuz it looks exactly like home.

JOVAN

We're...here...but also not here. I can show you what I mean. Look--

At that moment, Jovan begins to levitate a foot off the ground. Teal cannot believe what he is seeing.

JOVAN

You can do it, too. Lemme show you. (Takes Teal's hand) Now, stand on your toes and take a step up into the air.

Holding on to Jovan's hand, Teal stands on his toes, then places one foot into air. With no effort at all, he too levitates. His face changes, finally, to delight.

JOVAN

Now, let's fly.

TEAL

Wait, wha--

Before he can finish his sentence, the two of them begin flying over the lake. Hand in hand, they go higher and higher until they can see the treetops for miles in all directions. As they continue just beyond the lake, Teal notices on the ground, to his left, is a large building with people dressed in black military gear (with semiautomatic weapons) getting into an armored transport vehicle. A realization hits him like a bolt of lightning. He turns to Jovan and gets him to stop.

TEAL

I remember now.

JOVAN

Remember what?

TEAL

Why I'm here. With you. All of it.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. LABRATORY - NIGHT

Teal is at his job inside the laboratory, cleaning up for the night. He pauses as he hears a conversation just outside his door.

TEAL (V.O.)

Last night, I overheard my boss speaking with someone from the government. I figured out that the technology we had developed, a pill called Oracular, was going to be used by the government for war.

Teal scrambles to find his access key to the prototype room on his desk.

TEAL (V.O.)

The thing is, Oracular is a powerful tool. It allows whoever takes it to see the future through dreams.

Teal walks down the corridor to the prototype room, looking around before he opens the door and heads inside. Inside, he heads over to a safe, enters the code, and pulls out a small, iridescent capsule and a clear, plaque-like object (called a neurofile) with diodes embedded into it.

TEAL (V.O.)

I knew that if they got their hands on this technology, it would be catastrophic. So I did the only thing I knew to do.

Teal swallows the pill, smashes the neurofile, hides it underneath the safe and leaves, unaware that a small hidden camera has been watching him the entire time.

END FLASHBACK:

EXT. ABOVE THE LAKE - MOMENTS LATER

Teal and Jovan are floating at the edge of the lake.

TEAL

This has been...fun...

Jovan's face has become a blur of features.

TEAL

I know you're not in there, in that body--but I love you. (looking down at the lake) I have to go now.

Teal lets go of Jovan's hand.

TEAL

See you soon.

Teal turns and dives in the lake and on impact--

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Teal wakes up just as the alarm clock begins buzzing at 6:59 A.M., hitting the button to turn it off. He looks over his shoulder and sees Jovan, next to him asleep. He stares at him, smiling slightly, wistfully, before his attention turns to dim red light flashing against the walls, growing brighter and brighter, and the sound of a large engine growing closer.

END.

High School Selections

Eternity at Sea

by JG Burns

Influenced by the work of Robert Eggers

NOTE All scenes shot in black and white.

“THE SHIP”

The sound of the waves of the sea crash around the screen as the audience faces a black screen. Slowly, lettering appears on the screen reading, “She roams the deep searching for her lost love. Her presence has become legend to many. Except for those that have the misfortune of meeting her face to face.” The lettering then fades away, slowly.

FADE IN

Ext. Wide Shot- The screen then slowly fades in on an old wooden ship swaying at sea. The waves rock the ship calmly back and forth. After time, the screen fades to black for a moment before an inside shot of the ship.

WIDE SHOT

Int. Front Shot- We see a man, an elder man, around 60-65, with a white scruffy beard and spiky white hair, a resemblance of Willem Dafoe in The Lighthouse. The camera starts zoomed in on his snoring face, slowly moving out until we reach the whole room, revealing another man sleeping on the floor, who looks younger, around 30-35, with dark black hair and a clean shave. The image of the whole room rests for a few moments, then slowly fades once more into a room-resembling some sort of kitchen.

CLOSE UP

Int. Front Shot- We see a man’s sweaty face, scooping sand into a metal box. His face shows frustration, he looks very young, around 20-25, with brownish hair and a bit of stubble. After he scoops for a while, the camera changes to a posterior wide shot, showing him wiping the sweat off his forehead then taking a drink from a mug. After he drinks,

he wipes the residue off his upper lip. He grunts and tries to catch his breath from scooping all morning.

WIDE SHOT

Int. Now we see the main room of the ship. Empty. After seconds, the young man enters the room from a door leading into the kitchen. He has a wooden spoon and pot in his hand. He walks through another door, leading into the room where the other two men lay asleep.

WIDE SHOT

Int. We see the young man walk in the room where the other two men lay sleeping. He looks at their slumber for a moment, then lifts his pot and wooden spoon and starts banging.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The men wake up in utter shock. The man sleeping on the floor gets up immediately and stumbles around. The older man is awake but lays in his bed, annoyed.

Old Man

We hear ye!

The man stops banging.

Youngest Man

Up now. You dogs.

The old man starts to get out of bed while the other man falls to the ground; it is obvious he is hung over.

WIDE SHOT

Int. - Main Room – All three men enter the main room and sit on the ground together. They place a rosary in the middle of them and sit on their knees. They begin praying. Maybe their prayers will keep her at bay.

Old Man

Father, Conor, Liam, and I, Aidan, come to you humbly. We ask for your blessing upon this day, this ship, and the crew on it. We thank

you for your many blessings. We ask that you continue to bless us throughout our journey. Amen.

Conor & Liam (In Unison)

Lord hear our prayer.

Aidan

We shall prepare breakfast.

Conor (Youngest man)

The oven is fired up.

Liam (Hungover man)

Mumbling Tired... awful cooking.

Aidan

Do not complain, Liam. We are lucky to have anything to digest at this point.

Liam

Any day now I'll eat one of ya's. If she doesn't get you first.

Aidan

Your drunk mouth is talking. Stop your yammering. Your belly will be full in minutes.

Conor

It's almost ready, I'll bring it out.

Conor goes into the kitchen. Leaving Liam and Aidan sitting alone waiting.

Liam

Still mumbling Pathetic... your hope. It's been too long. We won't make it off this ship alive.

Aidan

Liam. Hold your tongue. Stop your prophesying. We shall be fine.

Liam

You are naive, boy! The sea will eat us alive. We will be swallowed into its depths, taken below to live among the fishes and everything else that lurks beneath. She'll see to it!

Aidan

Liam! Quiet, you fool! It is bad luck to bring such evil spirits upon us. Do you want to die? Do you want her to hear you?

Liam

Raising his voice The sea knows not of luck. The sea cares not for our ship or our lives. Waves crashing, day in and day out. You can't stop the sea or its inhabitants. A mere three Irishmen are no match for this beautiful and ominous being. The sea houses its mysterious creatures and allows them to do its bidding. It allows her to take anyone she wants since it took what she wanted most.

Aidan

You've gone mad! You know that's just a legend, an old sailor's tale.

Aidan stares at him in annoyance and horror. Liam grins like a man who knows their fate is already sealed.

Conor comes back from the kitchen.

Conor

Breakfast.

FADE TO BLACK

Across the black screen shows the following: "LATER THAT NIGHT..."

"The Lady of the Sea"

WIDE SHOT

Int. The bedroom- Aidan is asleep in his bed while Liam sleeps on the floor. Conor lays on the floor, but with eyes wide open. As moments pass, all that is audible is the snoring of Liam and the swaying of the ship amongst the waves. It sounds as if it is an awfully stormy night.

The room emits drunk sleep and dirtiness, but Aidan and Liam are out cold.

Conor stands up. He goes up to Aidan and observes him as he sleeps. He notices the rosary beside him. He picks up the rosary and inspects it. Distracted and deep in thought, he hears a noise from the main room.

CLANG!

TRACKING CLOSE UP SHOT

He inches closer and closer to the door leading to the main room. He enters the main room slowly.

WIDE SHOT- Main Room

We see a woman standing in the main room. She is dressed in a beautiful gown, torn and aged. Perhaps a wedding gown. Conor stares at her and can't believe his eyes. Is this her? The infamous lady of the sea.

The woman stares back at him. No words are exchanged.

Eventually, she raises her hand as she calls for him to follow her. He can't resist and he hesitantly follows her across the ship's deck.

WIDE SHOT- The Deck

It is a very stormy night; Conor can barely stand. Yet the woman has no trouble walking in the storm. She glides to the edge of the deck.

Conor

STOP! You'll go over!

She offers no reply and simply sits on the edge of the ship staring into the night. She glances back over her shoulder then gently slips over the edge.

Conor

Wait!

Conor races to her, struggling to manage through the storm. He finally gets right up to her as she falls off the ship.

Conor

No!!

In haste, Conor dives in after her. He is lost in the waves. The sea rages on as we see no sign of life from either of them, simply swallowed up by the sea. Haunting female laughter is heard in the distance.

CLOSE UP

Int. - The Bedroom- We see Aidan's sleeping face as Liam's snores grow louder. Suddenly, his eyes opened. He struggles to wake. He sits up on his bed and notices Conor's absence. He looks at his feet to see his rosary laying on the ground. He picks it up and clutches it tightly while the snores of Liam fill the room. As he begins the rosary, he hears a crash from the kitchen. He gently places his rosary on the bed.

Aidan

Conor?

No response.

Aidan slowly rises out of his bed, stepping closer and closer to the door leading to the main room.

WIDE SHOT

Aidan stands in the now open door. A female figure stands in the room in front of him. He takes one step forward, her next victim, and the screen fades to black.

Across the black screen reads "Eternity at Sea."

End credits roll.

My Best Friend and Dead Celebrities from the 90s

by Phaedra Temmis

INT. APARTMENT, BEDROOM - DAY

An attractive white woman in her early-20's, JANE, is sleeping in her bed without any blankets. She's moving around for comfort as a foot moves into the frame and pushes against her face. She makes a face of discomfort and blinks awake.

NOAH and Jane are sharing the bed, however they are on opposite ends. Noah remains out of frame, though he is present for the scene.

JANE

Ugh.

She picks up the foot and pushes it aside.

JANE (CONT'D)

Noah, do you ever stay on your side of the bed?

NOAH (O.C.)

Great question, but do you ever think about sharing your side of the bed?

Jane starts to become frustrated but in a playful manner.

JANE

"Do you ever share your side of the--" This is my bed.

(pause)

This is my apartment!

She tugs on the blankets so that they cover her face.

After a few beats, the blanket slips away to reveal Jane's face again.

JANE (CONT'D)

Ugh, go haunt someone else.

NOAH (O.C.)

(sarcastic) And leave you all alone? How dare I? Come on, you know you can't do anything without me.

He lightly smacks Jane's face repeatedly with his foot. Jane aimlessly smacks around for Noah's foot until he stops tapping, she sighs.

JANE

(to herself)

I find out I see dead people, yet I can't even see someone important like...

(sits up)

like Heath Ledger or-- or River Phoenix. I get...Noah Daugherty.

The camera shifts to Noah for the first time. He is a young man around the same age as Jane with a translucent body and a hazy glow due to being a ghost. He's smirking with determined eyes and sits in the same position as Jane.

NOAH

(shrugs shoulders)

I mean that's a gift if I've ever seen one.

We now see both Jane and Noah as they sit in silence. Jane has a look of annoyance but lets out a giggle at Noah's remark. Jane picks up a pillow and hits Noah across the chest, however, it goes through him.

JANE

Hey, no fair!

Noah grabs a much smaller throw pillow and starts to hit her too. Their laughter continues as the sound drowns out. They continue fighting as Jane does a voice over narration.

JANE (V.O.)

Noah...I mean, where do I start?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. ART CLASSROOM - DAY

TEEN JANE and TEEN NOAH are in art class seated at a table across from one another. The classroom is quiet and everyone is working.

TITLE CARD: AUGUST 2012

JANE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We met in art class, freshman year.

(pause)

He was really good, I was...also good...

We see Teen Jane's horrible drawing followed by Teen Noah's better drawing.

TEEN JANE

Hey, that's really good.

TEEN NOAH

Thanks.

Teen Noah doesn't look up to see who's talking to him.

Teen Jane notices that he's not paying much attention so she tries to gain his attention once more.

TEEN JANE

(laughing softly)

Yeah...mine isn't that good.

Teen Noah lifts his head up to see what she's drawing.

TEEN NOAH

Yeah, it kinda sucks.

He looks back down and continues to draw.

TEEN JANE

(taken aback)

Oh—

TEEN NOAH

I would say I was that bad once, but I wouldn't want to lie.

TEEN JANE

(surprised, offended)

Well, you don't have to be so rude about it.

(she starts to draw again)

It's just a stupid fine arts credit anyway. Who cares if it's good?

She mutters the last sentence to herself in a way to justify her lack of skill.

We linger on Teen Jane drawing aggressively as present Jane continues her voice over.

JANE (V.O)

He wasn't the nicest when I first met him...But he proved to be a good person the more I spent time with him.

INT. ART CLASSROOM - DAY - LATER DATE

TEEN NOAH

Y'know, if you want it to appear more realistic, try adding highlights to it.

(he points with his pencil)

The light is coming from here, right?

Teen Jane nods.

TEEN NOAH (CONT'D)

So the highlights would be...here.

He retreats to his own paper in a swift motion to appear as if he didn't help Teen Jane.

TEEN JANE

Thanks, that's really helpful actually.

TEEN NOAH

Don't go thanking me yet, let's see if you can actually do it yourself first.

TEEN JANE

(smiles)

Whatever.

She goes back to drawing.

We now see both Teen Jane and Teen Noah. Both focused on their art, Teen Noah lifts his head to glance at Teen Jane while holding back a tiny smile. Returning his head, Teen Jane now glances at him, performing the same action.

JANE (V.O.)

...Sort of a good person. But that's what I liked about him. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind. He'd tell you the harsh truth but he also knew how to make you feel better. He had a secret soft side and silliness under all the coldness. How could you not like him?

JANE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We did everything together.

A series of brief interactions occur.

- EXT. OUTSIDE OF MOVIE THEATER - DAY - Teen Jane waves to Teen Noah as he approaches the movie theater building.

- INT. CITY BUS - NIGHT - Teen Noah wakes to Teen Jane's head on his shoulder. He lifts his jacket from his lap to place it on the other half of her body. He rests his head on hers.

- INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY - Teen Jane and Teen Noah play a board game and Teen Noah wins. Teen Jane retaliates charmingly

- INT. ART GALLERY - DAY - Teen Jane forces Teen Noah to get a picture with his artwork while he dreads the entire thing.

JANE (V.O.)

(admirably)

For the next 4 years, we were literally inseparable. He was my other half. My annoying, lovable, goofball of another half. I couldn't imagine my life without him.

EXT. CEMETERY - AFTERNOON

TITLE CARD: October 2015

It's drizzling outside, the sky dark and grim. Noah's family members are all surrounding the newly placed coffin and many are huddled in groups for support. Teen Jane is standing by herself with her head low and eyes watering, but not crying.

JANE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And then he died.

Noah's grandmother, MRS. ANDERSON, approaches Teen Jane and places a hand on her shoulder. Teen Jane places her opposite hand on Mrs. Anderson's and smiles.

TEEN JANE

Sorry for your loss, Mrs. Anderson.

Mrs. Anderson smiles softly through tears before retrieving her hand and walking away.

INT. JANE'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - DAY

We see Teen Jane crying in her bed across a couple of short scenes.

JANE (V.O.)

I made the best effort not to cry at the funeral. But of course, I caved. I cried for a long time. I mean it was awful.

(pause)

But then, what I call the second-best day of my life came around.
October 5th, 2015.

INT. JANE'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - DAY - LATER DATE

We focus on Teen Jane huddled up in her blankets. Her nose is stuffed so she gets up to retrieve tissue. She SCREAMS as she views the ghost version of Teen Noah. She is too stunned to speak.

TEEN NOAH

(awkwardly)

Hi, Jane.

Teen Jane is silent.

TEEN NOAH (CONT'D)

I'm back...

Teen Jane gasps at the sound of his voice and swings her hand over her mouth, dropping her head.

TEEN JANE

(to herself)

Oh my god...oh my god. I'm dreaming.

(nodding, reassuring herself)

I'm dreaming...I'm dreaming? I'm— oh my god. What the hell is going on?

Teen Noah walks up closer to Teen Jane.

TEEN NOAH

I'm not too sure about this either.

TEEN JANE

No, stop...you aren't real.

(quietly)

You aren't real.

TEEN NOAH

I don't know, I think I'm pretty real.

(pause)

Just yesterday I went to my house. I saw my grandma and I was so happy, but while I could see her, she couldn't see me, she couldn't hear me, nothing...I thought I was the one having the dream. Or nightmare, rather...I was so— so scared.

(pause)

But then, I thought about you, Jane. I had to see you.

Teen Jane looks up at Teen Noah, she's crying.

TEEN JANE

How do I know this is real, that I'm not hallucinating...that this is the truth?

TEEN NOAH

Because I'd never lie to you.

(pause).

I could also pinch you if you're up for that.

Teen Noah steps towards Teen Jane to console her. He brings her to his body and hugs her as Teen Jane violently sobs into Teen Noah's chest. She wraps her arms around him to complete the hug.

TEEN NOAH (CONT'D)

(laughs)

I guess you see dead people now.

TEEN JANE

(sniffing)

I mean I still can't tell whether I'm crazy or not but...I guess?

Teen Jane lets out a small laugh.

TEEN NOAH

Yeah, that's totally weird on your part.

TEEN JANE

Hey!

She lightly punches Teen Noah's chest.

There's a pause for a few moments. Teen Jane looks up to Teen Noah.

TEEN JANE

So...what were you doing this whole time? You weren't like watching me sleep or something right?

TEEN NOAH

Oh, god no. I was having trouble going through the walls and you just caught me at the wrong time.

Teen Jane has a confused expression.

TEEN NOAH (CONT'D)

Yeah, yeah, I know, you'd think as a ghost I'd know these things. But give me a day or two and I'll have it under control.

TEEN JANE

(smiling)

You're so stupid.

Teen Jane goes in for another hug and Teen Noah reciprocates it.

JANE (V.O.)

And just so you know, he did not have it under control within 2 days. Not even the first week.

We see multiple scenes where hijinks ensue as a result of Jane and Noah's newfound dynamic. We gradually transition from Jane and Noah as teens to the present day characters in each scene.

JANE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

After that we continued on as normal, well a little less than normal. I got the occasional stares from people who might've thought I was, like, schizophrenic or something, but that didn't matter now that I had my best friend back.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY

We see Jane and Noah sitting on a picnic blanket painting on canvases, carrying a conversation. Jane tries not to talk too much to appear normal to bystanders. Noah looks up at what Jane has done.

NOAH

Wow, that is awful.

JANE

(mouth drops)

This is a work of art, thank you very much.

(pause)

I just don't see the need to show off as much as...other people I know.

NOAH

(laughs)

I hope you remember this was your idea.

He looks back down and resumes his painting.

JANE

What if I just...

Jane takes her paintbrush and flicks it in Noah's direction. Noah looks up with a shocked expression.

NOAH

You little...

Now, both Noah and Jane are laughing. Noah takes his paintbrush and flicks it back. He and Jane flick paint back and forth while bystanders stare with concern. We see the perspective of others who only see Jane flicking paint in the air.

JANE (V.O.)

You know what, I guess I've realized I don't need someone like Heath Ledger or River Phoenix. I get to have Noah Daugherty.

(pause)

And that's enough for me.

END

The Hermit

by Jordan Strobel

OVER BLACK...

The sounds of a little girl humming and crayons scraping on paper.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

The little girl, LUCY (7), sits on the floor at the living room coffee table as she keeps humming her tune. Crayons and colored pencils are strewn all over the table and floor.

INSERT: Lucy's current masterpiece. A harshly done stick figure drawing of a man holding a little girl's hand.

She picks up the drawing, gets up, and works her way down the hall.

INT. HOUSE - STUDY - CONTINUOUS

Lucy creaks open the door and peers through the crack.

Her FATHER sits at his desk on the phone. Everything on his desk is meticulously organized.

FATHER

Yeah...OK...No, I can't. My kid's home alone...I can't get a babysitter... Fine...Fine...I'll be there in 20...

He slams the phone down on the receiver gets up, grabs his coat, and storms out of the room. Lucy backs away as the door flies open.

INT. HOUSE - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Her father rushes out of his study.

LUCY

Hi Daddy! I drew you something.

FATHER

(impatiently) Let me see it.

She hands him the drawing. He looks at it for a split second and hands it back.

FATHER (CONT'D)

It's great, honey.

Really?

LUCY

FATHER

(snappy)

Yeah, it's amazing.

LUCY

Do you wanna play with me? I can go get Mr. Fluffy Pants and we can have teatime.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

FATHER

I can't right now, Lucy. I need to get to the office.

He trips on one of her toys that's lying on the ground. He catches himself before he falls and gets angry.

FATHER (CONT'D)

(yelling)

Ugh! Lucy, how many times do I need to tell you to pick up your toys when you're done with them?!

LUCY

I'm sorry.

He turns around, kneels down, and kisses her on the forehead.

FATHER

I love you. I'll only be gone for a few hours, OK?

(beat)

OK?

LUCY

(deflated)

OK.

FATHER

Can you clean up your toys while I'm gone?

LUCY

OK...

He leaves the house almost instantaneously, leaving Lucy standing in the middle of the living room.

She slowly loosens the grasp on her drawing and lets it fall. The front door slams shut.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Lucy stands in the middle of the living room. She begins picking up her stuffed animals. Lucy sulks out of the room with her toys.

INT. HOUSE - LUCY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Lucy walks into her room and walks over to her bed. A cornucopia of stuffed animals already occupies her bed. She adds the ones she's holding. Someone would question why she's allowed to sleep with that many. Her attention becomes drawn to one small Bunny. This is MR. FLUFFY PANTS.

LUCY

Hi, Mr. Fluffy Pants. Do you want to go outside with me?

She props up the bunny with her hands.

LUCY (CONT'D)

(as Mr. Fluffy Pants, gruff) Sure, Lucy. I could use some play time!

(as herself) Yay!

She hugs Mr. Fluffy Pants. Skipping out of her room with complete and utter joy.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lucy walks through the living room and pulls open the sliding glass door. She looks out towards the woods.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Lucy shuts the door to the house and walks into the middle of the backyard. We see that it's only fenced off on the sides with the middle leading right into a thick, DARK FOREST. She doesn't know what to do.

EXT. BACKYARD - LATER

Lucy is now sitting on the ground, playing with Mr. Fluffy Pants. She makes him jump and she giggles with herself over all the stories and adventures she's making him go through in her mind.

Some leaves in the woods RUSTLE.

LUCY

(afraid) Hello?

More rustles.

She starts walking slowly to the edge of the woods. The leaves rustle again.

A BUNNY hops out from some of the leaves. Lucy looks ecstatic!

CUT TO:

LUCY

(loudly) Hello!

(CONT'D)

The bunny flinches so Lucy shrinks down low to the ground.

LUCY

(quietly) I'm sorry.

(CONT'D)

The bunny looks at her, crooked. "What is she doing?"

Lucy gets up slowly and starts walking towards the bunny who watches her every move.

CUT TO:

Lucy's foot lands perfectly on a small twig and snaps it sending the bunny to dash into the woods.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Wait! I just want to play!

She follows him into the woods.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

The bunny continues to run for its life with Lucy not too far behind.

LUCY

Wait! I just wanna play!

The bunny runs behind a fallen tree.

Lucy follows, jumping over the tree but doesn't seem to see the STEEP HILL behind it. She goes tumbling down the hill. Every tumble followed by a grunt before she slams onto the ground at the bottom of the hill.

EXT. WOODS - LATER

Lucy lays on the floor, passed out. We see the bunny behind her, sniffing her. Lucy moves slightly causing the bunny to hop away into the forest.

Lucy sits up, groggy. We see a hill covered by leaves and moss as Lucy begins to look around. After a moment she's panicked.

LUCY

Mr. Fluffy Pants? Mr. Fluffy Pants!

She can't find him. She looks towards the hole and sees him just outside the entrance. She gets up and starts walking towards Mr. Fluffy Pants.

The closer we get we start to see it's less of a hole and more of a tunnel or a cave. Just before she reaches him she hears a NOISE... Coming from the CAVE.

Hello?

LUCY

(CONT'D)

The noise sounds familiar. Like someone walking, but not normally. No, this is different. It sounds like more of a shuffle.

Suddenly, a LARGE FIGURE, covered by the darkness of the trees and the shadow of this cave, approaches Mr. Fluffy Pants. We can't see his face. All we see are the rags and torn cloth that he wears.

LUCY

(scared) Hello?

(CONT'D)

Lucy backs up a few steps, tripping on a rock and falling backwards. She begins trembling in fear. The figure continues to slowly shuffle towards Mr. Fluffy Pants. The sun shines directly onto the figure's face. If you can even call it that.

It has a grossly deformed, almost monster like face. Its left arm is uncomfortably large compared to the right. All balancing on skinny legs that somehow hold up the rest of its body.

Lucy sits on the floor, frozen. Still trembling. This creature grabs Mr. Fluffy pants and investigates it. A small smile nudges its way onto his face. He looks up to see Lucy and begins shuffling towards her.

LUCY

(CONT'D)

Please!

She tries to run back up the hill but can't. She keeps sliding down on leaves and unstable rocks. We hear the shuffle of the creature growing louder and inching closer as she struggles to make it up the hill. The shuffle grows louder and louder as she slides back down for a final time and clutches herself into a fetal position, crying. The shuffling stops.

Lucy slowly uncovers herself to see the creature, kneeling down with its head bowed, holding Mr. Fluffy Pants towards Lucy. She slowly reaches out and grabs Mr. Fluffy Pants.

The creature backs up, still bowing its head. It sits on the floor and watches Lucy as her fear begins to fade. She looks at Mr. Fluffy Pants, then back to the creature. She stands up, quickly followed by the creature standing up and backing up a step.

Thank you.

LUCY

(CONT'D)

Her voice scares the creature, causing him to flinch and back up another step.

LUCY (CONT'D)

It's OK, I won't hurt you.

She steps forward again. The creature follows with a step back. This tango continues for a moment until Lucy sits on the ground. The creature sits.

LUCY (CONT'D)

My name is Lucy.

She points at herself. The creature tries to imitate her pointing.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Do you have a name?

The creature looks down.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Well, this is Mr. Fluffy Pants... He's my favorite toy. Do you have any toys?

The creature looks up at Mr. Fluffy Pants. He gets up and shuffles into his cave.

After an uncomfortable wait, the creature emerges from the cave holding a rock. He drops it onto the ground and sits next to it. He pushes it around from one hand to the other.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Is that your toy?

He looks at her, then bows his head before playing with the rock. Lucy gets up and looks at the hill. The creature watches her as she tries to climb back up. She falls again and he turns his head; he's curious.

LUCY (CONT'D)

I need to go home. I just don't know how to get out of these woods.

The creature ignores her and keeps rolling the rock.

LUCY

I have an idea!

(CONT'D)

The creature looks at her as if he can understand the concept of an idea.

LUCY (CONT'D)

If you can help me get home, do you want to play tea time with me?

The creature replies with a blank stare. Lucy sends a stare right back at the creature.

She gets up and walks towards the side of the hill before stopping and looking at the creature.

LUCY

Are you coming?

(CONT'D)

The creature stands up. He looks back at his cave before walking towards her. Lucy gets ready to walk but the creature walks in front of her. He's leading the way.

EXT. FORREST - HILL - MOMENTS LATER

Lucy continues to follow the creature. He leads her down a dark and gloomy path.

LUCY

How do you know where we're going?

The creature doesn't pay her any attention.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Do you know where my house is?

He still ignores her.

Ugh...

LUCY

(CONT'D)

She reluctantly keeps following him.

EXT. FORREST - TREE LINE - LATER

Lucy walks out of the trees and behind the fence, she stops and turns to notice the creature standing at the edge of the trees.

LUCY

Are you coming?

The creature takes another step back.

LUCY (CONT'D)

You can come with me. We still have to play tea time.

The creature looks towards the direction they came. He's looking back towards his home.

LUCY (CONT'D)

You'll be OK. You can hold my hand.

She offers him her hand. He tilts his head.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Let's go get some tea.

The creature stands there for a moment, contemplating. He starts towards her hand. He stretches his larger arm out but hesitates.

It's OK.

LUCY

(CONT'D)

He rests his hand in hers. He follows closely behind, clinging to her hand.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

Lucy brings the creature into the backyard. He tries to pull back but she brings him to the door.

LUCY

This is my house. It's kind of like your cave, but better. I'm going to see if my daddy's home yet.

Lucy opens the door a crack.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Lucy peers through the door; her father is nowhere to be seen. She opens the door more and brings the creature inside. We finally get a real sense of his size. Anything looks tall next to a 7 year old's. Especially a 7 foot tall humanoid. As they walk through the living room the creature looks around like a child in a candy store.

All these new concepts and objects he's seeing for the first time.

A lamp. A couch. A TV. Rugs. Cups.

INT. HOUSE - LUCY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The creature stands in the middle of a bright pink room. He's mesmerized by the mountain of stuffed animals. He stops looking at them as Lucy begins grabbing them. He turns his attention to the light switch that he begins flipping on and off and on again.

LUCY

Alright. You sit there.

She points towards a 2-foot-tall plastic chair sitting at a 3-foot-tall table equipped with a variety of plastic cups and saucers. Tea party ready.

She puts the stuffed animals on their chairs. The creature walks towards the table.

Wait!

LUCY

(CONT'D)

The creature stops in his tracks.

LUCY (CONT'D)

You can't go to a tea party dressed like that.

He looks at his rags.

LUCY

Come with me.

(CONT'D)

INT. HOUSE - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Lucy and the creature walk from her room to the one across the hall.

INT. HOUSE - THE FATHER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is very drab. Grey and lifeless. Lucy goes to the closet as the creature looks around. His interest is instantly drawn to a baseball bat on the wall. He looks closer and sees the inscription on it "SEASON MVP (MOST HOME RUNS)."

He turns and looks at the end table. A photo of Lucy's father and a woman sits behind a gold band. Her father's wedding ring. Lucy notices the creature looking at it.

LUCY

That's my mommy. (beat)

She died 2 years ago. I miss her
sometimes.

She looks at the creature who is staring at the picture.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Where's your mommy?

The creature looks out the window.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Is she in the cave?

The creature looks somewhat sad.

LUCY (CONT'D)

We'll find her. Together.

She reaches her hand out. The creature looks at her open hand. He places his on top.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Let's find a suit for the tea party.

She ruffles through the closet and finds one.

LUCY(O.S.)

Here you go.

Lucy lays out a suit on the bed. The creature looks at the suit. It's a normal black suit. Lucy places a white dress shirt on top, followed by a tie.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Now you'll be dressed just in time for tea.

INT. HOUSE - LUCY'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The creature looks even larger when sitting at the tiny table. The suit rides up on his calves and his forearms. It's an extremely tight with the shirt buttons barely clasped. The tie is just kind of tied around his neck. Not in any sort of formal knot, just like a rope.

The evening sun shines on the table.

LUCY

You hold the tea like this.

She points her pinky way out as the creature holds the cup normally.

Like this.

LUCY

(CONT'D)

She reaches across the table and positions his pinky way out, mimicking her own.

LUCY

Then, we drink.

(CONT'D)

She mimics drinking the tea. He follows suit.

LUCY

Good. Now you see if Mr. Fluffy Pants wants some. Like this.

She gives Mr. Fluffy Pants some "tea." The creature follows her.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Good job! Now again.

She takes a sip, so does the creature. The creature's chair suddenly buckles underneath the weight and he falls about an inch. He's jolted but continues to try and "drink" tea.

LUCY (CONT'D)

We should do this every day.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The front door opens and Lucy's Father enters. His tie is undone, he's tired.

The father walks into the living room and sees Lucy's crayons and paper on the coffee table and floor.

FATHER

(to himself)

Didn't I ask her to pick these up?

INT. HOUSE - LUCY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Lucy keeps playing teatime as the door to the bedroom opens.

FATHER

Hi, honey. How was yo--

The creature instantly stands up and hits his head on the overhead lamp. The father doesn't know what to do.

FATHER

(panicked) What is that!?

LUCY

(CONT'D)

Daddy, he's my friend.

FATHER

No, what is that!? Get out of my house!

The creature moans, not knowing what to do. The fear in his eyes takes over the rest of his face.

The father runs into his room.

INT. HOUSE - THE FATHER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The father grabs the MVP bat from the wall.

INT. HOUSE - LUCY'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The father points the bat at the creature. He begins swinging it, HITTING the creature repeatedly.

LUCY

Daddy! Stop!

Her words start slurring as she screams and cries. The creature SCREAMS in agony!

LUCY (CONT'D)

(crying and screaming) Daddy! Please!

The creature continues to scream as the father pushes him out of the room with the bat and into the hallway.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The creature stumbles into the living room as Lucy screams at the sight of the creature being hurt. She's conflicted between her father and her new friend.

FATHER

Get out!

The creature sends out a moan of sorrow as he crashes through the sliding glass door. Lucy is inconsolable as she grasps Mr. Fluffy Pants tight, hugging it. Hoping Mr. Fluffy Pants can bring her some sense of calm. The father drops the bat and runs into his bedroom. Lucy takes the opportunity and goes outside to the creature.

EXT. BACKYARD - EVENING

LUCY

I'm sorry.

The creature leans down towards her. Her sadness overwhelms the creature as we see tears stream down his face... She lifts up Mr. Fluffy Pants and hands it to him.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Here... Now go! Run!

More tears stream down his face as he takes Mr. Fluffy Pants... Blood drips from gashes caused by the glass door.

The father reappears with a PISTOL and sends out a single shot into the sky. This causes the creature to flinch as he stumbles down the hill... Lucy continues to cry as her father leans down and hugs her. Holding her tight.

FATHER

It's OK, baby. Everything's going to be OK...

As we pull away from Lucy and her father, Lucy continues to sob as we hear a loud MOAN echo throughout the woods...

EXT. WOODS - HOLE ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

The creature shuffles towards his cave. Mr. Fluffy Pants rubs against the ground as the shuffling of his feet disappear into the cave with the rest of his body...

One last sorrowful groan echoes out of the cave...

FADE TO BLACK...

Playwriting

Columbus State University Selections

Outlived

by D'Miya Richburg

Dedicated to my beautiful and loving Great Grandmother, Momma
Dot.

&

Dedicated to my fierce and loving Great Aunt, Auntie (Juanita)

Characters

Mae

Gigi (G)

Rose

Eddie

Niecy

Nicole

Little Girl

Marie

This play takes place at a time where grief screams, the mind
crumbles, and one's heart yearns.

Act I

Scene One

The stage is dark. There is a sense that it is nighttime from the sound of crickets outside. A quiet wave of water rustles throughout the atmosphere. As the tide goes in and out.... in and out... until we hear the sound of someone breathing to the rhythm of the tide. This person begins humming a calming melody only they can seem to follow. Creating the perfect balance of stillness and harmony throughout the space. Getting up, they begin to walk without picking up their feet. The dragging sound of their bedroom shoes on the wooden floor is the last instrument to complete this unique score to this world.

(Lights up) A lamp is cut on revealing the bedroom of a nursing home. There are two beds set up to make an L-shape along with a white curtain in between them to separate one another. Around the room are wooden dressers and cabinets with a mini television that is currently paused on an episode of "The Young and the Restless." A single large window is on the left side of the room with the curtains closed. Gigi and Mae are both wearing blue bonnets and white nightgowns. Gigi is snuggled under her covers trying to catch Mae's attention as she stands in the center of the room swaying and pacing back and forth.

Gigi: Mae, didn't I tell you to stop waking me up in the middle of the night?

Mae ignores Gigi as she is immersed in her own little world.

Gigi: You better hush all that fuss before Rose come in here. I'm tryna get some good sleep tonight.

Rose, wearing navy blue nursing scrubs and a white long sleeve shirt underneath enters, letting all the light in from the hallway. The room is now fully lit.

Rose: Aw come on Mae not again.

Gigi: I tried to tell her.

Rose: Where are we at today, pretty Mae?

Mae: I'm swimming. Don't you hear the waves?

Rose: Yes, I do. But don't you think it's time to go back to bed? The tides seem pretty high tonight.

Mae: They just fine for me baby. I think I see someone I know on the other side.

Rose: You see Gigi? Look, she's right over there.

Gigi: I got out the ocean a bit early tonight, Mae.

Mae: Gigi, that's you? You can't be leaving me too, I'm tryna get to the otherside.

Rose: Come on pretty Mae, let's dry you off and get you back to bed.

Mae: I am quite tired.

Rose: Mmh, me too. Come on.

beat

Mae: Can we finish swimming tomorrow?

Rose: We sure can, but it's late.

Mae: I see.

Rose (putting her in bed): There we go. Sweet dreams, pretty Mae.

Rose manages to get Mae into bed successfully. As Mae begins to close her eyes, the sound of waves disappears leaving the room to silence.

Rose: You alright, Gigi?

Gigi: Tired... that ain't the Mae I know.

Gigi rolls over in her bed and cuts off the lamp. Rose gives one final tuck for Mae and begins walking to the door to exit. Taking one more look at them before she leaves.

Rose exits the room and the stage is dark again as they finally go back to sleep.

Scene Two

(Lights up) It is morning time at the nursing home. Approximately 8:00 am. Both Mae and Gigi are still in bed. Gigi is awake and watching her stories on the television. While Mae is still catching up on sleep. Rose enters the room. She goes to open the blinds and notices Mae in the bed.

Rose: Morning Gigi. She's still sleeping, huh?

Gigi: She hadn't said a word since last night. I've been tryna wake her up... it's like she can't hear me.

Rose: She's right here. She just sleep.

beat

Gigi: We all we got so...

Rose: I know, but she's right here and doing fine.

Gigi: That dementia sure is some else, ain't it?

Rose: Yes ma'am, it is.

Gigi: Mmmh.

Rose: Well, since you're awake let's check your vitals.

Gigi: I'm bout tired of y'all sticking stuff in me nie.

Rose: It won't take that long, I promise. Now how your legs doing?

Gigi: Still can't walk.

Rose: Still don't wanna try the walker?

Gigi: If I can't walk with the two legs God gave me, then I just ain't gone walk at all.

beat

Rose: Oh, looks like someone's up. Give me one second Mae I'm almost done with your sister.

Gigi: Mae, you didn't hear me calling you last night?

Mae isn't responding.

Gigi): Mae?

Rose: She just woke up, give her some time.

Gigi: I told you she can't hear me.

Rose: Alright, you are all done. Everything looks fine, just your blood pressure is just a little over but not by a lot so please try to take things easy, okay? I'll be right back to come check on you pretty Mae.

Rose exits the room.

Mae: Ju...

Gigi: Mae?

Mae: June, that's you?

Gigi: Mae, it's Gigi.

Mae: My sister? Gigi, that's you?

Gigi: Yeah Mae, it's me.

Mae: I thought you was Junie.

Gigi: Junie not here no more, Mae.

Mae: I saw her last night when I was swimming.

Rose re-enters the room ready to check Mae's vitals.

Rose: See, I told you she can hear you Gigi. How we doing today, Mae?

Mae: I'm doing good sweetheart. You saw Junie last night too didn't you?

Rose: I don't think I know Junie.

She begins checking her vitals.

Mae: Yes you do. My daughter, Junie.

Gigi: Junie gone, Mae.

Mae: No she not. She was right here last night Gigi. Tell her Rose.

Rose: I don't know but you're all good to go and y'all's breakfast should be here shortly, okay?

Rose exits the room.

Mae: Why you being so mean, G?

Gigi: I ain't being mean.

Mae: Maybe if you start swimming you can see your child too.

...

Eddie, loud and proud, enters wearing the same scrubs as Rose but with a hair net as he brings in breakfast on a cart for the ladies.

Eddie: What's up superstars!

Gigi: Hey Eddie.

Eddie: We got blueberry muffins, ham steaks, grits, and toast with a side of fruit.

Mae: Whew now who gone eat all that?

Eddie: You is birthday girl.

Mae: It's my birthday?

Eddie: Sure is. Seventy-five years old.

Eddie proceeds to hand out the food to the ladies.

Eddie (to Gigi)- One for Thelma.

Eddie (to Mae)- And one for Louise. Bon appetit.

Gigi goes in to eat her food while Mae just stares at it. Eddie glances and notices.

Eddie- You need any help there, Mae?

Mae- I'm not hungry

Eddie: Well, you gotta eat some. Here, just try it.

He starts feeding her the food bit by bit.

Eddie: See, it's good ain't it? Gigi over there taking it to town!

Gigi: Well maybe if nobody was stealing my snacks I wouldn't be so hungry.

Eddie: Oh lord, here she go.

Gigi: I know how many peanut butter crackers I had Eddie.

Eddie: What you want me to do, hunt down the cracker thief? Will that make you happy?

Gigi: Shonuff will.

The two share a laugh.

Mae: Ion want nomore, Eddie.

Eddie: You sure? You barely ate, birthday girl

(beat)

Gigi: We don't like to talk about her birthday...

Eddie: Why not? We celebrating her life and being born.

Gigi: It's just a sensitive topic, baby. That's all.

Eddie: Oh...I understand. I'm sorry to have brought it up.

Gigi: It's alright.

Eddie: Well, it looks like y'all bout finished. I can go ahead and get this out y'alls way.

Eddie begins to collect and gather their plates back onto the cart. He walks over to Gigi's bed to get her food. She stops and gestures to him to come closer so she can tell him something. Turning their backs towards Mae so that she won't hear.

Gigi: We buried my niece three years ago on Mae's birthday. That's why we don't like to talk about it.

...

Eddie: Oh...Gigi I'm so sorry. I didn't know.

Gigi: Cancer... at least that's what the doctors say. That it came back.

Eddie: I'm so sorry.

Gigi: It's okay sweetheart. It's better to know now than later.

Eddie nods his head and exits.

Mae: Three years already? Lord have mercy.

Gigi: Oh Mae, I didn't think you-

Mae: It's alright. That's probably why I thought I saw her last night. I guess my mind really ain't no good.

Gigi: Don't say that. She probably did come to you.

beat

Gigi: You know, sometimes I think I see her too.

Mae: Really?

Gigi: Yeah. I see momma every now and then too.

Mae: Shonuff?

Gigi: Mmh. They're with us and don't let no one tell you any different, okay?

Mae: Okay.

Gigi: Happy Birthday, sweet Mae.

Scene Three

The night comes and the stars are out as Mae and Gigi dream. Rose creeps into the room, standing in the doorway. She just stands and watches them sleep. As if she's experiencing the most beautiful piece of art.

After some time, Eddie comes to stand next to her and he also just watches...

They stay there, breathing in this moment for a while. In the dark and in silence...

Rose: You don't think she's gonna die, do you?

(pause)

Eddie: We all gotta die someday... I pray it ain't Mae's time yet though.

(pause)

They look at each other and then look at Mae.

Rose: I had to put her back to bed last night. She said she was swimming again.

Eddie: Do you know about her daughter?

Rose: She talked about her today. Said she saw her out on the water. I've never heard about her till now though.

Eddie: It's sad. Nobody should bury their child on their birthday. No one should have to bury their child at all.

Rose: God, I didn't know that.

Eddie: I found out today. Gigi told me when I mentioned Mae's birthday.

Rose: Oh God, I should've told you. When they first got admitted Gigi's son said not to celebrate Mae's birthday but I never knew why.

Eddie: It's sad man. She must have taken it really hard.

Rose: Yeah... I just wish there was something we could do.

Eddie: What we always do, just keep being there for them. They got each other but they need to know they got us too.

Rose: Yeah, you're right.

beat

Eddie: We should go get some rest. It's late.

Rose (taking a deep breath): Yeah.

Leaving the door open, they make their way out into the hallway and exit.

Rose quietly runs and sneaks back into the room. She looks at them one last time; smiling. She gently goes to turn off the lamp.

Scene Four

Later that same night while the sisters are still sleeping, the sound of waves crashing onto shore emerges from afar. The air conditioner gets louder. Mae starts tossing and turning in bed. The waves crash harder. Both sounds continue to increase until the stage is completely black and silent.

(Lights back up) Someone is in the room with Mae and Gigi. She's wearing the same nursing scrubs as Rose. Scanning the room and humming Aretha Franklin's (BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER.)

Mae: Rose?

Marie: My gorgeous child.

Mae: Momma?

Marie: Hey, my pretty Mae.

Mae: Is it time to go back home?

Marie: No sweetheart, it ain't your time yet.

Mae: Why not? Marie: It just isn't. Mae: But I'm tired...

Marie: Well, then get some rest baby. You got time.

Kissing Mae on the forehead. Marie: Sweet dreams, Mae. She leaves the room.

Mae: Momma, please don't go. Don't leave me again.

Mae begins to weep like a child.

Gigi: Mae?

Mae continues weeping. Almost screaming. Gigi: Mae, can you hear me? What's wrong? Mae: Momma— she left again.

Gigi: Where was she Mae? Were you out swimming again?

Mae: No, she was here. She was right here!

Gigi: Rose! Eddie! Somebody!

Mae: No, she was wearing them scrubs just like them!

Rose runs into the room.

Rose: What's wrong Gigi?

Gigi: I don't know she was mumbling and talking about our momma— I don't know—

Rose (to Mae): Okay pretty Mae you gotta catch your breath, okay?

Mae: Get her away from me!

Rose: Mae, it's Rose. Mae: Get away from me! Gigi: Mae!

Mae: That heifer playing tricks on me!

Rose, trying to hold Mae down, struggles as she fights back.

Rose: Eddie! Eddie, we need help in here!

Eddie rushes in and sees the chaos. He moves Rose to the side and holds down Mae.

Eddie: I got you Mae. You're safe here, okay? Calm down. It's Eddie.

Mae: My momma. She was here. She left me again, my momma.

Eddie: It's okay Mae, it's alright...

He continues holding her down.

Eddie: She wetting herself... Rose go get her bath ready.

Rose: Oh lord.

Rose exits to go run her bath.

Gigi tries to get out of bed and manage walking with her walker.

Eddie: No, Gigi please we don't need this today!

She doesn't respond as she's focused on standing.

Eddie: Gigi! You can fall, please!

Gigi: She's my little sister damnit! We all we got!

Eddie goes quiet. Gigi finally stands and slowly she walks over to Mae's bed. Eddie moves out of her way as Gigi goes to hug her sister. Tucking her head under hers and rocking her in her arms peacefully.

Gigi: I'm here Mae... I'm here, it's okay.

Gigi begins to sing to Mae a ballad version of, Aretha Franklin's (BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER.)

Gigi (singing):

When you're down and out When you're on the street When even falls so hard

I will comfort you I'll take your part

Oh, when darkness comes And pain is all, is all around
Just like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down
Just like a bridge Over troubled water I will lay me down.
(Lights fade on them)

Scene Five

Two days later, Gigi is now back in her own bed and is working on a crossword puzzle. Mae is awake and watching television, The Andy Griffin Show. Rose comes in and out as she's cleaning up the room from breakfast.

Gigi(while doing the crossword) : PURSE! I knew I was gone get that one.

Rose: You and them crossword puzzles.

Gigi: I still got it in me. I use to be top of my class, y'know?

Rose: I know.

Rose: You sure you don't wanna eat Mae?

Mae: I ain't hungry.

Rose: Okay.

Gigi: What is the four letter word for the first month of summer?
JULY! Rose: Nope, got you on that one Gigi. It's actually June. My birth month. (pause)

Rose: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... uhh...
beat

Rose: Gigi you bout done with this plate over here?

Gigi: Yes sweetheart.

Rose: Okay great. Well uhh- I'll be heading out y'all's way now.

Rose makes a quick exit out the room.

Gigi- You thinking about her a lot today?

Mae doesn't respond. But we all know the answer is yes.

Gigi- Yeah, I sure do miss mine too.

Mae- Curtis?

Gigi: Mmmh.

Mae: I haven't seen Curtis in a long time.

Gigi: Me too, Mae... me too...

Mae: Is he doing alright?

Gigi: I don't know... haven't talked to him.

Mae: Really?

Gigi: Mmmh.

Mae: Now that ain't like Curtis.

Gigi: Yup. Before he passed all he cared about is his wife. I wasn't the only women in his life nomore. Hell, she the only reason we in here anyway.

Mae: Talking bout Pam?

Gigi: Yeah... She probably just gone have me cremated and call it a day once I'm gone.

Mae- Don't talk like that Gigi.

Gigi: Sorry, I know.. I just- I just been having these thoughts for a long time.

Mae: Time?

Gigi: What's that Mae?

Mae: What time is it?

Gigi: 12:28 in the afternoon.

Mae: My bones... Lord Jesus, Gigi did I eat today?

Gigi: You said you weren't hungry. Rose just put the food up.

Mae: I look like I ain't eaten in days.

Gigi: You say you don't want to. They try to feed you—

Mae: They tryna rot me in here!

Gigi: No, they take real good care of us in here, Mae.

Mae: In where?

Gigi: The home.

Mae: Home? We back at home?

Gigi: This our home now...

Mae: God, I feel like I'm in too many places.

Gigi: You don't have to be. Just be right here, with me.

Mae: I don't feel safe here, G.

Gigi: You're safe as long as I'm here.

Mae: You promise?

Gigi: I promise.

(beat)

Gigi leans over to her nightstand and grabs some peanut butter crackers from inside. And hands one to Mae.

Gigi: You wanna share?

Mae: I'd love to.

Gigi turns the volume up on the television that is now playing the newest episode of 'The Young and the Restless.'

Mae: Victor still on this show?

Gigi: Oh yes, he is!

Mae: Oh well, I haven't missed out on much then, have I?

Gigi: Not at all.

They lay in bed and watch the episode together. It is the first time in a long time that it felt like old times.

Scene Six

Three days have passed. Mae and Gigi are getting dressed for the day by two other nurses, Niecy and Nicole. They are happy and Mae seems to be doing better.

Rose enters with a bouquet of pink roses.

Nicole: Rose coming in with roses!

Niecy: Ouhh looks like somebody got flowers!

Rose: These are for you, pretty Mae.

Mae: Me?

Gigi: Who got you flowers Mae?

Mae: I don't know but they sure are beautiful!

Gigi: Did anything come for me, Rose?

Rose: Not that I saw but I can go back and check.

Gigi: Oh no, it's okay. I know ain't nobody got me nothing.

beat

Niecy: What's the special occasion?

Nicole: Do you have a distant lover?

Mae: Oh no sweetheart, that ship has sailed a long time ago.

Nicole: Well somebody wants to rock your boat.

Rose: Y'all stop.

Mae: Do you think so?

Niecy: Maybe one of the male patients gifted these to her.

Nicole: Langston?

Rose: Oh God.

Gigi: He is pretty handsome, Mae.

Mae: Now y'all hush, I am not looking for a partner.

Nicole: But a partner is looking for you!

They all start laughing. Eddie enters the room.

Eddie: Now, who got y'all smiling and giggling in here.

Niecy: Mae gotta secret admirer.

Eddie: Ohh, is it Langston?

Nicole: See, I knew I wasn't the only one thinking it!

Rose: Look at the flowers she got.

Eddie: Oh wow, Mae these are beautiful! So, do we know if Langston gave her these for sure?

Rose: That's the suspicion.

Eddie: Well, let a brother be a wingman and go find out.

He slides to the door all smooth and swavy. The girls hype him up as he leaves.

Nicole: Oh suckie suckie nie!

Niecy: Alright, gone with ya bad self!

He exits.

Gigi: He shall is a fool, ain't he? All the ladies (except Mae): He is! They all share a laugh.

Rose: Those flowers are beautiful though Mae. I hope they came from someone nice.

Mae: Thank you sweetheart. Me too. Gigi: Right. All the best gifts go to Mae. Eddie stands in the doorway.

Eddie: Sorry to break it to ya ladies but Langston said he ain't get nobody no flowers.

Rose: Hmm. Then I wonder who could've got em?

Eddie: Maybe just a gift from above.

He leaves and walks down the hallway. Niecy: We should probably get going too. Nicole: Yeah.

Rose: Well, alright ladies. Do you need anything before we go?

Gigi: Can you take me out to the common area?

Rose: Are you sure? You don't wanna stay in here with Mae?

Gigi: I just need some time alone, that's all.

Rose: Okay... yeah I'll take you.

Rose (to Niecy): Can you grab me a wheelchair?

Niecy: Of course.

Rose (to Nicole): And we can help her out of bed.

The two ladies go and help Gigi out of bed and Niecy comes back in with the wheelchair. They place her in the chair successfully and Rose is about to take her out in the hallway.

Mae: Did I do something, Gigi?

Gigi: No, it's okay. I'll be back soon, pretty Mae.

Rose looks surprised at Gigi as her response is rather passive. But also because she has never called Mae by this name before.

Everyone makes their exit, leaving Mae in the room by herself.

A spotlight focuses on Mae while the rest of the room is in the shadows. Sitting up in her bed and picking up her flowers. Smiling and admiring them. She picks one special flower from the bouquet and begins twirling it around by the stem. Picking the petals off one by one as they hit the ground. She looks over at Gigi's bed.

Begins to pick out another flower and leans over to put it on the nightstand next to her sister's bed.

The noise of a child laughing is heard from in the hallway. The spotlight is now off and the room is back fully lit. A Little Girl about 6 years old wearing a white dress runs across the hall and into Mae's room. She stops in the doorway. She waves. Mae smiles and waves back. The little girl enters the room and runs straight to the flower Mae placed on the nightstand.

Mae: It's pretty isn't it?

The little girl nods.

Mae: Would you like one?

Mae picks up the bouquet and hands it to the little girl.

Mae: Go on, pick one.

The little girl picks one and starts spinning and twirling around in excitement and joy. It is the cutest thing to watch. Mae laughs and smiles.

Little Girl: Thank you miss Mae.

Mae: You know who I am?

Little Girl: Yes ma'am. My mommy talks about you all the time.

Mae: Who's your momma?

Little Girl: Momma Junie.

A voice from a woman down the hall calls for the little girl.

Voice: Honey, where did you run off to?

Mae: June?

Little Girl: That's my mommy, I got to go. Nice to meet you, Miss Mae!

The little girl waves Mae goodbye and runs out the door. Mae tries to get out of bed as fast as she can. She goes to the door and calls for June.

Mae: June? Junie, where are you? June!

Mae is now in the hallway, searching for her daughter. The sounds of waves crashing onto shore begin emerging in the distance. The little girl comes back. Skipping and giggling with her flower. Mae tries to catch her attention.

Mae: Hey, little girl where did you come from?

The waves grow louder. The little girl continues skipping and laughing up and down the hall.

Mae: Hey, I know you hear me. Where is your mother?

Little Girl: Over the water.

Mae: What?

The little girl begins to skip in circles around Mae. She begins singing:

Little Girl: Don't trouble the water

Leave it alone

Why don't you, why don't you Let it be...

Mae: Did you send me those flowers?

Little Girl: Still water run deep Yes, it do

Oh-oh-oh-yeah

Mae: I don't understand.

The sound of the waves becomes intense.

Mae: Lord Jesus, please help me understand! Why can't I see you? I just want to see you.

The voice of the little girl's mother comes back in the distance.

Voice: Honey, where did you run off too?

The little girl gives Mae her flower and runs off. Mae tries to follow the voice.

Mae: Junie, honey please help your momma understand.

Voice: Momma...

Mae: Junie, please.

A figure appears from the distance.

Mae: Baby, Junie oh goodness is that you? Are you about to take me home?

Rose rushes in to get a hold of Mae.

Rose: Mae, how'd you get out in the hallway?

Mae: On over the water.

Marie appears, walking in from the other side of the hallway. Still in the same scrubs as Rose.

Marie: Mae, it's not your time yet.

Mae: Then when is it!

Gigi enters the hallways in her wheelchair with Eddie pushing her.

Gigi: Mae, what's going on?

Mae: Why do I keep seeing y'all? Huh? You, momma, that child? Who's playing tricks on me?

Eddie: What child?

Mae: Damnit, that little girl! Didn't you see her in the white dress?

Rose: Okay Mae, let's try to get you back in bed shall we?

The little girl skips down the hall humming the song.

Mae: See, don't you see her? She's right there! She gave me this flower.

Mae hands the flower to Rose. They all look at it, stunned as they can actually see the flower but not the little girl.

Marie: They can't see her pretty Mae.

Mae: Why not?

Marie takes a deep breath and decides not to respond.

Mae: You keep coming to me, tell me the answers!

Marie: Now I am still your momma, don't you dare raise your voice at me!

Mae: My momma is dead! You hear me? She's dead! So whoever and whatever you are is not her.

Gigi: Mae-

Mae: She left us Gigi. Mamma left us!

Marie steps back... exiting with her head down.

Gigi: She couldn't control that, it was her time.

Mae: If I hear that one more time. It seem like it's everybody time but mine, huh?

Gigi: Mae, don't talk like that. Being alive this long is a blessing.

Mae: How? I don't know where my mind ends or begins? I've outlived everybody I love and they just keep coming back to haunt me. I'm cursed!

Gigi: But you got me... isn't that enough?

Mae(collapsing on the floor): I'm drowning Gigi. This is not how I want to spend the rest of my life, living with ghosts!

Gigi: Just live with me... remember? Your sister... we're family. You're all I got. I need you, Mae.

Mae: I'm suffering G.

Gigi: I know but...

Mae: I wanna stay here with you but I just can't. I can't trust my own mind anymore. I'm scared.

Everyone is in shock as they collectively all wish they knew what to do to help Mae. It's truly hard seeing her like this...

A beat

Eddie kneels down and sits with Mae.

Eddie: Dear God, we summon your power, God; show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.

Rose helps Gigi down as they both join him.

Rose: Lord Jesus, may you please watch over these two sisters. These two beautiful souls. May you cover them, guide them, protect them, and show them your light.

Eddie: May you strip all fear from their hearts and remind them that you are with them. That you are our savior and grace.

Rose: Our home...

Eddie: Our protector...

Eddie and Rose: In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Act Two

Scene Seven

A month has passed... It is currently nine in the morning and Gigi is seen sitting in her wheelchair looking out the window. Mae's bed is empty, she is not in the room, just Gigi. The roses are still next to her bed and the one the little girl gave her is on her pillow.

Rose knocks on the door.

Rose: You bout ready Gigi?

Gigi: Oh... yes I'm ready.

Rose goes over to Gigi and begins slowly pushing her down the hall.

Rose: So is there any particular reason you wanna try using the walker now?

Gigi: I still got ambition. I haven't given up on all my dreams yet.

Rose: Well that's good, Gigi. I'm proud of you.

Gigi: Thank you sweetheart. For everything, you've always treated me and Mae so well.

Rose: Of course, ya'll all I got too y'know?

Gigi: Your momma must be so proud.

Rose: I hope so.

Gigi: I know she must be wanting her daughter back. You barely leave out of here.

Rose: Oh I don't mind it.

Gigi: I know you don't. We love having you here.

Rose: Thank you Gigi. Okay bout ready to start putting these legs to work?

Gigi: We made it this far.

Rose pulls out the walker from the hallway and helps Gigi up. Rose: Okay so we're gonna take this one step at a time, okay? Gigi: Alright.

Rose: First, let's just make sure you get a good grip of it.

Gigi stands with the walker.

Rose: How does that feel? Got a good balance on it?

Gigi: I think so.

Rose: Okay, good! Now let's try a few small steps. Rose guides Gigi as she slightly picks up her feet
Rose: Good Gigi! Look at you!

Gigi: Oh lord, I'm starting to walk!

Rose: See, you got it!

Gigi: Not too bad, huh? Last time I used this I was only going from my bed to Mae's.

Rose: Well, you're doing a great job. Let's try taking three steps up and down the hall.

Gigi: Okay.

Gigi starts walking and Rose walks with her.

Gigi: So what the doctors say about Mae?

Rose: Um, the last time I checked, the specialist was just running a couple of tests. Trying to keep a close eye on her and see if she may be better in memory care than here.

Gigi: Oh okay... so that means she may be leaving?

Rose: We don't know yet but we hope not.

Gigi: Oh okay...

beat

Rose: Can I ask you something, Gigi?

Gigi: Yes, sweetheart.

Rose: Did you ever feel... left out or that people always picked favorites between you and Mae?

Gigi stops walking

Rose: I'm sorry, that was very personal...

Gigi: It's that obvious, huh?

Rose: I noticed when Mae got those flowers...

Gigi: Lord Jesus...

Gigi goes back to sit down in the wheelchair

Rose: Was it always like that between y'all?

Gigi: When we was younger, I was so happy to have a little sister. A bestfriend who could never leave me. And that was always true up until our momma passed. And at seventeen years old, I had a child to raise. I had to take care of her and become a mother so early on because ours was gone. It seemed like I had it all together to everybody else cause I was the one working three jobs and making sure we had food on the table. But all the condolences went to Mae as if she was the only child who was suffering. I don't know... not all grief look the same y'know. I felt like if I showed mine then I wasn't this strong woman everybody thought I was. But deep down I was struggling. I still am. And I know for the rest of my life ima have to suck it up and be strong and be there for her and hear her talk about my niece who's gone as if my son ain't here nomore either. Nobody remembers how I'm a motherless child too! How my child left me too! How just like her I ain't got nobody! But nawl, nobody ever stopped to think about Gigi. Nobody.

beat

Rose grabs Gigi's hand

Rose: I'm thinking about Gigi... I see her, I hear her, and I feel her. You can always count on that. Okay?

She gives Gigi a hug

Gigi: God bless you Rose. God bless you.

Rose: You let me know whatever you need okay? Eddie too, we all love you in here.

Gigi: I know it. Maybe when I start walking I can go somewhere and live my life for myself. I always had that dream.

Rose: Where do you wanna go?

Gigi: Some island somewhere. Drinking a good cold cocktail and laying out on the sand. Minding nobody business but my own.

Rose: I know that's right, Gigi.

They start to laugh

Gigi: Got such a pretty smile. Remind me of my niece.

Rose: Junie?

Gigi: Mmmh. She was the sweetest she could be.

Rose: I wish I could have met her. Curtis too.

Gigi: Oh Curtis was a handful. Put me through hell but I love him. Always will. You'll understand when you have kids.

Rose: Oh that won't be anytime soon.

Gigi: Do you want kids?

Rose: Oh definitely. I would love to be a mom. But the guy who I was with we just... I don't know it just never happened...plus my body isn't really fit to carry a child so...

Gigi: I understand sweetheart.

Rose: Well, let's take this walk outside. You got an island to go to.

Rose attaches the walker to the wheelchair.

Gigi(laughing): Shonuff do!

beat

Gigi: Thank you for listening to me baby.

Rose: Always will, Gigi.

She pushes Gigi as they smile and walk down the hall to outside.

Lights fade on them.

Scene Eight

Eddie, Rose, and the other two nurses are sitting in a break room with notebooks and pamphlets on dementia patients. They are all taking notes. Eddie is very invested in the reading.

Niecy: You good over there, Eddie?

Eddie: Yeah, I just can't see really... Why all these words so small?

Nicole: Okay, old man.

Eddie: Hey, what we said before about age.

Nicole: Sorry, let me respect my elders.

Eddie: Hey!

They all start laughing.

Niecy: It's crazy how we're still learning stuff.

Rose: I know right. I hope this helps Mae.

Nicole: Me too. She barely talks whenever I'm around now.

Niecy: Yeah... it's been a wild month.

Eddie: Well, we gotta learn this so we can keep Mae here with us. We are the best team she's got. Ion care who that specialist is, he ain't us.

Nicole: I know that's right!

Rose: Let's all make sure to be there for Gigi too during all this. Mae's not the only one struggling.

Niecy: Yes, we gotta let Gigi know we love her too. God I know this is so hard for her to see.

Nicole: Yeah, she's the only one Mae really remembers so far.

beat

Niecy: How are y'all doing? Eddie and Rose, I know y'all were there when she had her big episode. That can be a lot to handle...

Rose: Oh— umm I'm alright. I just want to be there for them.

Eddie: Yeah me too. It was hard to watch but all I want is to see them get better.

Niecy: Yeah, well we know y'all watch over them the most so if y'all need anything Nicole and I are here too.

Rose: Thank you Niecy.

Eddie: Thanks Niecy.

The room gets quiet as they all start back reading and researching.

Nicole: I mean how are we for sure, this is what Mae wants though? I'm reading all this and it seems like a lot we will be doing but we don't even know if this is what she would want us to be doing.

Rose: What do you mean?

Nicole: I mean, Gigi is her only family member here. Shouldn't we ask her? Or have Mae have some form of say so in all of this.

Eddie: I didn't think about it like that...

Rose: Well, Mae can't really say much because of the condition she's in. Nobody will really take her word for anything.

Niecy: But they can take Gigi's.

Rose: Gigi's already going through a lot right now.

Eddie: But she is her older sister.

Rose: I know but that just might be a lot on her right now.

Nicole: But how else will we truly know what Mae wants.

Rose: This is what Mae would want. For somebody to take care of her. It's our job to help her and everyone here. We have to still hold our vow to that.

Nicole: Yeah but sometimes our job is helping them die the way they want to.

Rose: You sound ridiculous right now Nicole.

Nicole: Wow, okay.

Eddie: Rose, like it or not I do think Nicole is on to something. I mean Mae has said it herself that she doesn't want to be here much longer.

Rose: But that doesn't mean we should just give up on her!

Niecy: Wait, no one is saying we're giving up on her.

Rose: That's what it sounds like.

Niecy: We just want her to pass on the way she wants to.

Rose: But we can still give her something to live for.

Nicole: We can't save someone that doesn't want to live anymore, Rose.

Rose: So y'all just want to do nothing but sit and watch her die?

The room is quiet.

Rose: Some nurses y'all are.

Rose storms out of the room.

Eddie: So what do we do? Nicole: Be there for Mae... Lights fade on them.

Scene Nine

The next day, Nicole and Eddie are in Mae's and Gigi's room. Mae is in bed while Gigi is getting ready to go walking with Rose.

Eddie: Alright superstars, y'all ready for the day? Gigi, Nicole is gonna be taking you to the common area to help with your walking and I'll be in here with Mae.

Gigi: Where's Rose?

Eddie: She's here... she just...

Gigi: Taking it hard?

Eddie: Yes ma'am...

Gigi: Bless her heart. Well, alright then. So you the boss now I see.

Eddie: That's all you! I'm hearing how fast you walking you'll be ready to reach Timbuktu.

They laugh

Gigi: Boy, you ain't nothing but a fool. Always good seeing you Eddie.

Eddie: Pleasure is all mine, Gigi.

Gigi: I'll be right back, Mae.

Mae is still lying in bed with nothing to say.

Eddie: I got her, Gigi. Y'all have fun.

Nicole: You ready?

Gigi nods her head and she and Nicole exit the room.

Eddie: Alright miss Mae, how we feeling?

Mae doesn't respond.

Eddie: I got some clothes here for ya. You wanna help me fold em?

She still doesn't respond...

Eddie: Okay...

He places some of the laundry on her bed. They are composed of shirts, rags, and towels. She picks her head up and looks at the pile, deciding which one she wants to pick. She points towards a light pink shirt.

Eddie: So you like that one?

She nods her head.

Eddie: Okay.

He hands her the shirt.

Eddie: It's a pretty color, ain't it?

Mae: It's just like my rose...

Eddie: Rose? You remember Rose?

Mae is silent...

Eddie: Mae?

Mae points her finger to Gigi's bed. Eddie looks and spots the rose that is on the nightstand between her and Gigi's bed. It's slowly dying.

Eddie: This rose?

Mae: No. My rose...

Eddie: Rose is upset with me right now.

Mae: Oh now why is that?

Eddie: We just don't know what to do regarding a friend of ours.

Mae: Well, I hope y'all figure it out. Keep what's best for the friend in mind first.

Eddie: That's good advice Mae. Thank you.

Mae: Anytime Curtis.

Eddie: Curtis?

Mae: My nephew. You look just like him.

Eddie: Oh no Mae, I'm Eddie.

Mae: Shonuff?

Eddie: Yes ma'am.

Mae: Edddie... I'll try to remember that.

Eddie lightly chuckles but not in a sense of laughter but in a sense of pain that he's trying to hide...

Mae: Whew I'm sleepy. Can you sing that song you always sing to me?

Eddie: I'm Eddie pretty Mae. I'm not Gigi.

Mae: Oh... Well where is she?

Eddie: She's out walking.

Mae: Gigi can't walk.

Eddie: She's learning now.

Mae: Shonuff?

Eddie: Yes ma'am.

Mae: Well that's good for her. I hope I get to see it.

Eddie: Me too...

Mae: Oh, I'm tired...

Eddie: Well, let's get you some rest.

Mae: I don't know if I'll wake up sweetheart.

Eddie: Well you gotta wake up to see Gigi.

Mae: My sister.

Eddie: Yes ma'am.

Mae: Okay. I'll go see Gigi.

Eddie just slightly smiles and tucks Mae into bed. She falls fast asleep. Eddie watches, holding tears in his eyes. He takes her hand and cries. He prays...

Eddie: Please wake up Mae. Don't leave us yet Mae please. Father God, please. Please watch over Mae Lord Jesus please give us the strength to get through this.

Rose and Gigi enter the room and see Eddie hovering over Mae's bed.

Rose: Eddie?

They hear Eddie crying.

Gigi: Sweetheart, what's wrong?

Eddie: Rose? I thought you were-

Gigi: I went and got her. Now what's going on?

Eddie: I'm scared Gigi, she can't leave us yet. She can't!

Gigi uses her walker to sit on her bed.

Gigi: Sounding just like Mae... always scared somebody gone be leaving... Lord have mercy...

Rose begins crying too.

Rose: What do we do Gigi?

Gigi: Y'all have done the best y'all can.

Rose: But there has to be more we can do. We just can't leave her like this. We're supposed to take care of her.

beat

Gigi: Listen... I've been taking care of my sister all my life. From the time my momma died, from when she was pregnant with Junie, to when Junie died, and now in this home. And even I know, it's coming to the point where there's nothing left that even I can do for her. So, I know there's nothing left for y'all to do for her either. We got to let her go the way she wants to. All my sister want right now is peace. And if you keep bothering her she won't have that now will she?

Eddie: You're so strong Gigi.

Gigi lightly chuckles, masking her pain too.

Gigi: I like to think that God gifted me with a strong might.

Rose and Eddie wipe their tears and look at Gigi like how grandkids would. With so much love and safety.

Rose: We love you Gigi.

Gigi: Aww, I love y'all too. My sweet Rose and Eddie.

They all smile.

Gigi: Now let me have a minute with my sister.

They both nod and leave the room holding each other.

Gigi gets off of the bed and uses her walker to get to Mae. She tenderly moves her hair out her face. Mae awakes....

Mae: Gigi...

Gigi: Hey Mae.

Mae: Were you just walking?

Gigi: Mmmh. You wanna see?

Gigi gets up and starts walking with her walker. Mae gives the brightest smile ever!

Mae: Go on now Gigi!

Gigi: Pretty good, huh?

They both start laughing. And that feeling of old times starts to fill up the space. Gigi he kisses Gigi's hand.

Mae: Oh, I love you. I still love you Gigi.

Gigi: I know you do. I love you too.

Mae holds both of Gigi's hands now. They speak with their eyes and heart. The room is silent for at least 15 seconds.

Mae: My rose...

Gigi: What rose Mae?

She guides Gigi's hand under her pillow. Gigi pulls out the rose the little girl gave Mae. It's still fresh, healthy, and alive.

Gigi: Well would you look at that.

Mae: It's still alive. Ain't that something.

Gigi: Sholl is.

Mae: It's like it's been calling to me...I sleep with it underneath my pillow every night.

Gigi: Say, did you ever find out who the little girl was who gave this to you?

Mae: Nope... but she said Junie was her momma.

Gigi: Shonuff?

Mae: Mmmh. But that might have been my mind playing tricks on me again. You know how Junie couldn't have kids.

A beat

Gigi: Right... Well sleep tight pretty Mae. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?

Mae: Okay... I love you Gigi.

Gigi: I love you too Mae. Now and forever.

She kisses Mae on her forehead and they look at each other until Mae falls asleep.

Scene Ten

The very next morning, Mae is still in her bed while Gigi is still in the same spot watching her. The sound of a clock ticks and ticks and ticks.... Footsteps are heard from the hallway, the floor creaks as Rose enters the room.

Gigi: You here to take her back home, aren't you?

Rose: Huh?

Gigi: Mae said that little girl was Junie's mommy. Except our Junie couldn't have kids. In fact it was the last thing she wanted before she got diagnosed with cancer. I remember Mae and I holding onto her as she cried for days. And it just so happens that you tell me the other day that you couldn't have kids either. I thought I was losing my brain too but then I remembered when you corrected me that day during my crossword puzzles and you told me your birthday was in June. Just

like Junie... in fact she loved that her birthday was in June and it matched her name. She mentioned it every year. No wonder you were so familiar to us.

Rose: I wasn't supposed to die first. My momma was supposed to take me home. So now, I gotta do that for her.

Gigi: Well if it's her time sweetheart then I guess you gotta take her home. Lord, I'm just so happy to see you.

They give each other a hug.

Rose: I'm happy to see you too auntie.

Gigi: Just beautiful. Thank you for watching over us baby. Now let me see this little girl of yours!

Rose: Hunny!

The little girl runs in with a smile on her face and runs straight to Gigi and gives her a hug.

The Little Girl: Gigi!

Gigi: Oh, hey sweetheart! What's your name?

The Little Girl: Gina.

Gigi: Like me?

The little girl nods.

Gigi: Oh June... Thank you. How did this happen?

Rose: It was one of the many gifts God had given me. Including being able to come here.

Gigi: Oh that's lovely sweetheart.

Rose: I also wasn't down here alone, you know?

Eddie walks through the door.

Eddie: Hey momma.

Gigi: Oh no, this can't be... Curtis?

Eddie: It's me momma.

Gigi: Oh my lord.

They rush to give each other a hug.

Eddie: I missed you so much momma.

Gigi: Aww I've missed you too sweetheart. I thought you forgot about me.

Eddie: I know how much trouble I caused being here but when God gifted me passage through heaven, I knew I had to make things right. I couldn't take care of you then but I made sure that I would do it now. I promised myself that.

Gigi: Sweetheart.

She holds his face and wipes his tears.

Gigi: You are my child you, hear me? And I have always been proud to say that. No matter what you did you were mine and I will keep bragging so the whole wide world can hear that you are my son. And even before all that, you are my heart first.

She kisses his cheek and they share another hug.

Gigi: Oh lord, so you mean to tell me we was together this whole time?

Rose: Yup.

Gigi: Well, would you look at God!

Eddie: Pretty crazy right?

Gigi: It's a miracle.

Eddie: Well, I guess we all bout ready to go on home.

Gigi: We?

Eddie: I came to take you home too momma.

Gigi: Oh no, darling it ain't my time yet. I gotta stay right here.

Eddie: But mamma, you'll come back home with me.

Gigi: When I'm ready, yes I'll come back home with you. But it ain't my time yet.

Eddie: But mamma-

Gigi: Son.

Rose: Alright now Curtis, don't get yourself in trouble. Auntie said she ain't ready to go yet.

Eddie: But I thought that's not how death works. Death comes whether you're ready or not.

Rose: Yes but we have to stick to what's in her plan.

Eddie: In her plan?

Rose: You still have a lot to learn. And auntie Gigi still has a lot of life to live. So, let's let her get to that, okay?

Eddie nods.

The Little Girl: So is Curtis coming with us?

Rose looks at Eddie for an answer.

Eddie: Do you want me to?

Gigi: Of course, I would love to have you here. But I've grieved you for a longtime baby. I don't think I want to do that again.

Eddie: Okay...Maybe I can come and visit sometimes?

Gigi: I'd like that. It'll be like you're coming to me in a dream.

Eddie: I love you mamma.

Gigi: I love you too.

Rose: Well, shall we take mamma home.

Gigi: Ah, so it's really my sister's time...

Rose: And you're sure you don't want to come with us?

Gigi: I'm sure...

Rose: She loves you Gigi...

Gigi: I know it...

Gigi goes to hold Mae's hand. Looking at her one last time.

Gigi: Y'all take good care of her now. You gotta promise me that you'll keep her safe.

Rose: We promise.

Eddie: We promise, mamma.

Eddie, Rose, and the Little Girl slowly make their way to the otherside of the room. Gigi goes to give Mae one last kiss on the forehead.

Gigi: I'll see you soon Mae.

She holds Mae's hand and begins singing a verse from Aretha Franklin's (BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER.)

Gigi: Sail on silver girl Sail on by

Your time has come to shine

All of your dreams are on their way See how they shine?

Oh, if you ever need a friend

Look around, I'm sailing right behind

As Gigi is singing, Mae slowly opens her eyes and joins in.

Gigi and Mae:

Just like a bridge over troubled water I'll be there to lay me down

Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down

The sound of soft quiet waves begins to emerge in the background.

Mae: I'm about to cross the river, Gigi.

Gigi: I know, it's finally your time Mae.

Mae: Will I see you on the other side?

Gigi: Soon. When it's my time. But you got good people taking care of you until then.

Mae: Yeah, I think I see them coming towards me.

Mae gives a light chuckle followed by a smile. Gigi gently rubs her face.

Gigi: Goodbye baby sister.

The sound of soft quiet waves continues throughout. As we begin to hear people's feet stepping on puddles of water surfacing. One by one, silhouettes of Marie, Rose, The Little Girl, and Eddie appear one by one behind Gigi. The light on Mae slowly begins to fade out. Leaving Gigi alone under a single spotlight. While on the other side, their faces individually become lit with a specific golden light as they watch over Gigi from the otherside. And just as the final wave crashes, Mae's face becomes lit with the warm light, joining the rest of them.

Blackout.

End of Play

The Naming of the Dolls

by London Van Every

Setting: A "present day" antique shop interior, whatever that means to you. It's raining.

Dramatis Personae: The Purchaser and the Dealer. Both fully average people in every way, if a bit wet and a bit dusty respectively.

(An antique shop. Dusty furniture, old toys, chipped ceramics. A Grecian vase stuffed with a bouquet of umbrellas. A shelf lined with porcelain dolls. Somewhere, a broken clock is ticking. The bell above the door chimes. Purchaser runs in, panting and drizzled with water. They shake themselves out. Dealer doesn't look up from their risqué magazine, lazily flipping through its pages.)

Dealer: Twenty-five percent off all three-legged furniture, broken or whole.

Purchaser: *(Distracted)* What? Oh. Oh, no, I'm not here to buy anything. Just got caught in the rain without an umbrella.

(Dealer points at the vase of umbrellas.)

Purchaser: *(What a pleasant surprise!)* Oh! Guess it's my lucky day.

(The Purchaser crosses to the vase, digging around inside. As they do so, they bump a shelf. Two dolls, one boy and one girl, tumble to the floor. They appear unfazed by Purchaser's slight on their dignity. This is because they are dolls.)

Purchaser: *(Kneeling to pick up the dolls)* Shit- sorry, that's my fault! I'll just put these... *(Trails off, transfixed, umbrellas forgotten)*
...Sorry, I...

(Purchaser rights themselves, testing the weight of the dolls in their hand.)

Purchaser: *(Entranced.)* These dolls sure are... fascinating. What did you say their names were, again?

Dealer: *(Suddenly very animated, as if they've been talking for hours.)* Sam and Andy, like I said when you came in.

Purchaser: Right, right. Sam and Abby. Sam's the boy?

Dealer: Yes, Sam's the girl. Sam and Maggie.

Purchaser: Sam and Marcus is an odd combination of names, don't you think?

Dealer: Sam and Margot?

Purchaser: Right, that's what I said. Sam and Marvin.

Dealer: I think it sounds classy. Mary was my great-grandmother's name, you know.

(Purchaser nods, carrying the dolls over to the checkout counter. Dealer sets down their magazine.)

Dealer: So you've made up your mind? You'll have them?

Purchaser: Yeah, I'm buying them. I was thinking about just getting Sam, but it feels wrong to separate her from Davy.

Dealer: I know what you mean. Once I tried putting Daisy on display by herself, but I couldn't stand the sight of it. She was reunited with her Sam in less than an hour.

Purchaser: How much?

Dealer: Fifty total.

(Purchaser sets the dolls on the counter, then digs around in their pockets. They produce a wallet from their soggy jacket. Dealer rings them up. They pay. The dolls are placed into a flimsy paper bag.)

Purchaser: Don't worry, Sam and Dalton. I'll give you a good home.

(Purchaser moves to exit the antique shop. As they do so, the bottom of their bag rips. The dolls fall to the floor once more.)

Dealer: Wait, you forgot the-!

(Purchaser exits. The bell above the door chimes.)

Dealer: ...dolls.

(Begrudging and long-suffering, Dealer rounds the counter and picks up the dolls. They don't mind being manhandled. This is because they are dolls.)

Dealer: *(pauses, then says to herself)* Guess you two fell off the shelf again, huh? Wonder how you got to the middle of the floor...

(The Dealer returns the dolls to their rightful place. They then crack open their magazine once more, lazily flipping through its pages. Somewhere, a broken clock is ticking. The bells above the door chime. Purchaser steps in, drizzled with water. They shake themselves out.)

Purchaser: Wow, it's a wet one out there, isn't it?

Dealer: Twenty-five percent off all three-legged furniture, broken or whole.

Purchaser: Oh, I'm not here to buy anything. Just got caught in the rain without an umbrella. You don't happen to sell umbrellas, do you?

(Dealer points at the vase of umbrellas.)

Purchaser: (relieved) Oh, great!

(The Purchaser crosses to the vase, digging around inside. As they do so, they bump a shelf. The dolls tumble to the floor.)

Purchaser: *(Kneeling to pick up the dolls)* Shit- my bad! I'll just pick these... these... hey, these things are pretty interesting. What did you say their names were, again?

(End.)

The Hell that is Human Interaction

by Dvn Dsn

PLAYWRIGHTS NOTES:

The cast of The Hell that is Human Interaction needs to be diverse. Some characters' races, gender and sexualities are specified within the dialogue (such as CHIEF being from Navajo descent or ZERO being caucasian) The show can't work if everyone is the same because No one is the same.

Act 1

Scene 1

SETTING: CLASSROOM

The stage is split in half. The Professor is walking down the center aisle, pacing, in his hand is a copy of "No Exit". On the board behind him is the phrase "Hell is other people".

PROFESSOR

It was Jean-Paul Sartre who said, "L'enfer, c'est les autres or in english, "Hell is other people."

(beat)

Would anyone like to take a guess as to what he meant?

STUDENT

That he spent too much time with you?

The student and a few others on their side of the classroom laugh. The Professor smiles, but ignores the comment.

PROFESSOR

Jean Paul's belief was in Existentialism, does anyone know what that means?

(beat)

Nobody?

(beat)

Existentialism was the belief that humans are to revolt against societal norms and take hold of their own free will. A philosophy that prides itself on finding what gives your life purpose without the influence of anything around. So how does this- connect back to the text.

A bell can be heard ringing in the background. The students begin to pack their belongings.

PROFESSOR contd

Alright settle down... We'll continue this discussion later, for homework I'd like for you to write a page about what the following means to you, "Life is meaningless, nothing matters."

The students leave the classroom, all but Linda Spring. She's taking her time packing her things.

PROFESSOR contd

Linda, a word.

LINDA

Did I do something wrong?

PROFESSOR

No, I just have a letter for you.

LINDA

A letter?

PROFESSOR

An invitation, left by someone who wants you in their club.

Professor hands Linda a decorative envelope with a pin attached to it.

EXT Professor

LINDA

Dear Linda Spring, I want to formally invite you to the Literature Club. The club meets every Thursday at 7. There is no required uniform, but the pin attached to the letter is mandatory and should be worn at every meeting. The Literature Club is an exclusive club where members are hand picked based on academic achievements and a recommendation of a professor. We hope to see you this Thursday for initiation, please note that masquerade masks are required for initiation night. To RSVP and confirm please mark the letter with an “X” and leave it on your desk, to reject, please destroy the letter via flame...

Best wishes, the Owl.

Linda takes the letter and examines it, holding it up to the light. She wonders if it has a decrypted message or weird sorcery within it.

She marks the letter and leaves it on her desk.

EXT Linda.

(beat)

NTR The Owl.

The Owl is hidden within a black cloak and bird-like mask. She takes the letter and conceals it.

—BLACKOUT—

Scene 2

SETTING: CLASSROOM

LED candles light up one by one until the space becomes ominous. (Slowly the lights dim. Enough to light the stage, but low enough to create shadows and silhouettes.) 8 silhouettes in black cloaks and masquerade masks are divided evenly amongst the room. There’s a

ninth silhouette standing in the center of the room. Their mask is the most elegant (Wolf).

NTR Linda.

Linda wears her pin and a cheap masquerade mask.

Confused and quite unimpressed she walks towards the ninth silhouette.

LINDA

Are you The owl?

CHIEF

Who?

LINDA

Guess that answers it.

The silhouettes take a few steps forward in unison.

CHIEF

Do you accept the invitation to join the Literature club?

LINDA

Yes, despite it being a very... elaborate book club.

CHIEF

Then please blow out the candles and adopt a new name.

LINDA

I can’t use my own name?

CHIEF

All of us have adopted new names

LINDA

That doesn’t answer the question-

CHIEF

It's tradition. It'll all make sense in time.

Linda blows the candle out.

LINDA

(beat)

Lily

CHIEF

Welcome to the Literature Club, Lily.

Music Cue: Mind over Matter- Young the Giant

The silhouettes begin to move in closer towards Lily and eventually begin to break into an interpretive dance. Soft music plays that matches their tempo and rhythm.

Soon Lily is adorned in a black cloak and the silhouettes move about the room putting out each candle until the room is pitch.

When the lights come up everyone is in normal clothing, attire that best suits their different range personalities. Lily stands in the center wearing her mask and cloak, she's confused- she takes a seat in what would normally be her desk.

None of the members interact with her- in the corner three girls sit side by side conversing amongst themselves. (ROSE, THORN and LEAF). Two kids are resting in bean bags tossing a ball back and forth (DILL DOE and HARRY COX). One sits quietly reading a book (SCARLETT). One studies at a desk (ATHENA) while another sits on their phone (ZERO).

CHIEF does whatever feels right

LILY

Is there a president I can talk to? A professor even?

CHIEF

Don't need one.

LILY

So this is it? The Literature Club?

CHIEF

Well... We're not actually a Literature Club-

LILY

-Are you a cult? Did I just sign away my first born?

CHIEF

No... We just masquerade as a Literature Club to make it more exclusive. No one's looking to joining a literature club-

SCARLET

I was...

LILY

So what exactly is this then? A breakfast club type scenario?

ZERO

You're not entirely wrong.

CHIEF

This is a club for... well people I guess.

LILY

A people club?

CHIEF

I suppose-

LILY

What does that entail?

CHIEF

Zero would you like to explain?

ZERO

No I would not.

DILL DOE

I want to-

HARRY COX

Me too!

CHIEF

Go ahead.

DILL DOE

Which one of us?

HARRY COX

Him or I?

DILL DOE

Me or him?

CHIEF

Yes-

(beat)

You.

DILL DOE

Which one?

HARRY COX

Just say the name?

CHIEF

Dill Doe, you can explain the purpose of the club.

DILL DOE

With pleasure. Okay, Lily- Catch!

(beat)

The purpose of Chief's so-called People Club is to be well- people.

HARRY COX

I am people.

DILL DOE

As am I... If you look over to the board you can see all of our selected names. Read them off for me-

LILY

Athena, Scarlett, Chief, Rose, Thorn, Leaf and Zero...

HARRY COX

You're missing a few.

LILY

Dill Doe and Harry Cox.

HARRY COX

Thank you.

DILL DOE

Everyone here is allowed to be their true selves-

LILY

Their true selves?

DILL DOE

-This is a no judgment zone. Here you can voice your opinion on politics or taboo topics or what sauce is the best pairing for a chicken nugget- it's ranch by the way.

LILY

A club where people discuss politics and voice their opinions... Sounds like-

HARRY COX

STOP!

(beat)

The board. Everyones name has two slots next to it... even yours. That's for your strikes. Anytime you judge someone for being themselves you get an x, once you get two- you're gone.

LILY

Zero's the only one with a strike?

ZERO

And?

LILY

Nothing, just being observant.

(beat)

So what? We meet here once a week and study? Read? Pass the time until the room reservation is done?

CHIEF

Pretty much, sometimes we'll talk and whatnot, but it's always a chill place to hang. Catch up on homework, but every now and again the owl visits.

LILY

I thought you were the owl-

CHIEF

No, I'm Chief. The Owl is who organized this club and they'll occasionally prep the room with food and drinks as well as an envelope with a topic we have to discuss.

LILY

Why would we do that?

THORN

Well the owl pays for your class fees for the semester. We just write down the number and they verify then ta-da the class fee is paid for.

LILY

And all we have to do is talk?

CHIEF

Sounds easy enough right?

LILY

Right.

CHIEF

Then lets chat Lily.

Chief takes a seat.

LILY

What would you like to talk about?

CHIEF

I just want to get a feel of you... See what kind of person you are.

Scene 3

SETTING: CLASSROOM

Everyone should clear the stage and give spotlight to Lily and Chief (whether that be in the form of dimming lights and a spotlight or the students exiting)

Lily and Chief take center stage: Chief studies Lily.

LILY

Are you going to say something?

CHIEF

Why Lily?

LILY

Because you wanted to talk

CHIEF

No... I mean why'd you choose the name Lily?

LILY

Because you guys made me pick a name?

CHIEF

Well of course we did, but we didn't pick the name for you.

LILY

Why Chief?

CHIEF

I asked first.

Lily crosses her arms and shows no sign of giving in.

CHIEF contd

My heritage. My Navajo ceremonial name is Hastiin, it translates to Chief. We couldn't go by our names as you noticed, which was fine by me... don't care too much about my Christian name.

LILY

Your English name?

CHIEF

Yeah, the one we let everyone else call us.

(beat)

So Lily?

LILY

Another question?

CHIEF

Shoot.

LILY

If the point of this club is to not judge, then why change our names? I guess to a certain extent it hides our identity, but like- judgment free zone right?

CHIEF

The way I see it... Same concept as online personas. It's easy to say it's a safe place and even if it was entirely, that little voice in your head holds you back, but with a mask or screen or pseudonym you're more confident, more likely to be yourself and speak your mind, which is why wearing a mask to these things is an option, but a new name is necessary.

LILY

Right... Scarlet wears one.

CHIEF

Yeah, they're very reserved but they participate. They have to, the bare minimum per meeting is to at least state your opinion or view on the subject, but that's neither here nor there. Why Lily?

LILY

No reason.

CHIEF

Seriously?

LILY

Is that a judgment I hear?

CHIEF

(laughs)

No... surprised that's all. I guess I just think names have to have meaning, it's your identity after all.

LILY

Yeah, but you're given a name at birth, you're hardly a person... you're just a slimy baby. I'd argue there are people our age who still have no idea who they are and if that's the case a whole lotta people would go through life without a name.

CHIEF

That's true, but then what would we call each other?

LILY

A number, the way people who don't know us, see us.

CHIEF

Social Security

LILY

Bingo

CHIEF

So in a way, you think that names are more personal, otherwise we'd all be a number?

LILY

You have someone here named Zero.

CHIEF

Nothing gets past you does it?

LILY

All I'm saying is I don't think names have some hidden meaning that reveals something about us- I mean think about last names, historically last names were nonsensical. You were named after your job or where you were from or your parents name, that's why people have surnames such as Baker, Woods or Harrison.

CHIEF

But in that sense dont names have meaning?

LILY

Not if I don't bake or my father isn't named Harry... or the fact that I'm not a son.

CHIEF

You'd actually be Harridottir at that point, if you were nordic-

LILY

-But I'm not-

CHIEF

-And even if you weren't... Your name transcends languages. No matter where you are, even if you don't speak the language; you'd still be Lily.

LILY

You have an English name and a Navajo name...

CHIEF

Well that's just because of the white man.

LILY

Fair enough, but on the other end of that, names of things. I know it's not a real literature club, but Romeo and Juliet... What's in a name? That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet. A rose is a rose even if you call it a banana. So isn't it kinda pointless that we choose it here? All mind games... Whether I'm Lily or Harrirottir... I'm still me.

CHIEF

(Smile)

I guess you win this one.

Scene 4

SETTING: CLASSROOM

Dill Doe and Harry Cox sit on their respective bean bags tossing their ball back and forth, they seem to have no purpose in doing it other than to pass the time waiting for the meeting to start.

Across the classroom sits Zero, he's nose deep into a book. The Dust cover has been removed purposefully so no one can see what he's reading.

DILL DOE

Hey, do you know if the club has any funding?

HARRY COX

What?

DILL DOE

you know, like funding from the school. i get it's a secret club, the whole first rule of lit club is don't talk about lit club, but it's clearly sanctioned.

HARRY COX

what're you getting at?

DILL DOE

funding? like money, dough, motion

HARRY COX

what of it?

DILL DOE

i know the owl has offered to pay for our books so clearly money is being funneled through the club, it may also be getting laundered but money. club has it right?

HARRY COX

yes the club has money, that's how we have all the food and books

DILL DOE

you think we could get a new bean bag set

HARRY COX

why? I think they're great. like giant marshmallows.

DILL DOE

mine is stiff, it has no lumbar support and instead sinking i feel like i'm- not sinking

HARRY COX

really, so like you're floating?

DILL DOE

no, more like i'm- not sinking.

HARRY COX

let me try?

DILL DOE

See?

HARRY COX

you're right. I'm not sinking and I'm not floating.

DILL DOE

So how do we fix this?

HARRY COX

with the funding

DILL DOE

that's what i said

HARRY COX

i know i was just re-stating it, i guess we'll talk to the owl.

DILL DOE

right... How do we do that?

HARRY COX

I don't know. i've never talked to the owl

DILL DOE

me neither

BOTH

Who do you think the owl is?

DILL DOE

it's gotta be someone in the club right? that way they could sanction it and know what goes on? i doubt it's ran by us or we'd have an election

HARRY COX

we couldn't have an election anyways

DILL DOE

Why

HARRY COX

we'd be judging the candidates

DILL DOE

right. so it's someone in lit club

HARRY COX

the obvious answer is chief, the name is the name of a leader-

DILL DOE

but he just joined, it has to be one of the earlier ones

HARRY COX

Well, what's the order?

DILL DOE

Lily, Chief, Leaf, you, Thorn, then me... the rest is before my time

HARRY COX

that's leaves Scarlett, Athena, Rose and Zero

DILL DOE

Well it's obvious right

HARRY COX

No, not really.

DILL DOE

Zero... I mean think about it, Zero has to come first-

HARRY COX

As opposed to- Uno and Dos?

DILL DOE

He's the only one with a strike and he's the first one in the room before meetings and-

HARRY COX

-Wait, does this count as judging?

DILL DOE

No, nooooo- we're purely analyzing, we haven't judged anyone.

HARRY COX

How do you know?

DILL DOE

We'll- get a dictionary

HARRY COX

A public official appointed to decide cases in a court of law.

DILL DOE

Go one down

HARRY COX

To form an opinion about through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises

DILL DOE

Premises?

HARRY COX

a proposition antecedently supposed or proved as a basis of argument or inference.

DILL DOE

Ummm... right// So we're not judging, simple as that.

HARRY COX

Right, we're not even forming an opinion, we're just trying to form a conclusion-

DILL DOE

Right, one that has no judgment, it's like a lab assignment.

HARRY COX

I don't judge bacteria or microorganisms-

DILL DOE

Neither do I.

(beat)

So Zero.

HARRY COX

Right Zero, he's... but the strike?

DILL DOE

What of it?

HARRY COX

Who would've given it to him? I doubt he'd do it to himself.

DILL DOE

So the Owl had to give it to him. I guess we could always ask him.

HARRY COX

Ask Zero

(laughs)

Yeah okay.

DILL DOE

I mean it's worth a shot. Speculation can really only get us so far. We should just ask him a few questions, start off slow and then when the time's right BOOM! Owl.

HARRY COX

Aggressive, good cop, bad cop?

DILL DOE

Now we're talking-

HARRY COX

I say we ease him into the conversation with subtext though... You know questions that have no meaning on the surface, but then have more based on the answer like those ink blot tests.

DILL DOE

Got it. I'll let you start first.

DILL DOE and HARRY COX make their way over towards ZERO. He doesn't look up from his book, though he can feel the presence of the duo.

HARRY COX

Whatcha readin'

ZERO

It's a two-in-one, one part Communist Manifesto and the other Mein Kampf.

HARRY COX

Ah philosophy, I do enjoy a bit of thinking myself.

HARRY COX looks back at DILL DOE who's drawing. He reassures him to continue the interrogation.

HARRY COX contd

So... Are you the Owl?

DILL DOE facepalms.

ZERO

What?

HARRY COX

(panicked)

Umm... I- We- Wow it's warm in here- Abort!

(HARRY COX starts cawing)

DILL DOE

Tell me Zero what does this look like to you

DILL DOE slams a piece of paper on the table.

ZERO

An ostrich.

DILL DOE

Those are its legs...

ZERO

I'm going to use the restroom.

ZERO EXTS.

HARRY COX

We should reevaluate.

DILL DOE

Yeah that sounds great.

DILL DOE and HARRY COX EXT.

Scene 5

SETTING: CLASSROOM

ROSE, THORN and LEAF NTR.

The Trio struts in, one-by-one. Rose leading, Thorn following closely behind and Leaf finally staggering in. The room is theirs; They each take their respective seats, Rose taking the center.

ROSE

So the new girl.

LEAF

What about her?

ROSE

You know...

THORN

I was thinking the same thing.

ROSE

Did you see her and Chief?

THORN

Hard to miss. Quite the name game.

LEAF

You think-

ROSE

-I know.

The conversation is rapid and quick. Followed by silence as they adjust themselves.

ROSE contd

OMG Leaf is that a new color?

LEAF

On the lipstick? Yes...

ROSE

It's totes adorbs on you. Can I try it?

LEAF

(happily)

Sure.

ROSE

This is sooo my color, makes me look so- yummy. Do you feel that way when you're wearing it, Leaf?

LEAF

Yummy? I can't say... I don't really know what feeling yummy means.

THORN

You know... Yummy.

LEAF

Yummy?

THORN

Slow it down, every letter deserves attention.

(Seductive)

Yu-mmy.

LEAF

Yummy.

ROSE

So do you feel Yummy?

LEAF

I still don't really know what it means.

ROSE

Of course you do.

(beat)

You ever see a guy and just think, mmmm... I could eat him up.

LEAF

Wouldn't that make him Yummy?

ROSE

Ahem.

LEAF

Wouldn't that make him Yummy?

ROSE

What goes around comes around girlie.

(beat)

Come on, look at yourself in the mirror, do you look Yummy?

LEAF

Isn't that judging?

ROSE

Only yourself. It's okay to think about it, just don't say it. Loose lips sink relationships.

LEAF

Isn't it ships?

ROSE

Not the way I use it...

LEAF

Oh... Oh!

(beat)

Well... I guess I look Yummy.

ROSE

I don't care how you look, I care how you feel. That's half the battle. Guys will bend over backwards for anyone with swaying hips and bouncing tits.

LEAF

I feel Yummy.

NTR CHIEF.

Leaf begins to cough and choke out of embarrassment.

ROSE

Yummy enough for him?

LEAF

Chief? No... I don't- I couldn't. Besides didn't you say he and Lily-

ROSE

I didn't say anything.

THORN

What about Zero? You think he's-

LEAF

Yummy? I- He's-

(beat)

I don't have an opinion on the matter. He's got a strike anyways, I don't even know anything about him.

ROSE

I do.

THORN

You do?

ROSE

I was there when he got his strike.

THORN

Come on girlie, spill.

ROSE

It was probably around my first meeting. Maybe my second... Athena Scarlet and course Zero were there. We got our first topic from the envelope.

LEAF

From the Owl?

ROSE

Can I finish?

LEAF

Sorry...

ROSE

Anyways... The point of the envelope as explained to me was to have a conversation. Simple as that- talk to one another. I assume it was a test of some sorts, but what do I know? The whole club allows us to speak our mind freely without judgment, so we can talk about something such as gun control and no matter your opinion no one can hold it against you. It's a safe place for the open minded... The topic of that session was jobs and that led to gender equality and with the ratio being 1:3, he might've felt like he was in the hot seat and he exploded. The next meeting there was a strike next to his name.

THORN

He doesn't share much anymore, does enough to remain in the club.

LEAF

Why stay if it's frustrating.

ROSE

Free books, but hey... that's none of my business.

LEAF

Right.

THORN

Right.

The conversation ends. Followed by silence as they adjust themselves.

NTR LILY

THORN

Check this out

Scene 6

SETTING: CLASSROOM

Same directions as before(though a dim light can be placed onto the trio if preferred). Give spotlight to Lily and Chief (whether that be in the form of dimming lights and a spotlight or the students exiting)

Lily and Chief take center stage

CHIEF

We're getting a new member

LILY

That's nice.

CHIEF

I'm telling you because it's tradition that the most recent member holds the initiation ceremony-

LILY

Meaning?

CHIEF

What I did for you, lead the initiation, ask them to adopt a name etc... It's all in this paper.

CHIEF hands LILY the papers.

LILY

I need a new mask?

CHIEF

You'll need one that defines you, just as mine did.

LILY

The animal one?

CHIEF

Exactly.

LILY

What about the dance you guys did?

CHIEF

That's easy enough, I can even show you later if you'd like, but you do have to change the song. Each initiation needs a different song.

LILY

What's the point of the dance?

CHIEF

How I see it, we're not dancers so it feels awkward and looks that way as well. It's supposed to make us feel vulnerable-

LILY

-so you're more likely to share. Got it

There's an awkward silence and neither knows how to continue.

CHIEF

I was thinking about what you said...

LILY

What did I say?

CHIEF

That people don't know who they are... that they can go their whole lives without knowing.

LILY

And? What about it?

CHIEF

Do you?

LILY

Do I what?

CHIEF

Know who you are?

LILY

I'm a twenty year old college student who needs books paid for.

CHIEF

Is that all you think you are?

LILY

That's all I care to share-

CHIEF pulls out a water bottle with water at the halfway mark.

CHIEF

What is this?

LILY

A water bottle

CHIEF

What kind?

LILY

Dasani

CHIEF

No... like it's a water bottle-

LILY

-right-

CHIEF

-There's water in it-

LILY

-correct-

CHIEF

-what level is the water at?

LILY

You want to know if I think it's half empty or half full.

CHIEF

Sort of.

LILY

It was a full water bottle when you got it, you drank half... therefore it's half empty.

CHIEF

You're a pessimist.

LILY

I'm a realist.

CHIEF

Who's to say I didn't already have an empty bottle and just fill it up again?

LILY

Did you?

CHIEF

We may never know. One of life's great mysteries.

(beat)

Alright realist, how about this, the purpose of this water bottle is to be filled. Its sole purpose is to fill its empty space with water, so in that sense wouldn't it always be filled.

LILY

What if it's empty?

CHIEF

It'd be no way filled.

LILY

Alright, but can you not argue that a bottle's purpose is also to be emptied. The bottle carries the liquid with the purpose that someone

will remove the cap and empty its contents. Water can't be stored forever like that.

CHIEF

Two sides of the same coin. That's smart, I like that. So then let me ask you; is your purpose in life to buy those books or is it the books purpose to be bought and consumed.

LILY

It could be my purpose... I could get those books and die in a car crash the next day, but my contribution had paid for the author's lifestyle; because it was their purpose to write those books so that I can buy them and in doing so finding my purpose so that they can accomplish their purpose.

CHIEF

Is it just me or is "purpose" starting to sound like a made up word.

(beat)

Anyways... you don't believe you have a purpose do you?

LILY

And you just won the jackpot. Congratulations... I take it you believe in everyone having a purpose?

CHIEF

Actually... I don't. I believe we give things a purpose so we can feel in control, just like this water bottle... it exists for us and that's definitive. It exists to be filled or emptied. We know that... As humans... everyones trying to find why they exist... who they exist for, but truthfully; Life is too complicated and incomprehensible to attach a sole meaning or purpose to it. Humans all experience different things and they experience things differently. In the end the only thing guaranteed in life is death so honestly... who cares?

Scene 7

SETTING: CLASSROOM

LED candles light up one by one until the space becomes ominous. (Slowly the lights dim. Enough to light the stage, but low enough to create shadows and silhouettes.) 9 silhouettes in black cloaks and masquerade masks are divided evenly amongst the room. There's a tenth silhouette (LILY) standing in the center of the room. Her mask is decorated in a floral design.

LILY

Will you accept the invitation and join the Literature club?

PETAL

Totally, this is unbelievable.

LILY

Will you please blow out the candles and adopt a new name?

PETAL

Totally.

(Petal blows a kiss towards Rose)

You can call me Petal.

LILY

Welcome to the Literature Club... Petal

Music Cue: New Person, Same Old Mistakes- Tame Impala

The silhouettes begin to move in closer towards Lily and eventually begin to break into an interpretive dance. Soft music plays that matches their tempo and rhythm.

The members of the Literature Club surround Petal and adorn her with the same black robes and slowly begin to blow out the candles until the stage goes BLACK.

Scene 8

SETTING: CLASSROOM

The classroom is set up in a semicircle, no one is paired with their respective cliques so the chaos can unfold.(Characters can move after initial opinions are stated) In the center of the semicircle is a cornucopia filled with snacks (Little Debbies etc...) and drinks as well as a golden envelope sticking out of it.

Lily stands from her seat (She should be centered as much as possible) and picks the golden envelope out.

LILY

(reading)

I hope all is well. Your progress and discussions are very interesting and I look forward to hearing everyone's opinions on today's discussion. Remember that everyone has to state their view/opinion on the following topic if they wish to continue to be a member of the Literature Club. I look forward to hearing what you all have to say. Best Wishes... The Owl.

(Beat)

This month's topic of discussion... Christmas.

LILY takes her seat and lets the card pass around.

PETAL

So how does this work? Is there a talking stick?

ATHENA

It usually starts with someone volunteering to go first, but if no one does then we just start from one end and go across.

HARRY COX

Shit

(beat)

Well... What's there to say? I like Christmas- the presents-

(beat)

Both giving and receiving... Very festive time- the decorations are cool. That's really all I can say about it.

THORN

I mean my opinion is no different from Harry Cox's. I enjoy the break and Christmas lights are nice.

ATHENA

I think it's a good holiday. A good day to remember that it's always good to give back to others.

PETAL

I love the gifts. I remember last year daddy got me a brand new tesla and filled the back seat with more presents.

LILY

I enjoy the holiday.

SCARLETT

I- I don't celebrate Christmas...

HARRY COX

You don't?

(beat)

What do you do for December then?

SCARLETT

I'm a Jehovah Witness so... We don't really celebrate the holidays.

HARRY COX

At all? Not even a birthday?

CHIEF

Birthdays aren't holidays

ROSE

Mine certainly is.

SCARLETT

Not even birthdays... we just don't celebrate these because their purpose is to worship or honor those who aren't Jesus-

ROSE

-Worshiped? Yeah I guess it feels that way sometimes-

HARRY COX

Does Christmas not worship Jesus though? I mean it is his birthday after all-

SCARLETT

It's complicated... We uh- well there's no proof in the bible that says he was born December 25th and also the Apostles didn't celebrate it and also he doesn't really want us to celebrate his birth, only his death-

HARRY COX

So you celebrate Easter?

SCARLETT

That's- no... He rose that day, but that was his resurrection so we celebrate 3 days earlier, so we celebrate passover, but not a giant bunny hiding eggs.

HARRY COX

That's- interesting... I guess I never figured that-

DILL DOE

I also don't celebrate...

(beat)

My mother is old fashioned so we celebrate Kwanza. She doesn't want me to forget our roots.

ZERO

Kwanza isn't- nevermind.

HARRY COX

Cool... Uh we can talk about that too- anybody else not celebrating Christmas?

LEAF

Hanukkah

HARRY COX

You're a jew?

CHIEF

Dude?!

LILY

Don't- Don't say that.

ZERO

You see what this is right?

CHIEF

Yeah.

DILL DOE

What's going on?

ZERO

The discussion isn't about Christmas...

LILY

It's about religion.

DILL DOE

The card only talks about Christmas though so-

HARRY COX

It's subtext.

CHIEF

The Owl did the same thing when we had to talk about technology-

ROSE

-and career paths... remember that Zero?

LILY

So what happens if we don't? We can finish our Christmas talk- those who don't celebrate just say that...

ATHENA

Doesn't that seem a little exclusive? We allow those who celebrate give their opinions on the holiday and how much they enjoy it while the others can only say "I don't celebrate it"

LILY

Better than starting a fight-

CHIEF

One could argue that a fight won't start if we're civilized...

LILY

You want to discuss it?

CHIEF

I do... I want to see how everyone sees. They believe they're purpose is to a higher power, so I'm curious.

DILL DOE

Well I don't actually believe in whatever Kwanza- kwanzian? Kwanzi gods are... I just do it because I wanna make my mom happy.

ZERO

You blindly follow your parents?

DILL DOE

No. I follow my mom and I wouldn't say blindly... I trust my mom and she'd never do something to lead me astray.

ZERO

Who else identifies themselves as a particular religion because of their parents?

HARRY COX, ROSE, LEAF, PETAL and THORN raise their hands.

HARRY COX

You chose to be a Jehovah Witness?

SCARLETT

I grew up Christian and wanted a more defined and definitive version of-

ROSE

As opposed to my made up version?

SCARLETT

I didn't say that-

ROSE

-didn't have to.

ZERO

Just out of curiosity, what religion is everyone?

HARRY COX

Catholic

ROSE

Baptist

SCARLETT

Jehovah Witness

ATHENA

Agnostic

PETAL

Christian... if that's still what I can call it...

LEAF

I'm Jewish

DILL DOE

I don't know, but God, Jesus, Holy Spirit so put me somewhere in between Baptist and Catholic

THORN

Muslim

CHIEF

Purely Spiritual.

ZERO

Atheist.

ROSE

Why am I not surprised...

CHIEF

What about you Lily?

LILY

I don't really believe in anything-

CHIEF

So you're atheist?

LILY

I also don't believe in these labels.

ZERO

So what's next Chief? We go around saying why we're right and everyone else is wrong? Or is this good enough? We've all said our beliefs

CHIEF

I was just curious

ZERO

Then get a book.

CHIEF

You didn't write the book, so how am I gonna know what your beliefs are?

ZERO

You want to know my beliefs?

(beat)

The man upstairs... doesn't exist. There's no attic... just like there's no basement. Just the 1st floor.

ROSE

By saying first floor you're implying that there are other levels.

ZERO

Tell me when's the last time you went to church.

(beat)

Everyone who said they had a god, tell me were you at church on Sunday? Anyone?

SCARLETT

I was...

ZERO

Anyone else?

CHIEF

I don't really have a place of worship, but I do retain my spirituality in my everyday life.

ZERO

That's great Chief... So no one else?

THORN

I guess that's the unique thing about atheism. Religion is one thing for you, but not for us. We don't all worship on Sunday. Prayers five times a week and a service on Friday.

LEAF

Saturday for me.

ROSE

I go to the college nights on Wednesday and lead my own prayer group on Fridays, so no I don't drive three hours to my parents for church Sunday morning.

ZERO

Whatever... This conversation was designed to breed conflict.

ATHENA

I don't think so-

ZERO

Because you're Switzerland. You know there's a god but don't worship them.

ATHENA

Zero... you're getting close.

ZERO

I'm done.

ROSE

Hey girlie, Scarlett right? Do you think my beliefs are wrong? Since you want a more definitive system.

SCARLETT

I- I didn't... I didn't mean it like that- for me I just like to have my faith be well defined and not biased because of a pastor's soapbox//I'm sorry.

ROSE

So now I read the bible wrong?

SCARLETT

Are you a virgin?

HARRY COX

Not with her bio-

ROSE

Excuse me?

HARRY COX

I'm just saying... It's kinda- I just remember seeing your bio on instagram.

ROSE

What about it?

HARRY COX

Well you have Proverbs 3:6 and right below a link to your onlyfans.

ROSE

What I do with my body is my decision-

HARRY COX

Yeah... and the highest tipper.

ZERO

This brings back memories doesn't it Rose.

ROSE

Yeah one of misogyny and sexism.

DILL DOE

What'd he say? What'd he say?

THORN

He was sexist-

ZERO

I'm not sexist?! I just stated my opinion.

ROSE

You called me a slut?!

ZERO

No, I said that's what sluts do. They parade around naked online and make their money that way... it's a cheat code and an unfair to those who have to work-

ROSE

Oh yes please I'd love to work for the patriarchy where I make less than you-

ZERO

How is it my fault I'm better suited for a job-

ROSE

-because you have something dangling from your crotch-

ZERO

-Some jobs are men jobs and some aren't-

ROSE

-right because a woman's job is to make dinner? Clean up the house for you?-

ZERO

-I didn't say that-

ROSE

You're not not saying that-

DILL DOE

Not not?

HARRY COX

Who's there?

CHIEF

Not now guys.

ZERO

We've gotten off topic, I believe you were about to explain how your job is acceptable for your religion. Please go on//

ROSE

-You're-

ZERO

-Question? Did you pick your name after your favorite toy?

DILL DOE

-We get presents on Kwanzaa too-

ROSE

What I choose to do for my job-

ZERO

-Job?! You post a risque pic and add a risky caption and make what I do in a week for manual labor-

ROSE

You don't think what I do is work?

ZERO

Oh... I'm sorry// I'm being insensitive. You must work hard with the late night frat house streams after the prayer group.

ROSE

I'm strong in my faith!

ZERO

Right the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak

HARRY COX

I see why...

THORN

Are you slut shaming her?

HARRY COX

Me? No- I... I was just// Oh god! Where's the eject button on this thing!?

THORN

How many people have you slept with?

HARRY COX

It'd be easier to say who I haven't slept with// I'm lying... four why?

THORN

At what point do you think a girl is a slut?

HARRY COX

When I can throw a rock in a crowd and hit an ex lover

CHIEF

Okay Diogenes.

HARRY COX

I guess 3 okay... You have your three bodies because they should be with serious relationships-

LEAF

They should be?

HARRY COX

I don't know, I guess I don't like girls who sleep with you on the first date... unless it's me they're sleeping with.

THORN

So you can have 4?

HARRY COX

I only say 3 because really when a girl says that she means 6-

THORN

What?! You have no idea what we have to deal with when it comes to insufferable horny pigs like you!

HARRY COX

Goddamnit this parachute isn't working!

SCARLETT

Can we not use that word please?

ZERO

It's a word- they're made to be said.

DILL DOE

Then say Nigga for me Zero. Enlighten a brotha// just words remember, better yet... say nigger. You can even snarl at the end of it... spit on me.

HARRY COX

Hey you sound like Rose.

ROSE

Can we stop?! Seriously, that is none of your business.

HARRY COX

For \$15 a month it better be my business.

ZERO

So are you feeling ashamed now Rose? Ashamed of what you're putting online for everyone to see... Ashamed of what your "God" thinks?

ROSE

My relationship with-

ZERO

WITH WHO ROSE?! HE DOESN'T EXIST!

ATHENA

ZERO! Enough!

ZERO

I don't need this shit anyways.

CHIEF

You crossed a line man...

ZERO

You're right... All of you- and your beliefs, your god/s. All of them, because there's no way that heaven doesn't exist. They're hand and hand, because one cannot exist without the other. No need for torture devices or the red hot pokers because I have you... this club- You guys are hell!

Act 2

SETTING: CLASSROOM

The stage is split in half. The board in the center that holds every member's name is updated.

SCARLETT X

ZERO X X

ATHENA

ROSE X

DILL DOE

THORN X

HARRY COX X

LEAF

CHIEF

LILY

PETAL

Scene 9

SETTING: CLASSROOM

DILL DOE is staring at the board, studying it methodically.

HARRY COX rushes into the classroom, arms spread like an airplane.

HARRY COX

INCOMING!

HARRY dives onto the beanbags.

HARRY COX

AHHH!

DILL DOE

You okay?

HARRY COX

Stupid beanbag.

DILL DOE

Still not sinking?

HARRY COX

It's like sitting on a rock.

(beat)

What're you doing?

DILL DOE

Well the Owl clearly wasn't Zero.

HARRY COX

So now you're looking for the next option?

DILL DOE

Yeah, but I'm hitting a roadblock.

HARRY COX

Well looking at it upside down isn't really helping either... Petal, Lily, Chief, Leaf-

DILL DOE

Wait-

HARRY COX

The boards in order

DILL DOE

The order in which everyone joined meaning-

HARRY COX

Zero was never first- it was Scarlett.

DILL DOE

You think Scarlett is the Owl?

HARRY COX

Well they're-

DILL DOE

Watch it!

HARRY COX

You have a strike man. Gotta be more careful than that.

DILL DOE

We're the only ones here.

HARRY COX

I'm sure there's a camera somewhere, how else would the Owl be monitoring us?

DILL DOE

You think they're monitoring us?

HARRY COX

How else would they know about everything? I don't think something like that last club meeting is something that can just have a once over

DILL DOE

So the Owl is watching us like a sitcom?

HARRY COX

Probably

DILL DOE

Do you think I'd be the main character

HARRY COX

Why would you be the main character

DILL DOE

Well I don't know... i'm just trying to find the focal point

Well if it's a sitcom it's really focused on love, romance and sex... Do you have a lot of sex?

HARRY COX

Sitcoms aren't just about sex- it's about the lives of the individual, their trials and tribulations- the relationships, lessons and generally just the overall way they experience what it is to be human.

DILL DOE

You're very passionate about sitcoms

HARRY COX

It's a guilty pleasure of mine.

DILL DOE

So... if we were in a sitcom right now; what would happen next?

HARRY COX

Well typically... depends on who we are as characters or archetypes. much like plays there's always tropes certain stories follow

DILL DOE

such as

HARRY COX

well the obvious romantic storyline which follows a will they won't they. you know flirting back and forth as they discover things about themselves only the other can bring out until the inevitable confession-

DILL DOE

you're not talking about us are you?

HARRY COX

I don't know baby, why don't you come over here and find out- you looking Yummy...

(beat)

I'm kidding. there's the bitchy character, the recurring one who's kinda mean but she's so hot it doesn't matter. They normally make them go braless to distract us from their toxicity.

DILL DOE

Well I didn't put on a undershirt today

HARRY COX

The comedic duo, they're normally doing random B plots while the story unfolds around them. Typically if the plot line is following the will they won't they the B plot is something goofy like they're looking for the perfect sandwich or they adopt a llama. something so irrelevant to the plot that if they got side tracked it wouldn't matter because they're funny.

DILL DOE and HARRY COX stop and go quiet. they slowly turn towards each other (an extremely slow moment to let the realization and comedy build)

BOTH

Nahhhh//

DILL DOE

Okay so if we're in a sitcom what happens next for us?

HARRY COX

Well normally we would have passed enough time for the plot to catch up with us

NTR SCARLETT

Once again: DILL DOE and HARRY COX stop and go quiet. They slowly turn towards each other.

DILL DOE

Hey Scarlett! Can I call you Scarly?

SCARLETT

No.

HARRY COX

We were just in the neighborhood and wondering if you could answer something for us.

DILL DOE

Yeah, we noticed that the board has names on it-

SCARLETT

Really? Never noticed.

HARRY COX

Yours just so happens to be first.

SCARLETT

And?

DILL DOE

So you got the first invitation from the Owl. Did you meet them?

HARRY COX

Or are you them?

SCARLETT

So let me get this straight... You think I'm the Owl? The person who doesn't want to be here and avoids human interaction.

DILL DOE

Well yeah, it just makes sense. You're always in the back lurking and listening to everyone. You rarely spark conversations yet you don't shy away from them-

SCARLETT

Dill Doe?

DILL DOE

Yeah?

SCARLETT

Sounds like you're judging me for being an introvert.

NTR CHIEF

DILL DOE

I'm not judging you. We looked up the definition of judging in the dictionary and unless you're having an opinion formed about you through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises, then I don't think I'm judging you.

SCARLETT

Well that's not the definition of judging?

DILL DOE

Yes it is, we looked it up. What's your definition?

SCARLETT

to form, give, or have as an opinion, or to decide about something or someone, especially after thinking carefully.

HARRY COX

Why did you know that at the top of your head?

DILL DOE

And what dictionary is that in?

SCARLETT

Cambridge

DILL DOE

Cambridge? You're kidding me right? That's not even top two dictionaries, at least rebuttal with an Oxford... Who uses Cambridge? If it's not Merriam it's wrong-

Once again: DILL DOE and HARRY COX stop and go quiet. They slowly turn towards each other.

DILL DOE contd

Damnit.

DILL DOE grabs a sticky note and marks it with an X then puts it in his first square.

EXT DILL DOE and HARRY COX.

Scene 10

SETTING: CLASSROOM

NTR LILY

Same directions as before(though a dim light can be placed onto the trio if preferred). Give spotlight to Lily and Chief (whether that be in the form of dimming lights and a spotlight or the students exiting)

Lily and Chief take center stage

CHIEF

Hey Lily, Over here.

LILY

Yes?

CHIEF

I wanted to chat with you-

LILY

-Wouldn't you rather talk to the new girl? Petal?

CHIEF

No... I like talking to you.

LILY

You do?

CHIEF

Yeah// you're unique.

LILY

Thought everyone was unique.

CHIEF

They are... you're just unique in a special way.

LILY

I guess that's entitled to a thank you... So thank you.

CHIEF

Don't worry about it.

LILY

So what about me makes me... unique in a special way.

CHIEF

That you put up with my shit. Not most people can do it-

LILY

What? The interrogations? Please, my parents drilled me every night wondering if I was out smoking and drinking.

CHIEF

I don't know, you're just making- you're like a book.

LILY

I'm assuming this is going somewhere so go on...

CHIEF

You know how people are either an open book or not an open book?

LILY

-One might even say a closed book-

CHIEF

//Well I guess you just seem like- a book with a nice cover that also seems to be opened.

LILY

So... An open book, nice cover- am I missing something else?

CHIEF

-But at the same time you're a closed book. You don't give me a lot, but enough-

LILY

//Enough to what?

CHIEF

Want to know more// you have a great synopsis!

LILY

I've never been complimented on my synopsis before so thank you.

CHIEF

Not even your foot notes?

LILY

There was a guy in my first year who was very interested in the notes of my feet.

CHIEF

That's exactly what I'm talkin' about.

LILY

What?

CHIEF

I'd hate to judge a book by its cover, but you// you're a human!

LILY

You lost me.

CHIEF

You're a human... and I know that sounds crazy because we're all human, but nowadays it's so hard to find someone who is. Someone who experiences things// things that aren't on your phone but also not just in the air. It's looking at someone and not feeling like you're falling, it's having a conversation where you're both listening. Not just hearing what I'm saying, but listening and allowing me to do the same. Because we're humans// we are social creatures, from the moment we leave the womb we need someone- and whether you believe in a god or evolution or believe that for some unknown reason we were placed on this earth, one thing is for certain; we're here for a small spec of time, and so is everyone else. Which is what makes humanity so fascinating and you don't have to believe it, but look: When we hold hands our fingers perfectly interlock with one another// think about the anatomy of a hug, when we hold each other your head falls perfectly into the crook of my neck and when we kiss... well I think you get it// Humans are made for each other.

(beat)

I apologize. I uh... I went on a tangent there for a second... And I think I also may have just judged you... but like I said earlier- Who fucking cares?

Scene 11

SETTING: CLASSROOM

ROSE, THORN and PETAL NTR.

The Trio struts in, one-by-one. Rose leading, Thorn following closely behind and Petal filling in nicely. The room is theirs; They each take their respective seats, Rose taking the center.

ROSE

So glad Zero is finally gone. He was so obsessed with me.

THORN

I know, it was ridiculous and kinda pathetic.

PETAL

Is this not considered Judging?

ROSE

No, we just can't judge one another and Zero is no longer one of us.

PETAL

Oh... In that case thank god am I right? He was so emo and it was like come on are you trying to be mysterious or depressing.

ROSE

It's been a minute since I've seen a man throw a temper tantrum. Last time was my ex when I told him I lost feelings for him. He started guiltin' me telling me he was going to kill himself

PETAL

Did he?

ROSE

Don't know, but if he did I certainly wasn't invited to the wake.

THORN

His outburst was so sad, did you see his face when he realized no one was on his side. Like yeah, we don't agree with you, misogyny is terrible. Girls support girls

ROSE

Right! Like get a hold of yourself.

PETAL

This shit right here... is why I love feminism.

NTR LEAF

LEAF

Petal... you're in my seat.

PETAL

Am I? Oops. I'm sorry 'bout that, but Penis and Buttplug aren't here so why don't you grab one of their beanbags.

LEAF

I know I just normally sit there...

ROSE

It'll be okay if you don't sit here one day Leaf. Just take a seat so we can talk.

LEAF

Alright...

ROSE

Leaf, do you have the lipstick you were using the other day? I was talking to Petal about it.

LEAF

Yeah it's right- oh my god.

ROSE

What? Something in my teeth?

LEAF

-No-

ROSE

-My hair-

LEAF

No the-

ROSE

Oh my god! Am I breaking out!?

LEAF

Nothings wrong with you?!

ROSE

Oh... that makes sense.

LEAF

The board... Damn near everyone has a strike.

(Beat)

Well everyone besides Lily, Petal and I... and Athena of course.

ROSE

Why did I get a strike?

LEAF

Well Zero would argue you were acting like a class act biotch. You said you weren't surprised when he said he was an atheist.

ROSE

Well were any of us?

LEAF

I don't know... I mean Lily is-

PETAL

She actually said she was against labels.

THORN

What does that even mean?

PETAL

Well it's no different than people who don't want to be identified for the convenience of others. Like when someone has to say they're in a relationship or that they're mixed or gay.

LEAF

Some people just don't want to make a big deal out of those things.

PETAL

To each their own, but there's a difference between owning it and hiding from it.

ROSE

Why does Thorn have a strike?

THORN

I called one of the guys a pig for slut shaming you-

ROSE

Really?! That's so sweet. You're the best

THORN

No you're the best.

ROSE

No you're the best.

PETAL

Hey Rose, can I join your prayer group?

ROSE

Of course, we meet Friday nights in the common room.

LEAF

You guys meet outside of the club?

ROSE

Yes, I've known Petal for two years.

LEAF

Oh... I didn't think it was allowed, you know with the ambiguity of it all.

ROSE

Did you think we were all strangers? I mean you heard them at the club meeting right? One of them is subbed to me.

(shudders)

I hope he's joking.

LEAF

Do you and Thorn hang out?

ROSE

Once or twice, why?

LEAF

No reason. I'm gonna go... I'll be back in time for the meeting.

ROSE

Okay... Why are you telling me?

LEAF

Right... Sorry.

EXT LEAF

PETAL

What's up with her?

ROSE

I don't know.

(beat)

Anyways, it's a shade of red... One that'll make you feel so- Yummy.

Scene 12

SETTING: CLASSROOM

The classroom is set up in a semicircle, no one is paired with their respective cliques so the chaos can unfold.(Characters can move after initial opinions are stated) In the center of the semicircle is a cornucopia filled with snacks (Little Debbies etc...) and drinks as well as a golden envelope sticking out of it.

Petal stands from her seat and picks the golden envelope out.

PETAL

(reading)

I hope all of you are well. Welcome to our penultimate Discussion. I hope you took time to collect yourselves and take care of yourselves mentally as you move forward. Your last discussion was very interesting and I look forward to this one. Remember that everyone has to state their view/opinion on the following topic if they wish to continue to be a member of the Literature Club. I look forward to hearing what you all have to say. Best Wishes... The Owl.

(Beat)

This month's topic of discussion... Sex.

PETAL takes her seat and lets the card pass around.

HARRY COX

Are we going to discuss the elephant in the room?

PETAL

What?

HARRY COX

A lot of us have strikes and well... We know that it's not just about sex as proven by the last meeting so... Should we just-

ATHENA

Last time won't be like this time.

HARRY COX

Because we got rid of Zero?

ROSE

Yes

ATHENA

No, because we're going to control ourselves and our emotions.

THORN

I saw we just get it over with. Everyone say what you think about sex-

DILL DOE

Feel free to throw in your favorite position too.

PETAL

Seriously?

DILL DOE

Just making conversation.

HARRY COX

Um... I mean I like sex. It's fun.

ROSE

Fun? Is it like a game to you-

HARRY COX

Not everyone does it for a living... I'm trying out here, but

(beat)

Ahem, let's go to the next person

THORN

It's fine.

SCARLETT

Virgin

HARRY COX

Hellooo mama's

SCARLETT

I believe in chastity

ATHENA

Same with me, on the virginity aspect.

PETAL

I love sexual freedom.

LILY

This topic makes me uncomfortable

LEAF

Same here.

DILL DOE

I think sex is a very special and intimate thing, one that should only be shared with someone you have a deep and enriching connection with. I also have a preference towards doggystyle and or prone boning.

ROSE

I think sex isn't some taboo thing that we should hold on a pedestal. Traditional values are not as prevalent so I don't keep them. I can sleep with whoever I want whenever I want and I don't think it's fair to shame anybody who chooses that sexual lifestyle.

CHIEF

Intercourse is cool I guess.

LEAF

Are we done with this conversation now? We all spoke up-

PETAL

Why are you so weirded out by it?

ROSE

Are you a virgin?

CHIEF

(to Lily)

You figure it out yet

LILY

Big time.

HARRY COX

I don't like being in the dark, let me in.

CHIEF

Just keep talking... It's not my place.

ROSE

It's no big deal if you're a virgin Leaf-

LEAF

Then why are you still bringing it up?

PETAL

Someones getting defensive, it's not like we're judging you- Scarletts a virgin and so is Athena.

LEAF

It really is none of your business so please stop-

DILL DOE

Well now I'm curious

CHIEF

Don't be-

DILL DOE

It's human nature// we're like cats-

CHIEF

Curiosity kills them.

DILL DOE

They're still curious.

ROSE

Look, Leaf whatever it is don't worry so much// Like I said sex isn't a big deal... you're not forced to wait for marriage or find someone you're intimate with- there's a whole industry revolving around it- Sex sells.

LEAF

I'm just uncomfortable okay, leave it at that.

PETAL

Oh my god Leaf no one cares that you're gay.

ROSE

(beat)

You're gay?

HARRY COX

I think she'd be a lesbian-

LEAF

Why would you say that?

PETAL

Because it's not a big deal, I'm bisexual; I've been with girls and guys-

HARRY COX

Nice

PETAL

-We live in a day and age where this doesn't matter anymore-

LEAF

Stop

PETAL

Like Rose said sex isn't a big deal and neither is sexuality... Be gay, be asexual- be whoever you want and own it; no one gets to tell you otherwise.

LEAF

Stop talking

PETAL

There's no point in hiding- that's what they want you to do. They want you to stay in the closet and conform to their ideas but screw 'em!

LEAF

You had no right! You had no right to say that!

PETAL

Calm down... I'm on your side.

LEAF

You just outed me?!

PETAL

That's the problem?! No, the problem is the idea that you have to be outed! Why should we?! They don't have to sit awkwardly in front of their parents, their friends and say "I'm Straight" they don't have to watch their grandparents faces grotesque at the idea- they don't have to hear "It's a phase" or "You'll grow out of it" So why is it a big deal when we do it?!

LEAF

You can't just do that though! That's your opinion, I didn't want people to know// I wasn't ready- Can I go?

ATHENA

You can leave

DILL DOE

Woah, who made you leader?

LILY

Even if we voted// Are you really gonna make her stay?

EXT LILY

THORN

I'll go talk to her.

EXT THORN

PETAL

I'll apologize. You guys don't have to look at me like that- it's judging.

ATHENA

Does anyone else have something to add?

LILY

I'm Demisexual.

Scene 13

SETTING: HALLWAY

A wall with a bulletin board covered in posters and other school related posts. Beneath it a small clear section of brick wall.

LEAF is sitting against the wall in despair. The sound of THORN's footsteps makes her jump.

LEAF

What do you want?

THORN

I wanted to check up on you...

LEAF

I'm fine. Just go back to the meeting//

THORN

I don't want to.

LEAF

You'd rather sit out here with someone who's crying?

THORN

I'd rather sit out here with someone who's a friend.

LEAF

We're friends now?

THORN

I don't think I'd ever consider us not friends.

LEAF

Well// thanks then... I guess.

THORN

She didn't mean it in malice

LEAF

She still shouldn't have- she was being a real-

(Noises of Frustration)

THORN

You know technically we're outside the club

LEAF

She was being a real bitch!?

(beat)

I get where she was coming from, but she needs to understand that all the things she expects// the things she believes we should go through- we still go through them. I'm terrified to tell my family... I know it's pathetic// I'm a 22 year old scared to talk to her parents.

THORN

It's not stupid... Telling people things can be really scary.

LEAF

It's terrifying// I wish she'd understand that... I would've loved to talk to her about it if I knew she was// but I- No one knows how hard it is-

THORN

I understand-

LEAF

I know but like- it's difficult to-

THORN

Leaf... I understand.

LEAF

You understand? Wait are you-

THORN

No... Well maybe, I don't give it much thought.

LEAF

Then how do you-

THORN

I've been in a similar situation... One where I wasn't able to find my voice//It's probably going on 5 years now... I had friend//not so much anymore. He was a real golden boy of a child; the kind you only see in movies. It was weird... I guess the weirdest part of that situation was that we were best friends. When we got to high school he asked me out, I didn't want to say yes, but// I don't know- I guess I felt like it was expected of me. Everyone teased us about dating, our parents made jokes and the whispers I heard from other girls... I kinda figured I had to. Nothing really changed, we held hands and instead of our names we said babe and baby, but nothing else changed// Then- all of a sudden, like a switch turned on in his head he became different. He became so irascible, the hand holding became hugs and then kisses and then before I knew it I was in the backseat of his truck on a

saturday night. I don't remember if I said no, and I don't remember if I said yes, but I know I didn't want it. He broke up with me a few weeks later and started dating some freshman... I didn't tell anybody- even if I did// I didn't want anything to happen. I didn't care about putting him away or going to therapy or having everyone see me as a victim, maybe I should've but... It's done and over with//I guess what I'm really trying to say is we each have a unique voice, no one else has our rhythm, pitch or cadence; so no one can tell you what to do with it. You understand?

LEAF

Yes// Thorn?

THORN

Yea?

LEAF

It's nice talking to you outside of the Literature Club...

THORN

Yeah// We should do it more often- and you don't have to call me Thorn... Call me Soph-

LEAF

Becca.

Scene 14

SETTING: CLASSROOM

DILL DOE and HARRY COX are sitting across from one another playing finger football.

DILL DOE

You know what would make this game more interesting?

HARRY COX

Setting the paper on fire?

DILL DOE

I was going to say a little wager//

HARRY COX

Yeah, let's go with that idea.

The duo places a few dollars on the desk.

DILL DOE

You know... we could make it a little more interesting.

HARRY COX

How so?

DILL DOE

Loser is forced to sit on the hard bean bag.

HARRY COX

Now I can get behind that-

DILL DOE

Best of three?

HARRY COX

Wait- let's do this the right way.

HARRY COX and DILL DOE arrange the desk into a giant playing field (preferable a 3x4 desk surface area)

DILL DOE

Before we up the ante... you're not some crazy paper football D1 athlete are you?

HARRY COX

No, but I do dabble in a bit of flaming puck unicycle hockey-

DILL DOE

Flaming what?

HARRY COX

Flaming puck unicycle hockey

DILL DOE

You're making that up//

HARRY COX

No, it's a real thing. Look it up// No seriously look it up it's a real thing. We get on our unicycles and play hockey, but to up the ante we light the puck on fire-

DILL DOE

Because learning to ride a unicycle isn't upping the ante?

HARRY COX

No it got too easy, that's why we stopped doing the pack burro race.

DILL DOE

Burro as in donkey?

HARRY COX

Yep

DILL DOE

So let me just get this right// you wanted to do a more extreme sport because you got tired of racing on your donkey-

HARRY COX

Not on// You never ride a donkey. You race beside it and it just carries your supplies-

DILL DOE

Seriously?

HARRY COX

Look it up// No seriously look it up it's a real thing.

DILL DOE

These are some interesting facts about you- I guess we don't know a lot about one another.

HARRY COX

Yeah we kinda just come here and goof off then go home.

DILL DOE

You come from a big family?

HARRY COX

Yup, how else could we fill up the Flaming puck unicycle hockey roster.

DILL DOE

What's that like?

HARRY COX

Dangerous- one year the puck took flight and almost scorched-

DILL DOE

No// the big family.

HARRY COX

Oh// it's fine. It's always loud in the house and you never get anything to yourself, rooms, bathrooms... closets// sometimes drawers.

DILL DOE

Is it fun?

HARRY COX

The family still right?

DILL DOE

Yeah//

HARRY COX

Real fun. Every weekend I go back, not because I have to or anything, but just because there's never a dull moment- it's loud, but the noise is nice. That and as long as I'm there I'm team captain for Flaming puck unicycle hockey.

DILL DOE

Sounds great...

HARRY COX

What about you? Big family?

DILL DOE

Just my mom and me.

HARRY COX

What's with pops?

DILL DOE

Nothing he's just not in the picture... Let's play the game alright? I don't really like talking about myself.

HARRY COX

Oh come on, I gave you a whole run down- give me something at least//

DILL DOE

Really man I don't-

HARRY COX

-Come on-

DILL DOE

-Seriously man enough... Sorry I just// it's different. Okay? Is that good enough for you?

(beat)

It's your turn.

HARRY COX

You seem to want to know an awful lot about me, but I can't know anything about you... What're you hiding?

DILL DOE

I'm not hiding anything-

HARRY COX

That's what someone who's hiding something would say.

DILL DOE

Dude you're-

HARRY COX

You know... you seemed very adamant on being involved in my search to find the Owl.

DILL DOE

We both wanted to-

HARRY COX

Yeah, but you only wanted to find the Owl because I wanted to find the Owl and so we started to look for the Owl and looking back on our journey to find the Owl, you whispered suggestions and ideas to help narrow the search for the Owl keeping me on a steady path of failure in the search for the Owl so do you see what I see, what I've been seeing,

DILL DOE

What?!

HARRY COX

You're the Owl- it all makes sense. Why else would these puzzle pieces be falling into place- it wasn't Zero or Scarlett... You knew I was close so you threw the scent of your trail, but buddy Flaming puck unicycle hockey burned all the nose hairs so I'm basically a quarter bloodhound.

DILL DOE

You've lost it man.

HARRY COX

On the contrary my feathered nocturnal companion. I believe I've found it.

DILL DOE

Dude... I originally wanted to see the Owl to change the bean bag, remember?

HARRY COX

Only because my intelligence was beginning to frighten you, so you made this elaborate hunt, knowing I could never hunt the hunter, but buddy you just became prey.

DILL DOE

How can I prove it to you?

HARRY COX

Tell me something about you.

DILL DOE

Can't.

HARRY COX

Hoo. Hoo. Hoo!

DILL DOE

I'm gonna head out-

EXT DILL DOE

HARRY COX

(existential crisis)

Maybe I'm the Owl...

Scene 15

SETTING: CLASSROOM

The classroom is set up in a semicircle, no one is paired with their respective cliques so the chaos can unfold.(Characters can move after initial opinions are stated) In the center of the semicircle is a cornucopia filled with snacks (Little Debbie's etc...) and drinks as well as a golden envelope sticking out of it. Zero is also there.

ROSE

Why is he back?

ZERO

The Owl invited me- wanted to hear what I've got to say on this last topic-

ROSE

If it's sexism then I'm sure we're in for a treat-

ZERO

-and if it's "How to be a bitch" I'll make sure I take notes.

HARRY COX

Oh my gosh just screw each other already.

Athena stands from her seat and picks the golden envelope out.

ATHENA

(reading)

Remember that everyone has to state their view/opinion on the following topic if they wish to continue to be a member of the Literature Club. I look forward to hearing what you all have to say. Best Wishes... The Owl.

(Beat)

This month's topic of discussion... Each Other.

ATHENA takes her seat and lets the card pass around.

HARRY COX

I'm not seeing the subtext in this one...

CHIEF

There isn't any- the Owl wants us to judge each other... Based on everything we know- our preconceptions, our ideals// So if you have something to say then-

PETAL

Before hell breaks loose... Leaf, I'm sorry for what I did// I shouldn't have outed you like that... it was wrong and-

LEAF

Did you need the audience to see you say that?

PETAL

Excuse me?

LEAF

You could've caught me before the meeting, hell even after it, but right here in front of everyone// You could've done the right thing and ran after me.

ROSE

Leaf, she apologized// what more do you need. She can't un-out you. None of us care that you're gay-

HARRY COX

-Lesbian...

ROSE

-other than probably Scarlett.

SCARLETT

I don't care what she is-

ROSE

Oh really? I was under the impression that we weren't up to your standards-

SCARLETT

I don't care what any of you do. I'm just here for the book check//Now I see why you and Zero were at each other's throats-

ROSE

Because he was an entitled misogynist-

ZERO

-And you're a-

SCARLETT

You're an instigating attention whore.

ZERO

Nice one.

CHIEF

I think we should take a step back... If we could all just calm down-

DILL DOE

Fuck you

CHIEF

What did I do?

DILL DOE

I don't know... just wanted to feel involved I guess.

HARRY COX

Oh like you aren't already involved enough you backstabbing treacherous snakes- I mean owl!

DILL DOE

I'm not the OWL!

HARRY COX

Owl say what?!

DILL DOE

Owls say Hoo.

HARRY COX

Whatever OWL!

ATHENA

One at a time please-

ROSE

Oh alright, Miss. hide under the radar. Come on, you've been watching us for a while now- so tell me; what do you think of us?

ATHENA

I don't have anything to say about any of you-

ROSE

Switzerland-

ATHENA

Now I think// you sound a lot like Zero.

ROSE

Oh please if I wanted to sound like a moron-

ZERO

You'd what?! Dress in pink and call yourself Yummy?

LILY

Can we calm down?!// The letter said nothing about being at each other's throats! It was and still is just peoples personal opinions, but that doesn't give you the right to call someone a slut or prude or asshole-

ROSE

Well that's how I feel. If you don't like it then that's how you feel right? We're all entitled to our feelings-

HARRY COX

Well I feel like you should offer a discount every now and then- I mean 15\$ for lewds?! Then you wanna do PPV// make up your mind- Why would I pay just to pay to see stuff and for the love of god learn to-

SCARLETT

Don't use his name in vain-

ZERO

Great now we're back to religion-

SCARLETT

There's nothing wrong with having faith!

ZERO

You're absolutely right?! There's nothing wrong with it, because if you're wrong about all of this- it's lights out. No more life// bye bye, but God forbid, if I'm wrong- I'm damned for eternity just because I didn't accept the Lord.

DILL DOE

Something wrong with that? You scared the man upstairs is gonna smite you?

ZERO

I'm afraid he won't on the account of God isn't real// Then I'll have to do it myself.

ROSE

Why don't you then, I'd love to see it.

ZERO

You'd love to see a lot wouldn't you, you know with all that time you spend with your head in your pillow.

HARRY COX

Jesus Christ, get a room.

SCARLETT

I'm leaving.

Scarlett storms off unapologetically.

EXT SCARLETT

HARRY COX

Where are they going

DILL DOE

They?

ATHENA

Yeah Like they/them

DILL DOE

Ohhhh I thought you guys were just confused... They just were.

THORN

What the hell is wrong with you

CHIEF

Maybe we should have implemented a talking stick-

HARRY COX

Oh you'd like that wouldn't you- Look I'll make it easy for you- Rose: Slut, Zero: Emo, Athena: Weird, DILL DOE: Owl, Petal: Kinda hot, Thorn: Dommy-Mommy, Leaf: Chill Chick, Lily: Present? and Chief you're a dude. Man there are a lot of people in this club.

Everyone begins shouting and overlapping each other.

HARRY COX contd

Oh my- One at a time please//

Everyone goes quiet

HARRY COX contd

Wow I didn't think that would work... Carry on.

Everyone begins shouting and overlapping each other.

PETAL

What was the point of this club if in the end all we were gonna do was judge each other?!

ROSE

Finally something I can get on board with-

ZERO

You're always on the board- foot or head, whatever your preference is.

ROSE

Call me a slut one more time...

ZERO

Slut-

ROSE

Fuck you, You wanna know why I parade my body the way I do; why I love sex... Because I had a teacher touch me when I was in middle school and this is my way of taking back my sexual freedom- this is me feeling empowered because for once in my fucking life I get to decide who gets to touch me and I want everyone to know that I'm in control.

DILL DOE

Talk about feminine rage.

THORN

Is everything a joke to you?!

DILL DOE

I was agreeing with her?! You know, supporting women empowerment. Feminism woohoo!

THORN

Is that a joke

DILL DOE

No seriously if that's what you guys are about then honestly// Me too.

THORN

(Scoffs)

You know what I think of you? I think you're an asshole, an insensitive brat who makes nothing but sexist, racist and homophobic jokes just so they can get a laugh.

PETAL

Seriously, not cool.

DILL DOE

Well I'm sorry you see me like that, but it's so hypocritical of you to judge me when you don't even know me.

PETAL

I know exactly who you are- you're the funny one because you're scared if you're not funny no one will love you.

DILL DOE

Oh Bravo, you nailed that// just like Rose. I don't make the jokes for you. You guys think you're the only ones here with trauma?! Oh give me a break; I had to watch my dad beat my mom black and blue; then I had to be a big boy and drive her to the hospital- And I was only 12! Then when I came back home daddy wasn't there, so before you hop on my back// Why don't you answer the door. Knock Knock!

HARRY COX

Who's there?

DILL DOE

Not my daddy!

Dill Doe storms off.

EXT DILL DOE

NTR DILL DOE

Dill Doe grabs the bean bag-

DILL DOE contd

Still not there!

DILL DOE EXT.

HARRY COX

That's my beanbag// You damn Owl.

HARRY COX EXT.

CHIEF

I should go make sure they don't break anything...

EXT CHIEF

ROSE

Well... I guess there goes them.

ZERO

Should've been the other way around if we're being honest.

ROSE

Do you have a problem with me?

ZERO

Oh my- was it that obvious?

ROSE

Well if you have a problem with me say it-

ZERO

I have nothing to say to you-

ROSE

Seriously?! After everything I said you still think I'm some shallow slut; if you have a problem speak your mind.

ZERO

That's your problem you care too much about how people see you

ROSE

Better than not carrying at all

ZERO

You shouldn't care- that's exactly why people like you get so hurt over every little thing-

ROSE

And people like you do the hurting-

ZERO

You don't think I'm hurting?!

ROSE

NO, I know you're hurting- why else would you be an asshole; Hurt people, Hurt people.

ZERO

If that's the case why are you such a bitch

ROSE

Why are you an asshole

ZERO

Because I was taught not to express myself?! That men don't cry, tears are for the weak. I have to be stoic-

ROSE

Sounds like that's why you're hurting- because you don't have a shoulder to cry on-

ZERO

Sounds like I need one then!

ROSE

Sounds like you do!

ZERO

I'm leaving!

ROSE

Not if I leave first!

ROSE and ZERO race towards the door still arguing.

THORN

It's like pulling on your crush's pigtails.

LEAF

How long before they realize-

THORN

Are you kidding? I'd be surprised if the storage closet wasn't broken into after this.

PETAL

So... Where does that leave the rest of us?

LEAF

You can start by giving me a real apology... One that isn't for show.

PETAL

It wasn't for show- I genuinely am-

LEAF

You're not talking to me- you're talking at me Petal.

THORN

What happened to girls supporting girls?

PETAL

You seriously want an apology? One where no one's watching? Fine-

Lights out (BLACK): Spotlights on PETAL and LEAF

PETAL contd

I'm sorry, okay... What I did was terrible; I know it was... and you don't have to forgive me- honestly I'd judge you if you did. I was a selfish jealous bitch who outed you and I should've known and done better. I'm here to bring you up and I know that what I did was awful... I know it was, but I saw a scared little girl- one who was nervous of changing in the locker room or sleeping over at a friend's house. I know how that feels and I understand- So please stop hating yourself for who you are. Hate me if it makes it easier. Is that better?

LEAF

You've never stayed over at a friend's house?

PETAL

No...

LEAF

(beat)

You want to come over tonight? Soph's coming.

PETAL

(trying to sound chill)

That could be cool.

LEAF

Good, let's bounce before someone else blows up.

LEAF, THORN and PETAL EXT.

LIGHTS UP: A small area downstage fit for 2

Scene 16

SETTING: CLASSROOM

All that remains in the classroom are ATHENA and LILY

ATHENA

Well that went about how I expected...

LILY

Athena... goddess of wisdom- Owl... So what was the point of all of this? Forcing a group of people to hate each other- to argue and fight until their minds broke?

ATHENA

Well... I just wanted to see-

LILY

See what?

ATHENA

I wanted to see if what Jean Paul Sarte was right// If there truly is no need for the eternal pits of fire or the chambers of torture- I wanted to see if Hell was other people.

LILY

That's it? You pitted us against each other for a theory?

ATHENA

Not just a theory, my thesis paper. I wanted to conduct an experiment to see how humans would react when they were forced to be around each other... Forced to be themselves, forced to be vulnerable- Would we all sing kumbaya or would it end in disaster//

LILY

Well?

ATHENA

I'm not entirely sure... I will say I expected everyone to argue about something//

LILY

You wanted us to fight?

ATHENA

No- but I knew it couldn't be helped... It's human nature- Everyone wants to believe they're doing it right...

LILY

Doing what right//

ATHENA

Being human.

LILY

No judgment, but that's dumb-

ATHENA

Maybe, but when you group together a large sum of people with nothing in common what do you think will happen? That's the experiment of Life: of the World. What will we do as humanity? Do we naturally find those we feel safe with-

SPOTLIGHT: THORN and LEAF

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

If you don't, do you remain alone?

SPOTLIGHT: SCARLETT

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

No one knows why we're here// So do we try to make sense of it all?

SPOTLIGHT: DILL DOE and HARRY COX fighting over beanbag.

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

Or do we embrace the Absurdity of it all?

SPOTLIGHT: CHIEF

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

I mean what's the purpose? Are we here to just live and die// Or are we supposed to take ahold of our own destiny and choose our purpose and decide why we're here-

SPOTLIGHT: ROSE

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

Or do we give up// realize there isn't a purpose so we just take life as it is and there's nothing else to it.

SPOTLIGHT: ZERO

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

Maybe the purpose isn't to live with everyone, but to live with yourself-

SPOTLIGHT: PETAL

SPOTLIGHT OUT

ATHENA contd

At the end of the day- at the end of time, that question can never be answered// What is the meaning of life?

LILY

It's to live// Life in itself is confusing, but the one thing we all agree on is that it's too short. In comparison to the birth of the universe// you and I are a blink... We're gone like that... That shouldn't mean anything, but at the same time it does- we're here. Right now// living

in this moment. Whether there's a God or whether a giant explosion created this moment- it doesn't matter. What matters is what we choose to do with it// I choose to live- Live my life with no regrets because... It's the only one I got.

(beat)

How's that for the results of your hypothesis?

ATHENA

You know... I hand picked everyone because I knew one way or another- they'd get on someone's nerves... It was inevitable, but I had no idea what I was going to get when I chose you- You were my outlier for lack of better terms.

LILY

How'd I do?

NRT CHIEF

ATHENA

I guess I'll find out from your response.

Athena backs away

CHIEF

They only broke the beanbag... What'd I miss?

LILY

Well everyone left... and Athena's the owl.

CHIEF

Wait that's the- you're the owl- She's the owl.

LILY

Not much gets past you does it?

CHIEF

Well... I guess that's the end of the Literature Club huh?

LILY

Yeah, I think we can go ahead and strike all of our names out.

CHIEF

Even yours?

LILY

Oh yeah, I judged a lot

CHIEF

No kidding? When?

LILY

Well I hate when people ask me questions, sooo I just about judged you everyday.

CHIEF

Well good thing you don't have to worry about that anymore...

LILY

I will say- it did grow on me.

CHIEF

Really?

LILY

Yeah, you're nice to talk to-

CHIEF

-You too-

LILY

Talk over lunch?

CHIEF

About what?

LILY

A phrase I heard recently... I think you'd do great at helping me answer it in a paper.

CHIEF

Hit me with it.

LILY

"Life is meaningless, nothing matters."

-End-

High School Selections

The Thing

by Jade Magee

AXEL – Teen who ran away from his life on Mars, and in order to get to Saturn and start a better life there, he stowaways on GREYSON and HENRY's ship. He doesn't really know his age, but he guesses late middle school to late high school (he really does not know)

GREYSON - Tired intern who also goes to college (online), has a deep love for coffee

HENRY - Eccentric Scientist person

Scene 1

AXEL sprints into the cargo room of the ship from Stage Left then flattens himself against the wall to the side of the door frame, out of sight from those looking in.

AXEL

They can't see me- They can't! I'll be done for! I can't be caught! They're going to send me back to mars! Or worse- earth! And I just can't go there. I don't want to go to the waste planet just for trying to get to Saturn! But this is the only way... So I can't get caught.

Footsteps sound behind the door frame (the one AXEL entered from-), approaching, AXEL freaks out and dashes to the middle of the room

AXEL

(Looking around, frantically.) No no no no no no! I can't get caught. Where to hide where to hide...

Footsteps are getting closer and AXEL spots a crate on Stage Right

AXEL

There!

AXEL sprints to Stage Right and hides behind a large crate. HENRY and GREYSON walk in

HENRY

Oh man, Greyson! Don't you just love being on a ship? Out here in space?

GREYSON

Henry. You do realize that even though your childhood was spent on Earth while it was still a nice place to live, I have spent my whole life in space. It's not that impressive.

HENRY

Still. We have our own ship! Our own research vessel!

GREYSON

Just means that I'll be stuck with you until we reach the next planet... I can't wait... (muttering under breath) Oh man I need some coffee...

HENRY

Speaking of which, we aren't in the cargo room for nothing! We have to get the thing!

GREYSON

(sighs) Which. Thing. We have many things on this ship. Because you just couldn't stop packing different "scientific necessities"

HENRY

Noooooo. You know the oneee. Ya'know, the one.

GREYSON

WHICH ONE

HENRY

THE ONE THAT'S SHINY AND GLOWS AND STUFF AND IS THE ONLY REASON WE WERE ABLE TO GET A SCIENTIFIC GRANT FOR THIS SHIP

GREYSON

(asides) And here I thought that this guy stole it (normal speaking)
You mean the thing that we found that is basically an infinite as far as
we know, source of energy?

HENRY

SHHHHH not so loud! We don't want other scientists to steal our
discoveries!

GREYSON

(sighs) Henry. Look at me. We are on our own ship, not in a crowded
café or lab or Reck Room. (aside) God I need some coffee...

HENRY

Oh... Right. Well, I for one am excited! We need to move in to our new
living space! Time to get unpacking!

They start miming unpacking certain crates

GREYSON

Why did you bring all of that personal garbage? I thought we "needed
to get out the door and onto the ship so we don't have time to pack"

HENRY

Heeeeeeeyyy. Its not my fault. You were taking a long timeeeee

GREYSON

No. I was trying to sneak out of the window. You were the one who
didn't tell me that we were going to be moving into this place.

GREYSON starts to rummage through their crate more frantically

HENRY

(Gasps offendedly) You were trying to run away? You didn't want to
work with me? I can't believe-

GREYSON

(Slowly stops rummaging through the crate then slowly turns to look
at HENRY) (yelling) WHERE THE EVER LOVING HECK IS MY
COFFEE

HENRY

Oh- I threw it away.

GREYSON

Oh- that's funny (poorly fake laughs) That's so funny. (pauses, looks at
HENRY, yells) YOU WHAT?

HENRY

I threw away your coffee

GREYSON

WHYYYYYYYY :(

HENRY

Its unhealthy to have 16 cups of coffee a day, and what better way to
have an intervention?

GREYSON

How could youuuuu?

While crying/being close to tears -in the comical overdramatic way-
Greyson gets out a mug and pulls a thing of instant coffee from
somewhere and pretty much makes coffee

HENRY

HOW? I thought I got rid of all of that stuff!

GREYSON

(speaking to coffee) You're the only one who loves me...

HENRY

You know what? Fine. I won't question it. We still need to get out the
thing. (Rummages through box and grabs thing)

HENRY and GREYSON walk out of the room

AXEL comes out from behind the box

AXEL

Oh thank goodness. (sighs in relief) I thought I was done for.

AXEL notices the opened boxes

AXEL

Oh, it seems that they left these open- just perfect for me to steal- no, borrow without a confirmed or finite return date. So they clearly left these open because they wanted someone (cough cough) me (cough cough) to look through them and take stuff from them.

AXEL rummages through the boxes and takes something out

AXEL sits down and starts fiddling with stolen object

AXEL

It's not fair that I have to steal. Not fair at all I tell you! I should be able to live out my childhood! Go to high school! If only there was a way... a way that I could not have to steal, at least when I get to Saturn. The only way that could happen is if I got some money. But I need a job to get money, and I need money to get a place to stay and food to eat to get to the job. So I need money to get a stable life, and need a job to get money, and I need money to get a job. So I need money. Now, how do I get that...

AXEL facepalms

AXEL

Oh, right! The thingy that those science people had! I bet if I stole it, or at least a little bit of it, then I could sell it! Depending on what it is... But it sounds important and expensive! I would get at least enough money for a stable job! So I have to steal it. I can't get caught by them- who knows what they'd do to me? Out here in space... on a private spaceship... with no interplanetary law to stop them from doing whatever they want... (gulps) Yeah. No way am I getting caught.

AXEL pauses, seemingly caught up with whatever he's doing with the object

AXEL

So... how do I do this... Well first I need somewhere to hide, a more permanent and secluded location. Then I'll need to borrow without a

confirmed or finite return date some food, and also the thingy. Then I need to get off the ship. First things first! I need to find a place to stay. I'll burn those other bridges when I get there...

Scene 2

GREYSON and HENRY are in their lab which is on Stage Left. HENRY is drawing one of those cartoony unrealistic plans and explaining to GREYSON how they're going to use the thing. GREYSON is the one actually doing research and looking at the thing under a microscope.

HENRY

So after we figure out that the thing can give you superpowers-

GREYSON

It can't.

HENRY

Stop being such a party pooper, Greyson. Anyways when we find out that we can make laser sword that can-

GREYSON

Henry. We. Don't. Know. What. This. Thing. Can. Do. Yet.

HENRY

Well. One can dream.

GREYSON

Yeah. Dream away. Silently. Unlike you, I'm doing actual work. Important. Work

HENRY

Oh yeah? Like what? Hmmmmmm?

GREYSON

Like discovering whether this thing is safe to use as an energy source or is ridiculously radioactive.

HENRY

Its noooooootttt.

GREYSON

Why did you put it in this 4 inch thick glass case for transportation then?

HENRY

Oh yeah. I forgot I did that.

GREYSON

You did. Besides it's a seemingly unlimited energy source. Based on things like that we've found in the past, it is most likely super radioactive.

Lights dim on them and they pause, meanwhile AXEL comes on stage from Stage Right and creeps through the halls all spy like.

AXEL trips over his own feet and barley catches himself.

AXEL

Whew. I almost fell over there. I could have alerted the whole ship to my presence with the sound of me hitting the floor. That was a close call.

AXEL tiptoes down the hall.

AXEL

(muttering) Gotta find the escape pod room- where could you be? If I were an escape pod room, where would I be?

AXEL pauses

AXEL

Not that I want to leave! I mean- I do. But not until I get to Saturn! Not via an escape pod! Its just- no one goes there unless they want to leave. It's the perfect place to hide. Plus, I have a easy escape if things get iffy.

AXEL spots the room at the end of the hall (Stage Right), runs there, and exits (AXEL should go to Stage Left and prepare to enter)

Lights dim on Stage Right and Light up on Stage Left

HENRY and GREYSON unfreeze

GREYSON is typing at a screen on a fume hood (or something like that) and HENRY is fiddling with a microscope

GREYSON

Almost...

HENRY

Almost what?

GREYSON

(GREYSON turns to look at HENRY) It's almost done- (the thing that they were typing away at dings) Oh! It is done! Finalllllyyyyyyy.

HENRY

What's done?

GREYSON

I was testing to see if it was radioactive.

HENRY

(Excited) Well? Is it?

GREYSON

Hold on a second- I'm pulling it up... And... (They lean in to read the results) It's ... not???

HENRY

See! I told you!

GREYSON

How?? This shouldn't be possible!

HENRY

Anything is possible with the power of friendship!

GREYSON goes for their coffee mug and takes a sip only to discover that its empty.

GREYSON

Awwww :(

HENRY

What's wrong?

GREYSON

I'm all out of coffee :(

HENRY

Well, why don't we go and get some more? We earned a snack break. When we get back we can look at this thing under the microscope, without a four inch thick glass barrier blocking the way

GREYSON

I thought you didn't like my love for coffee?

HENRY

Oh. Yeah, well, as long as you're not having over 5 to 6 cups a day, I'm fine with it.

GREYSON

Yessss!

GREYSON and HENRY exit to Stage Right. As they walk out, The Lights for Stage Right turn on.

HENRY and GREYSON exit Stage Right. As they do, the lights on Stage Right dim

AXEL sticks his head out of the Left Wing (the one on stage Left), does a quick sweep of the room to make sure that its empty

He confirms it and sneaks into where HENRY and GREYSON just were.

AXEL

The thing! Gotta find it! What does it even look like? Hmm. Guess I'll know when I find it. Where could it be though? Hmmm... If I were a thing, where would I be?

AXEL

Could it be under here?

AXEL picks something up, but doesn't find anything under it.

AXEL

Hmmmm... nope!

He steps away and cases the joint again. This time he spots the thing that GREYSON was fiddling with, and walks towards it

Lights turn on Stage Right and GREYSON and HENRY start walking back to Stage Left

AXEL

Oh!! This thing is on! It was just used! Its probably in here!

GREYSON and HENRY make surprised faces, glance at each other, nod and start running into the lab. Meanwhile, AXEL is sliding open the door to the fume hood.

They enter just as AXEL is halfway done

HENRY

WHO ARE YOU!?

AXEL startles, clearly not expecting anyone. He slams to door to the fume hood open and swipes out the thing. He makes for the door (on Stage left)

GREYSON

HEY! (GREYSON sprints towards Stage Left, and AXEL ducks into Left Wing before GREYSON can reach him) WHO THE HELL ARE YOU??? (GREYSON sprints out Stage Left)

HENRY

(HENRY runs after GREYSON) Wait for me!

HENRY exits Stage Left

All lights turn off

Scene 3

All lights turn on. The setting is the Cargo Room from the first scene. AXEL sprints onto the stage and ducks behind a box. Shortly after GREYSON and HENRY enter from opposite sides of the stage, with GREYSON entering Stage Right and HENRY entering Stage Left.

GREYSON

Hey kid! We know you're in here! We've got you cornered!

HENRY

Just give back our thingy and nobody gets hurt!

GREYSON

Henry! We are not hurting a child!

HENRY

I know, but they don't have to know that!

GREYSON

Kid! We're not going to hurt you!

HENRY

You're not in trouble!

GREYSON

We just need the thing back!

AXEL pops up from behind the crate.

AXEL

Yeah right, and I bet you're not going to turn me in too. Now don't come any closer! I have the thing and I'm not afraid to use it!

GREYSON and HENRY exchange glances then look back to AXEL.

GREYSON

Kid. We're not going to turn you in. That thing is just our only key to keeping our jobs. We kinda need it.

AXEL

Well I- Well I probably need it more than you! Besides, how can I trust that you won't turn me in!?

GREYSON

Well, if we wanted to, we would have already had you locked in this room while we called interplanetary officials.

HENRY

They make a good point. Besides, how could you need it more than us? Its our only means of keeping our jobs-

AXEL

Just... get another job? You seem like the type companies would hire easily

HENRY breaks eye contact with both GREYSON and AXEL and laughs nervously.

GREYSON

... You haven't seen his criminal record yet

HENRY

HEY! You're making me sound bad! Its just-

GREYSON

Let's see: Lots of vandalism in the form of graffiti of several cats with rainbow laser eyes, noise, public health, and interplanetary law

violations by way of trying to use... nuclear power to... make ice cream...

HENRY

Okay, but the time it worked it was amazing

GREYSON

It gave you radiation poisoning.

HENRY

Okay??? Your point?? I healed myself!

GREYSON

Using. Flipping. Rubber. Ducks.

HENRY

Hey! It worked!

GREYSON

So he's a genius, but like the strangest genius to exist. No scientific firm will hire us based on research on the healing properties of rubber ducks.

AXEL

... Okay. Well. I guess you can't get a job just anywhere then, huh?

HENRY

Yup!

AXEL

So you do need this. Quite a bit. But you see. I also need it. Like I have no money and no job kind of need it.

HENRY

You're a kid. Why are you worrying about getting a job?

AXEL

Dunno man. That's the way the cookie crumbles I guess

GREYSON

Okay. Kid. Listen. How about you help us do research on the thing, and then you can maybe get a paid internship- like I have

HENRY

All you have to do to get the internship is lie about your age- we'll do the rest. Don't you worry, kid.

AXEL

Don't call me kid. I'm not a child. I'm a minor though, but still not a child. By the way, that deal sounds perfect

GREYSON

Okay, well if we can't call you kid, then what can we call you? Also, could you maybe lower the thing? Feels weird. Especially since its not that threatening at all.

AXEL

What do you mean?

GREYSON

Well, for starters, its in a four inch glass case and you have no idea how to use it

AXEL

Oh. (pause) Wait a second... Did you just pretend to be scared??

HENRY

Yeah pretty much

GREYSON

Kid. You never told us your name

AXEL

Oh, right. It's Axel

HENRY	AXEL
Cool name! Mine is Henry, and that's Greyson	Yeah! I'll be right there
GREYSON	AXEL smiles, and after hesitating for a second, he makes his way to exit off Stage Left
Sooooo... Do you like coffee, Axel?	The light turn off before he can make it off Stage
HENRY	END
GREYSON! You are not giving this child a coffee addiction!!	
GREYSON	
Hey! I'm just trying to find something to bond over!	
AXEL	
Never tried it.	
GREYSON's head whips toward AXEL and gasps in horror	
GREYSON	
Unacceptable. We simply must get this child some coffee! To the Break Room!	
GREYSON exits Stage Right and HENRY sighs	
HENRY	
You went the wrong way!!!	
GREYSON walks back on and exits Stage Left with HENRY following behind	
AXEL turns the thing around in his hands	
AXEL	
The thing, huh? Henry and Greyson better make its common name the thing trademark, or I am going to be disappointed.	
HENRY	
(Yells from off Stage) Hey Axel! You coming?	
AXEL breaks eye contact with the thing (trademark)	

A Trip to the Future

by Wil King

Based On My Own Mind

Cast of Characters

MAN (QUIETLY):

TEEN:

MAN:

MAN (CHUCKLING):

TEEN (QUIETLY):

TEEN (LOUD): MEN:

MAN (SOMBER):

QWEMAN:

ACT I

Scene 1

It's January 22nd. The year is 2046, to put it plainly, humanity is dying. A middle aged man sits in the middle of an abandoned classroom, a party hat on his head. The man is wearing dirty clothes because he's in the future and dystopian societies are dirty. He's also wearing a gasmask for reasons you'll learn later for plot and big reveals.

The man is singing a song to himself, like a freak.

MAN (QUIETLY)

Happy Birthday to me... Happy Birthday to me...

From behind the man, a portal appears. This can shown by a loud 'whoosh' sound, or whatever sound the narrator so wishes for it to be.

From the portal emerges a teenager who looks like they are not from this time period, alot less dirty, you go dawg! The teenager tightly grips onto a gun, a look of confusion on their face.

The man stops singing, letting out a sigh before reaching into his pocket and pulling out another party hat, he sets it next to him.

The teenager walks up to the man, taking a seat a bit aways but close enough to where the both of them can have a conversation without yelling to hear.

The man nods his head to the party hat.

TEEN

Um.. Okay?

The teenager picks up the hat, snapping it onto their head, wincing at the snap of the string against their chin.

The man chuckles, earning a flip off sign from the teenager.

TEEN

...How'd I get here?

MAN

I'm not the one with a gun and fresh clothes.

The teen looks down at their hands, giving a little jump as they forgot they even had the gun, they toss it across the room.

TEEN

These um... aren't fresh.

MAN

Well, fresh compared to my standards, anyway.

TEEN

...Why are you in a school, you look like you're supposed to be graduated. Are you like- a super senior.

MAN (CHUCKLING)

You're really not from around here, are you.

TEEN

No, not really man. You look like you belong in The Hunger Games or something.

The man looks over at the teen, cocking his head a bit. Almost as if he's in shock that someone would know the name of that book, atleast someone of the teen's age.

MAN

You... know The Hunger Games?

TEEN

Everyone knows The Hunger Games idiot, are you old or something.

The man gives a little cough.

MAN

I'm only like- 38.

TEEN

DAMN... my fault.

MAN

... I now understand why my family gave me looks when I did that.

TEEN

..I said I was sorry.

The man gives a small glare at the teen, sighing and shaking his head.

MAN

Back to my original point. I just didn't expect someone so young to know a book like The Hunger Games.

TEEN

You must really live under a rock then, they just released a movie about it like- last year. Well, it's not really last year but 2023 was a month ago so it's technically las-

MAN

2023??? That means... you're from 2024?

TEEN

Are you suffering from a mental illness, yes, everyone is from 2024.

The man looks around, almost asking anyone if they're hearing this nonsense, but nobody is there except the Man and the Teen.

TEEN

I don't know why you're acting so shocked, it's almost as if you're from the futur....

The teen stares at the man, squinting their eyes to get a better view. Their eyes widen, they quickly stand up.

The man also stands up.

MAN

Kid... look around you. I ain't the one in the wrong place.

The teen looks around the room quickly, they walk around frantically.

TEEN

Wait.. if I'm not in 2024, when am I???

MAN

It's the year 2046, the year that humanity lost.

TEEN

Humanity lost?? You're not making any sense!

MAN

Kid, you need to listen to me. Going crazy ain't gonna help you right now.

TEEN

No! Listen here 'dude', I can't be in 2046. I have a life! I need to go back, to go back and see my friends and family!

MAN

Look around you idiot! Does it look like there's anyway back??

The man sighs, taking in a deep breath.

The teen is walking around the room, almost as if they're searching for a way back from where they came from. They stop, their head tilting to the floor.

MAN

Oh come on, don't look so down, it ain't that bad-

TEEN

Shhhh.

The man is about to start talking again but the teen kneels down, picking up something off of the floor. Standing back up, they face the man.

TEEN (QUIETLY)

Where did you get this?

MAN

What?

TEEN (LOUD)

Where did you get this?!

The teen holds up a paper, gripping it like their life depends on it. The man walks over, snatching it from them, he reads over it.

MAN

Whatdya mean, this is my class' yearbook photo.

The man looks over it, a sad smile on his face.

The teen looks over it from over the man's shoulder, the teen's eyes narrow as they snatch it back, holding it up to the man in an accusatory tone.

TEEN

No, this is MY class. Wait...

The teen looks over the paper again, they point it back at the man, giving it a little shake.

TEEN

Bro, why am I crossed out and labeled 'tyrant'??? I don't know you??

MAN

I don't know....

The man stares at the teen, it's an uncomfortable silence. The man's expression becomes dark, hateful.

MAN

You.

TEEN

Yeah the guy in the picture is me?? Glad you gained listening skills..

The teen looks over the paper again, making small comments ('Oh I always hated that girl', 'Oh he was an ass', etc.) Due to this little memory show, the teen doesn't notice the man backing up...

TEEN

Yo, it's almost as if you hated meeee... what are you doing??

The man is holding the gun from earlier, it's pointed directly at the teen.

MAN

Doing what you failed to do.

TEEN

Haha very funny, stop playin.

The man cocks the gun, the teen drops the paper and backs up.

TEEN

Bro, I ain't even done anything to you, put the damn gun down.

MAN

It's funny...

TEEN

Aiming a gun at me??

MAN

Nah... the fact that past you tried to blow your brains out a few minutes ago... and now future you is gonna do it.

The teen takes in a deep breathe, a grin spreads across the man's face.

MAN

It took me awhile remembering you. After a long time of solitude, you forget what's real. When's real.

Who's real. When you picked up that class photo, I thought 'It can't be.', but it is you! Or should I say, it's me?

TEEN

That doesn't explain why you have a gun to my head right now! Are you mad that I tried to kill myself? Did the bullet give us brain damage or something?

Make you need some nasty lookin mask?

The man sighs, taking off the gas mask. A scar is revealed under the man's chin, it seems to spread to his nose.

MAN

I guess you could say the bullet left me with some marks.

TEEN

Put that damn mask back on.

The man snorts, chuckling a bit.

MAN

I always was so... jerkish, wasn't I.

TEEN

Yo don't be using that word you're like 40.

The man rolls his eyes, twirling the gun in his hands. He gives a small tsk.

MAN

You have no idea what we've done, do you?

TEEN

NO??? I literally said a few minutes ago that I don't know why I'm about to get shot??

The man uses his free hand to point around the room.

MAN

Look around, do you see anyone else around?

TEEN

No?

MAN

They're all dead.

TEEN

I kind've assumed you were just weird...

MAN

It's our fault that they're dead.

The teen stares at the man, blinking and then shaking their head.

TEEN

You're lying, you look weird, but you wouldn't kill a whole population.

MEN

Obviously I'm not talking about the whole world, I'm talking about our friends, you idiot!

TEEN

Now I know you're bullshitting, I wouldn't hurt my friends.

MAN

Oh, of course we wouldn't hurt them, not directly anyway.

TEEN

...What'd you do?

The man cackles. He leans against a desk, rubbing his eyes with his free hand before sighing, he looks back at the teen.

MAN (SOMBER)

Oh... It's rather sad actually.

MAN

You see, the world went to shit when you shot yourself. On the way to the hospital, your parents got into a car wreck. Lucky for them, they died on impact, didn't have to live with the injuries. Turns out the truck that killed your parents held a chemical that would change the world.

The man uses his free hand to pull out a vile, it's filled with neon green liquid.

MAN

When you woke up at the hospital, the doctors wouldn't tell you about your parents. Neither would your friends. But... the scientists would.

The teen falls to their knees, staring down at the class photo on the ground.

MAN

'You weren't supposed to live!' They told me. They injected me with this fucked up drug, but we weren't enough. They needed more subjects, more blood.

The teen looks up, coming to a realization.

TEEN

NO!

QWEMAN

YES!

MAN

...Your friends didn't make it. The scientists told us it was because they didn't have what we had, their bodies didn't have the determination to live.

The teen stands up, they choke back a sob.

TEEN

You sold our friends out, you murdered them!

MAN

WE murdered them, kid.

TEEN

What did you even gain from it? A drug that apparently keeps you alive?

MAN

Were you not listening? The drug wasn't what was keeping me alive.

TEEN

What does that shit even do? Gives you a good high?

The man looks down at the vile, he tosses it over to the teen.

MAN

Try it out yourself.

TEEN

What?

MAN

Considered yourself honored, that's the last ever vile of it ever made.

TEEN

Why give it to me then, aren't you addicted to it?

MAN

I shoot you? I die too. Might as well let you know what betrayal tastes like.

The teen looks down at the vile, popping it open.

TEEN

So I just... down it?

MAN

That's the fun part, drink it, inject it, hell, you could even pour it in your eyes.

TEEN

Would've gone crazy back in my year.

MAN

It does.

The teen takes off their party hat, crushing it in their hand.

TEEN

Happy Birthday to Us.

MAN

Happy Birthday to Us.

The teen sighs before pouring out the vile of liquid onto the ground.

MAN

I- WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT???

TEEN

Figured my last rebellious act should be against myself.

The man looks towards the liquid and then the teen.

MAN

Oh screw you.

TEEN

Haha yeah fu-

The man shoots the teen right between the eyes, they fall to the ground, dead.

MAN

Damn right they are.

Ugh, you're not supposed to talk to me.

MAN

I don't want to be lonely when I die.

How are you even talking to me right now, you didn't drink the drug.

MAN

I've had enough of it in me over the years.

Sigh. The man who thinks he's better than us goes and sits down in a chair.

MAN

Oh yay, I get to die in a chair!

Yeah yeah. Can you hurry it up.

MAN

Um... Narrating voice, we promise not to lie to each other in my final moments, right?

Sure, you got a minute, probably, I'm not counting.

MAN

Are you God?

You said that with an uppercase G, woww, got respect for the big man upstairs I see.

Nah, he aint real... In this story, please don't sue.

MAN

Ohhh, okay, I was worried I was gonna go to hell after this haha.

Ha! No, but if it helps, if he were real, you would be!

MAN

Uhm... I have another question.

Hurry up you have like- only a few more lines left we're already at 11 pages.

MAN

Would you sing Happy Birthday to me?

Hell no.

MAN

Oh okay screw you too then... I'm scared.

I know... um.. sigh.

The man gets comfortable in his chair, giving a soft sigh. There's no pain as it happens. The man goes limp, his eyes slowly shutting, he lets out his last breath.

The man is dead.

His party hat still lays on his head, 38 years old, a cruel man.

...Happy Birthday. To the both of you.

The Supernatural Seekers Club

by Lucien Jervis

ACT I

Scene 1

Four people sit in a comfortably decorated, visibly out-of-use high school classroom that has been repurposed as a club room. A banner above the door reads "EVILS LURK: SUPERNATURAL SEEKERS CLUB".

MORGAN is shuffling cards at a desk.

KENNY and DEE sit on opposite ends of the couch. They are wearing the same clothes, but KENNY appears emaciated and ghostly and DEE appears living. (Their nicknames are used only for differentiation - both characters go by the name "Kennedy".)

LIAM is laying on his back on the floor. He wears a lanyard with a teacher's assistant badge on it, while the other three appear to be dressed as students.

KENNY

Quiet in here, huh?

Nobody reacts except for DEE.

KENNY

No magic news? No spooks for the supernatural club?

DEE

(interrupting) So... How's it going... Fellas...?

MORGAN and LIAM look up, unable to hear KENNY but able to hear DEE. KENNY gets up to watch MORGAN shuffle her cards, who does not react.

MORGAN

I'm a little busy.

DEE

Yeah, but - no, uh - is there any... 'Magic news'?

MORGAN

No.

LIAM

(half-asleep)

What are we talking about?

DEE

(at the same time as KENNY) The, uh, the purpose of the club.

KENNY

(at the same time as DEE) Just the entire reason we're here.

LIAM

Kennedy, there hasn't been supernatural or even news

of any kind since that weirdo in the alleyway pulled you to the side and started screaming about memories and cults and whatever-the-shit.

KENNY

If that guy didn't kill me, I'd have bitten his head off.

DEE

(to KENNY) Sucks to suck.

LIAM pauses. Nobody can hear KENNY except for DEE, so the context of the comment is lost on him.

LIAM

What was that?

DEE

(apologetic) Nothing. It was nothing. Sorry.

LIAM

You really like talking to yourself lately. Did that guy hit you in the head or something?

DEE

Um... Maybe?

LIAM

You're acting different, too. Morgan, back me up here.

MORGAN

There is a foul presence residing in you.

DEE

Whaaat? No there's - no there's not.

DEE looks over at KENNY nervously as he speaks.

MORGAN

You changed when you met that man, didn't you?

DEE

That's a little assume-tu-ous.

LIAM

...Presumptuous?

MORGAN

Not at all. Care for a tarot reading?

DEE

I have to go to the bathroom suddenly okay goodbye have a nice one I'll be back in 10!

DEE runs away through the classroom door. MORGAN and LIAM share a glance, but don't comment - the two return to their respective tasks.

Scene 2

DEE and KENNY stand in the bathroom. Since KENNY was not shown leaving the other room, it isn't clear how he got there. DEE paces while KENNY sits on a sink.

DEE

I would appreciate it if you'd stop commenting on my normal, regular life! That does not need to involve your... Death!

KENNY

How is any of this my fault? You're being suspicious. A little... Little... Suspicious guy. I didn't think it was possible for me-with-memory-loss to be worse than I am at acting, like, I figured you'd be less self-conscious at lea -

DEE

(interrupting) Sh!

KENNY

What? It's not like anyone can hear me. I'm your ghost. The only reason you can hear me is because we're the same person.

DEE

Right! And we can't tell anyone about that! Any of that! Being two of the same guy is crazy talk!

KENNY

Says who? Morgan basically already knows. She's freaky like that - but, you know, I wouldn't call her crazy.

DEE

Says me! I get that we're in a supernatural club, but I think telling anyone that you - we - I died, became a ghost, then came back to life as a different guy who lost his memories? That is trip-to-the-hospital material!

KENNY

I don't know, dude. Morgan's chill.

DEE

But what about Liam? ...What do you think he'd say?

KENNY

I think that Liam couldn't give a fuck if you handed to him and asked for it back.

DEE

That doesn't even -

KENNY

(interrupting) Point is, we're literally fine. The only people you're on the lookout for are, like, cops. Or the FBI. Or the Ghostbusters.

DEE

How do you know?

KENNY

Kennedy, look at me. I've known these guys for years. I know you don't remember them or whatever, but I swear to whatever kind of afterlife there apparently isn't for me that they could care less about what you do even if you started dressing up in a giant fuzzy spider costume and doing the Macarena on the school roof. They'd probably fucking join you. They're freaks. We're freaks.

DEE

But we're freaks in the freaks-of-nature way. They're freaks in the slightly-unpopular way. There's a world of difference.

KENNY

Listen -

DEE

No, you listen to me, Mr. Kennedy Tanner. I am terrified out of my gourd and being suddenly a completely different guy with only a vague memory of how I got here is - is -

KENNY

Shit?

DEE

I wouldn't use such strong language.

KENNY

...What? Shit is - in terms of swears - pussy shit.

DEE

Stop it!

KENNY

You are a child.

DEE

Hey, I'm 13 -

KENNY

You mean 16.

DEE

...Oh.

KENNY appears slightly agitated. He hops off of the sink and walks up to the bathroom door, opening it so that DEE can walk through.

KENNY

Just... Get back to your club, man.

DEE

Are you seriously using your ghost-powers to be a chauffeur?

KENNY

What else am I good for?

DEE walks out of the bathroom.

Scene 3

As soon as DEE walks back in, MORGAN perks up. Again, KENNY is already inexplicably back on the couch.

MORGAN

Would you care for your reading now?

DEE

You know what? Fine.

LIAM

(sarcastically) Don't you sound thrilled?

MORGAN

Come, sit.

DEE very awkwardly shuffles over to the opposite end of the desk where MORGAN sits and pulls up a chair. KENNY laughs at him while he stumbles around, and DEE shoots him a look.

MORGAN

I am asking the spirits here today for guidance - only those that wish us well. Any foul or evil presences are forbidden from interference.

KENNY

(to himself) And do you plan on enforcing that, or...?

MORGAN

Now... I will draw 3 cards. One to clarify what has happened to you in the past, one to clarify what is happening to you in the present, and one to clarify what will happen to you in the future.

KENNY

Man, I could tell you all about it! I got dragged into an alley by a creepy dude and he killed me, that's what happened. Like -

MORGAN

(unknowingly interrupting) And now, your first card... I call upon the spirits of the past.

KENNY

...Pretentious.

MORGAN shuffles the cards until one falls out onto the floor. KENNY walks over and squats over it, almost picking it up when MORGAN leans down and picks it up herself. She shudders once she sits back upright.

MORGAN

That presence, that foul presence...

LIAM

What about the presence? It seems pretty un-present to me.

MORGAN

I felt it as I picked up the card from the ground. It is with us.

DEE

Hah, wild how that goes, huh?

LIAM

Are you possessed? What is with you today, Kennedy? You're acting like you're covering up a murder. There's probably just a draft or something.

KENNY

Oh, ye of little faith.

LIAM rolls over on the floor and closes his eyes, not meaning anything by the comment. MORGAN, however, seems to take it into genuine consideration. She doesn't comment on it, though. She holds up the card to DEE.

Meanwhile, KENNY walks around to look at the card at the same time as DEE, watching over his shoulder.

MORGAN

This is the Ten of Swords. It represents the end of things - completion. It is a card of being cheated, a card of backstabbing and deceit, but it is also a card of renewal, change, and growth...

MORGAN sits silently for a moment. DEE squirms in his seat.

MORGAN

I believe that a chapter of your life has come to a close. You have been forcibly taken from that which is comfortable and forced into discomfort. You were betrayed, somehow...

DEE

...Like trusting that guy in the alley? Just so that he could knock me upside the head?

LIAM

Dang, you didn't tell us that. I was kidding when I asked if he hit you.

KENNY

Nobody asked you, Dalton.

DEE

Is that his last name?

MORGAN

What?

DEE

Um... Sorry. I was thinking about Liam's last name. It's Dalton, right?

LIAM

Yeah, dude. Seriously, are you okay?

DEE

Perfectly fine.

LIAM doesn't seem to wait for an answer, having rolled over again before DEE finished his response.

MORGAN

...In any case, yes. You were betrayed, taken to a lower point in your life. This alleyway stranger... This alleyway stranger must have had a profound impact on your life - they seem to have marked an end of an era for you.

MORGAN sets the card down in front of DEE, then shuffles her deck again until another falls out. This time, it falls onto the table, facing away from MORGAN.

MORGAN

...Ah. The spirits of the present have much to say about this reading.

DEE

Ah? Is that bad or something?

MORGAN

No, not in the slightest. This is the Knight of Cups, reversed.

MORGAN holds the card upside-down and shows it to DEE.

KENNY

...Horse?

MORGAN

This card represents overly ambitious behavior - a tendency to see the best in life, that it'll all just 'work out' when it won't, necessarily. The expectation that things will go one way, when they really go another. Romanticizing life, but not necessarily finding romance.

DEE

What does that - how does that matter at all to me? I don't think I'm overconfident -

MORGAN

(interrupting) Maybe not, but it is at least a sign that you're somehow allowing your emotions to get in the way of what you truly want. You feel somehow stunted or emotionally, creatively trapped. There's something stopping you - maybe it's yourself. As for your situation... I believe that you're holding back. Hiding. That there's something you're not telling us.

KENNY

Bitch - she's so making that up just so you tell her what's going on with you. If you're really set on keeping all this quiet, don't tell her

anything. Like, she cares about us, but... You don't need to get into all that. Your choice, dude.

DEE

Well... I guess I just feel like something's wrong with me. I'm not like I used to be - I'm trying to be good or better but it just isn't working. Like... I feel like people have this idea of me that isn't...Me anymore. And I'm not super optimistic about anything, but there's something telling me that I just have to keep quiet about everything in my head. That this is what I have to do to get where I need to go.

Everyone is silent. KENNY looks genuinely concerned, lightly grabbing DEE by the shoulder to examine him. DEE pushes him away as subtly as he can without arousing suspicion.

MORGAN nods, as though this is typical of her conversations with people. LIAM seems like he's asleep.

MORGAN

You don't have to be anything. You're not the same person you were two weeks ago, two months ago, or even two days ago. That is a perfectly usual aspect of growing and changing. We - everyone in this room, all three of us - are renewed with each passing day. Each day, we have the choice to become someone new. To become the version of ourselves that is most authentic to how we feel.

When nobody responds to this, she returns to shuffling her cards, unfazed. The card takes a few moments to fall out of the deck, but MORGAN eventually produces a card.

KENNY crosses his arms. DEE wipes his eyes, having teared up slightly.

MORGAN

The spirits of the future have delivered us the Knight of Swords.

LIAM

(half-asleep) The what of what?

MORGAN

I'm still speaking to Kennedy.

LIAM

Gotcha. Is he good?

DEE

I'm right here, and yeah, I'm fine.

LIAM

Uh, you sound fucked, dude.

DEE

You shouldn't -

KENNY

(interrupting) Nobody in high school cares about swearing. I'm promising you. Let it go.

DEE

- um... Comment on my... State of... Being?

LIAM

(annoyed) I'm just worried about you.

DEE

Sorry. Sorry, yeah, that's mean.

MORGAN

(loudly, to get attention) The Knight of Swords is a card that represents courageous, hasty achievements. It is a card of forward motion, progress, and determination. It is not a card of thoroughly-planned action, but it is a card of assured success nonetheless. If you have the determination and drive to succeed, there is no doubt in my mind that you will.

KENNY

Nice note to leave off on.

MORGAN

However...

KENNY

(to himself) Give me a break.

MORGAN

That's only if you have the strength to do so. If you have the determination to succeed, you will succeed, but if you do not...

DEE

Then I'm... Screwed?

LIAM

Man, what is up with you?

DEE

What?

LIAM

You normally curse like a sailor. Like, you'd normally be all, "Well then, I guess I'm fucking fucked then."

DEE

Haha... I guess so...

KENNY

I am not that bad.

MORGAN

You aren't 'screwed'. You simply have a variety of avenues open to you, provided that you don't let this residual evil that lingers around you guide your actions. I trust that you are smarter than that.

DEE

I don't know about th -

KENNY

(light-heartedly) You know what, Morgan? Fuck you, too!

DEE

- um... Yeah. Yeah, I won't.

The bell rings, indicating the end of the school's open hours.

LIAM

I don't want to get up.

MORGAN

You're going to need to eventually. The janitor will find you again - undoubtedly leading to consequences with our school's administration.

LIAM

I'm, uh, basically an administrator. They can't touch me.

MORGAN

Being a teacher assistant certainly does not make you an administrator.

LIAM and MORGAN continue talking in the background as KENNY and DEE silently walk out of the room.