



*Pulse*

*2017-2018*



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## Amongst the Trees

Robert Adams

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
and, though I could not journey both,  
I leaned each way, searching each path  
for what made roads any better  
than the unkempt undergrowth;

One road, a deep shade red, bent 'round  
a tree no less than fifty yards away.  
While the second, a serene, soft blue  
looked no more pleasant under  
the mid-morning light of day.

I stepped towards one way  
and then waltzed towards another,  
until my headstrong heart wanted the  
first, and my stubborn mind would  
not have any but the other.

I will tell of this journey 'til  
my soul slips into eternal sleep.  
Two paths in the woods presented themselves  
and I chose the middle  
so that I might walk amongst the trees.

# ashes, ashes

Robert Adams

sometimes  
life's greatest comfort  
is that no matter

who you are  
or  
who you aren't

what you do  
or  
what you don't

where you live  
or  
where you run

at the end of everything  
we all fall down

## Hand in Hand

Robert Adams

without misery  
we cannot understand happiness  
without dark  
we cannot comprehend light  
without sadness  
we can never find joy  
the truth:  
the two go hand in hand  
without one there is no other  
happiness  
depends directly on  
sadness

now read from bottom to top

## Patriot Dreams

Robert Adams

A boy picks up an old stick  
he found in the mud.

His blue t-shirt has a hole on the  
front where it caught on the barbed fence.

He raises his stick and pretends  
to shoot a red rusted can  
on the white windowsill.

He heads home as the sun  
begins to set. His mother's voice  
calls his name.

A boy climbs into bed  
dreaming of being a soldier.

A soldier clutches his M16 rifle  
as the rain threatens to tear it away.

His camouflage fatigues have a hole where  
the bullet tore his body.

He raises his rifle and feels  
the recoil against his shoulder  
as two more bodies drop.

He slumps in the mud, his  
back against the hard wood of  
a tree as life seeps away.

A soldier begins to die  
dreaming of being a boy.

## Wreckage

Rachel Blackburn

1. calls, hearing nothing but  
whiskey-choked sobs,  
the warnings that came too late.  
s for breath between broken  
nces, rocking even the  
gest ships.

storm in your mind is  
er than the thunder rolling  
rd the wrecked shore.  
es crashing against the rocks,  
s howling in pain.  
drops stinging the thin skin  
ose trapped in its path.

wanted me to be your anchor,  
ou didn't know that meant  
to drown.

## On Learning to Love Myself

Taylor Reynolds

I was 7 the first time I was told I wasn't good enough.  
An over the phone "hey let's spell out F-A-T, so our daughter  
doesn't know what we're talking about" kind of conversation.  
The correlation between fat kids and dumb kids must be high,  
because they ran under the assumption that I was both.

But I wasn't. I was actually smart, but I took to heart  
what they said. So at 8 I began confusing choices with fate  
and determined that maybe I was too big for my parents to love.  
An obligation to self-segregation from my friends followed.  
I needed for someone to treat me like more than a choice,  
so I chose to hate myself.

At 12 in middle school, I hid in the shower  
because during the fitness gram they'd yell out  
everyone's body mass. My coach made me run extra laps  
and took delight in watching me fail and fall to the ground.  
And the ground is where I learned to look, and I never learned to cook  
because, God forbid, I be let anywhere near a fridge.

At 14 I didn't own a real bra. I stared at myself  
shirtless in the mirror until my eyeliner smeared from the tears.  
My grandma said it was baby fat, but I knew  
my parents had never tried to baby me.

At 16 I wore a size larger than my age,  
and my mom was disgusted. She said,  
"God, what a waste." So I starved myself,  
dreaming of wasting away.

At 17 I thought cutting my hips would cut away the pounds.

At 20 I was cheated on the first time.  
It was the worst feeling,  
but in dealing with it  
I was told that it probably wouldn't have happened  
if stretchmarks hadn't mapped out my sides.



and bigger lips—or smaller hips—  
held my tongue when spoken to.

Someone needs to speak up for that 7 year old  
whose parents called her fat,  
the 12 year old afraid of laps,  
the 20 year old afraid someone will discover the maps on her skin.  
I wish I never did—and I am sorry.

## The Joker

Taylor Reynolds

It's the static before the needle hits  
and you play "I'm sorry"  
one more time.  
I've always hated that soundtrack.  
The knife you glide  
across your wrists  
cuts the same way the truth did.  
The same way her knife  
did from her ribcage to the last place  
you touched her. The next time  
you open your diary  
of carcassed lovers, you'll see her  
picture or mine.  
The next time you inhale air  
into your lungs instead of cigarettes,  
you'll exhale self-hatred and  
choke on why you weren't good  
enough to save either of us.

I'll hold her hand, two second choices  
finding consolation in each other  
because you've never loved  
anyone other than yourself.

I'll kiss the salt  
from her cheeks, and you can kiss mine  
before you wash  
my perfume from your sheets.

You convinced me  
that it was poetic to  
love you through my suffering.  
So I painted my tears into  
a watercolor of  
my life hoping it would be enough  
to make you stay.

u played me like a deck of cards but  
led to realize how dirty your hands were  
d how easily I bear the marks  
those who have used me.

## Book Dragon

Mercedes Roth

I am entranced by words,  
Held captive by the weaving of symbols;  
The intricacy in which they are strung like stars among the Gods.

I am enthralled by the sound,  
The hypnotizing lyric of a tale;  
The feel of syllable on tongue and whispering past lips.

I dine on the repetitive metaphor,  
Ingest the rhythm of simile,  
Devour the meaning of language.

I am a dragon among men,  
Hoarding language and tale,  
Hiding my treasure where no simple human would dare tread.  
I am a book dragon,  
Devourer of words, nightmare made real.

## Dreamscape in Grayscale

Heather Singletary

world was muffled between  
saturated skies and darkened  
inks, the silence broken only  
a fleeing doe through the brush.

world shifted then. There  
a path where once  
there was none. Bitter earth  
stung my nose, and copper  
tongue.

aspens bowed in  
wind, and the  
rust of their creaking limbs  
was part of the journey to come  
would simply uproot.

## Good Intentions

Heather Singletary

in fourth grade i found  
a feathered thing  
hiding amid the roots  
near my bus stop

scattering sandwich  
crumbs, i offered a humble  
meal knowing not to  
leave my scent behind

i returned that mild  
evening, tissue box  
in hand, ready to  
make my rescue

forgive me, friend, i  
led hungry ants in  
search of bread to  
a meatier meal instead

## Lucky Me

Heather Singletary

I gave you the world on a string.  
Then the next row of blinking lights  
caught your eye and you disappeared  
into the crowd. As the balloon  
slipped into the sky, I regretted  
not tying it around your wrist.

## If You're Having Fun You're Doing It Right

Jamie Dixon

Kenzi walks slowly into the exhibit hall. She feels people staring and tugs at her shorts. "You look fine, Kenzi," Alaina scolds her. Alaina has been Kenzi's best friend since sixth grade; they are now in their third year of college and living together.

"No, I don't. People are staring at me," she whispers back to her friend.

"Only because your gender bend *Static Shock* cosplay is so awesome that they're jealous. It's not because of what you think it's about." Kenzi looks down at her outfit, starting at the black boots that stop just above the knee with golden laces. She then takes in the shorts she looked high and low for on the internet and the black top she made with a golden lightning bolt on it with a circle around it that she managed by some miracle to make on her own. Kenzi pulls at her blue and black trench coat with the black just around the shoulders and the inside of the coat a very bright sunny yellow.

"But—" she starts while tugging at the fingerless blue gloves with gold around the cuff of the gloves Alaina helped her make.

"No buts," Alaina cuts her off. "You've worked hard for the past month to make your costume. You look awesome and that's that. Stop arguing with me."

Kenzi sighs and lets it go for now. She can't stop feeling self-conscious and is constantly pulling and picking at her costume.

"Hey look! That stand is selling fandom necklaces and earrings," squeals Alaina as she tugs Kenzi over to the stand. "They even have a Thor's hammer as a necklace!" she squeals again, which makes Kenzi wince, but she can't help smiling at how excited her friend is. Kenzi is looking at everything on the table, fingering a Loki helmet key chain, when she hears someone whispering, or at least trying to, not far behind her.

"Wow, look at her. Isn't she a little big to be cosplaying a superhero?" someone says.

Kenzi freezes. She tries to ignore them, but someone answers them.

"A little? There is nothing little about her. I mean if you're going to cosplay someone do it right. She's pretty in the face but not enough to get away with that. And to think she thought she could hang with Jesse Quick looking like that." They walk away, their laughter fading as they walk away, but it hangs over Kenzi as if it is a thick smoke that is slowly choking her.

Kenzi bites her lip as she feels a familiar stinging sensation in her eyes that has become very familiar within the past few weeks. She turns around when she feels Alaina tap her on the shoulder.

"Don't listen to them, ok. They were just being jerks," Alaina tries to

support her, but Kenzi tunes it out as she takes in her friend's costume. She takes the red and yellow jumpsuit that seems to fit her friend's body in all the right places with no bulges in sight anywhere. The Flash insignia with the yellow lightning bolt and white background is on her small but average-sized chest and doesn't look like it is going to fly off her suit at any second. And the black lightning bolts just amp up her fit thighs more than any shorts ever could. The red mask she wears over her face complements her green eyes so well that Kenzi tugs at her own white mask and adjusts the goggles on her head because of her unusually bright brown eyes for someone of her skin tone.

"You know what, I'm gonna go sit down for a bit. These combat boots aren't exactly a treat to walk in for hours and hours," says Kenzi with a small smile and turns to walk away, but Alaina grabs her arm.

"Kenzi—"

"I'm fine really. I just need to rest my feet for a while. I promise. I'll text you when my dogs stop barkin'," she says, patting her friend's hand lightly and walking away to the food court of the convention center.

Kenzi sits down at one of the tables near the edge of the exhibit hall far from the others with a heavy sigh, propping her head up in her hands. Kenzi looks around at the other cosplayers in the hall. Everyone seems to be ripped, toned, the right color and gender, which means they are "doing it right." She looks down at her table as her vision starts to get blurry with tears. She wipes at her eyes to make it stop and tries to swallow against the lump in her throat.

"I just can't win," she whispers to herself.

### Three Months Earlier

Kenzi breathes in the humid air deep as she leaves the campus gym after working out for an hour to head back to her apartment and start on her research paper that is due in two days. On her way she puts in her headphones and looks at her Tumblr on her iPhone, scrolling through her feed. She sees a notification pop up on her screen saying someone commented on one of her pictures from New York City last month.

"Stacie Adams? I don't know any Stacie Adams?" she says out loud and clicks on the notification.

*Seriously? U can't cosplay Clary Fairchild! She's white. Your black. She's tall and skinny. Your short and curvy. Get right huney. Get right.*

Kenzi rolls her eyes and deletes the comment. "I'll get it right once you learn the difference between your and you're, honey," she says dryly and closes her Tumblr app. She turns up her music and enjoys the walk back home.

Kenzi tries to let the comment bounce off her, but for some reason she can't name, it sticks to her for the rest of the week. Usually she couldn't care less

what people say, but that one irrelevant girl's comment nags her. And Stacie Adams took it upon herself to share some of Kenzi's other pictures from other Comic-Cons on her Tumblr page; everyone has an opinion about how she looked in her cosplays.

*You're black. You can't cosplay Kim Possible!*

*Last time I checked Dean Winchester was dude. And he was white. Now if you wanted to cosplay as maybe Gordon Walker's daughter or sister then I'm all for that. Just sayin'. No offense.*

*Aren't you a little fat to cosplay Asuka Kazuma in her school girl uniform? If you bend over in that skirt it's all over.*

*I don't know how you got your fat ass to fit in that Loki costume but good job for at least trying to dude.*

*That's just gross! Your arms are too big for you to be wearing tank tops like that. Wear a cover up next time.*

They just keep coming one right after another.

Kenzi tries to brush them off too, but it just keeps picking at her in a way she can't understand that almost drives her crazy. She even stops working on her new cosplays for Comicpalooza in Houston because she is feeling so discouraged and doesn't think she can feel any worse. And one day she just snaps.

"That's it! I quit!" Kenzi yells out two weekends later and closes her laptop with an angry clack after reading the latest comment. She grabs all of her current cosplay projects and starts throwing them in the hamper basket she has in her room. Alaina comes running into her room a minute later.

"You scared the hell out of me! Why are you yelling? Did you see a roach again?"

Kenzi dumps another armful of fabric in the basket. "I'm done. I'm just so done right now that I just can't even. She doesn't know me and I don't know her, so I don't know why she's targeting me," she rambles on while moving around the room until Alaina moves in front of her and grabs her shoulders.

"Girl, stop moving for one sec and talk to me instead of ranting at me. Is this about the comments?"

Kenzi takes a deep breath and tries to relax. "Yes, and it still hasn't stopped. Tumblr is usually so friendly, nice and accepting so I don't know why this girl is picking on me." She sits on her bed, and Alaina sits down beside her.

"Then just report her, Kenzi, because it—"

"I don't want to do that either because I feel like I'm tattling on her."

Alaina sighs, wraps her arm around Kenzi, and says, "Well, you have to do something because this is clearly pushing you to the brink."

"I know but I don't want to seem like a bitch, especially if she is on Tumblr to have fun and enjoy her fandoms like I am."

"That's what's wrong with you now. You're letting other people's opinions

control you when they are just that. Stupid opinions of shallow people who don't care anything else better to do. I mean look at you. You've been working out until you're dragging in so sore that you can barely make it to your room." Kenzi can't help the smirk at her friend's slightly over exaggeration but can't deny it.

"Cosplaying isn't a beauty pageant. It's about having fun. Don't let them take that away from you now."

### Present Day

Kenzi sighs and leans back in her chair, crossing her arms. After that she's been working on her cosplays with a new determination, trying to make them the best and match the characters the smallest detail.

"But it seems that isn't even enough," she mumbles.

"You know talking out loud is a sign of insanity?" a voice says beside her.

Kenzi turns and sees a black guy dressed as Ichabod Crane from the TV show *Sleepy Hollow*, with the famous black trench coat that looks like it has seen a lot of days, a loose cream top that looked like a peasant top for men, the black pants and the black knee high boots that don't look any more comfortable than her own boots. His light brown wig, pulled back into a pony tail, and green contacts that look pretty sweet to her though.

Two girls dressed as Jenny and Abbie Mills from the TV show *Sleepy Hollow* as well are standing there on either side of Ichabod. Abbie is white, wearing her signature black pants suit, pink cami and black boots when she finally gets to be the FBI. She is tall, lanky and skinny while Jenny is Asian, short and a little bit pudgy, curvy side. She is wearing Jenny's favorite outfit: blue skinny jeans, black boots, and a green tank top with a cameo jacket.

"... Excuse me?"

"You heard me. And if you keep sighing you'll sigh your life away," he says with a very serious look on his face. Abbie sighs and pushes Ichabod aside.

"Ignore Trevor. My name is Cayden."

"Yeah, we all do. And my name is Rachel," Jenny introduces herself.

Kenzi can't help but laugh a little at how hurt Trevor looks, as he puts his hand over his heart, clearly insulted. "How dare you. I do have feelings, thank you very much."

Cayden rolls her eyes. "What's your name?"

"Kenzi. Kenzi Allen."

"Nice to meetcha, Kenzi. We just came over to tell ya how much we like your *Static Shock* cosplay and were hoping we could take a picture with ya."

"Oh... uh, I don't know."

"You're not one of those stuck up cosplayers who're so famous that they don't do pictures are you?" Trevor looks at her with a look that screams annoyed.

"Well, no, not really. I just feel a little self-conscious is all. You could say I'm going through a rough patch right now..." Kenzi trails off as they all move to sit down at her table. Cayden and Trevor sit on either side of her while Rachel sits down beside Cayden. Not exactly an invitation to sit down but ok, Kenzi thinks to herself.

"Lemme guess. People are criticizin' ya cosplay. Specifically how ya look or don't look right?"

Kenzi stares at her, then at Trevor and Rachel, who also have a knowing look in their eyes. "Yeah... how did you—?"

"We've been there, done that, and bought the t-shirt," Trevor says with a grin, making Kenzi grin too. "And on top of that you look so miserable despite how bad ass your outfit looks."

"That obvious, huh?"

"Yep. We've been doing this since the ninth grade so we know how it feels," Rachel chimes in. "I've been told I'm too pudgy and can only cosplay Asian characters," she says with a wave of her hand.

"I've been told I'm too big and muscular to cosplay tiny and less muscular characters," says Trevor with a grin.

"And I'm too lanky and skinny to play any character with curves. It's only normal. Cosplay has become so mainstream that people are trying to stick to guidelines and rules that don't really exist. Well, as far as all cosplayers know anyway," Cayden says. "But it's mostly just for fun. I mean there are competitions at conventions, and yeah there are some cosplays that are a bit horrific, but we still know how to have fun."

"You just gotta roll with the punches and forget it. No matter how awesome you look there will always be someone complaining about how you look or about how you don't look. So you just have to learn how to suck it up, keep it movin', and have fun dude," Trevor says with a light elbow nudge to her side, and Kenzi smiles.

"Yeah, I mean look at us," Rachel says pointing to her friends. "We're an odd bunch all on our own. And who knows what people are whispering behind our backs."

"See? I told you that you had nothing to worry about," Alaina says as she sets down a plate of pizza and a root beer in front of her. "You took so long resting that I came to find you."

"Oh. My. God! Are you seriously dressed as Jesse Quick from *The Flash*?! Where did you get your material?" Rachel gushes over Alaina's costume.

After that, they sit around the table for another hour before getting up and walking around the exhibit hall together. They are not walking for even thirty minutes until some people started running up to them for pictures. Mostly Kenzi, to her surprise. When they take another rest break it is three hours and a panel

er, and Kenzi is smiling from ear to ear.

Alaina links her arm with hers, smiling just as loud as her. "You look like I'm having fun."

"Then I'm doing it right," Kenzi says laughing.

## Deadly Desires

Mercedes Roth

I am the child of lust and greed. I am the bastard spawn of a prostitute and a politician. I crave the feel of flesh against my own. I need the gasp of sex in my ear, the mixing of bodily fluid. I live for the screams of ecstasy reached; I strive to drive them to a whimpering, shaking mess. More than driving them to their blissful edge, I need to make me the only one they need. I need to be the one they imagine when they're with another. I have to be the one that causes them to clench their thighs with want and their dick to harden with desire.

I suppose I should blame my biological parents for my disposition, but I don't. No, they were just my creators, not my enablers. I thank my host family for the way I am. They were the ones who plucked me from living the life of a drug fueled street urchin and shoved that silver fucking spoon so far in my mouth I nearly choked. They made sure I never wanted for anything. Any mistake I made they were there to fix it. Any person daring enough to oppose me they made disappear. It didn't matter what I did, they fixed it with barely a reprimand. It didn't matter what I wanted, they got it for me without the batting of a lash. Their actions more than anything proved to me how weak love made a person, how easily desperation would drive one to forget their morals. No, they may not be the reason for my existence, but they were the ones who ensured I could live the life I needed. They showed me that money and power would get me whatever and whoever I wanted.

I wouldn't say that I love them, because love is a show of weakness, of being pathetic, but I suppose I am fond of them. More fond of them than I am of my spouse. No, I don't love anyone, but I'm not above using the weak emotion to get what I want. It's pitifully amusing how uttering that stupid four letter word is enough to make someone give you whatever you want, to make them fall hopelessly in line without a single protest or question.

While my host family gave me the means to fulfill my desires, they weren't enough when I reached legal age. No, once I reached that threshold it became apparent that I needed to unite myself legally with another in order for the petty gilded society I was in to be accepting. It was frustrating, the boring courtship, the pretending to be in love and wanting monogamy. I hated having to pretend to be faithful, that only they fulfilled my large sexual appetite. It was tiring and I nearly gave up the façade, but it paid off when only eight months after that first date we were married. Yes, with that document signed I was given the society status that kept every door wide open for me.

I suppose I'm a better performer than I thought, since my naïve little mate truly did fall in love with me. The foolish little pet thinks we're soulmates, that I



in love with them as well and that we'll grow old together. I'll admit to bedding m regularly, it feeds my greed to know that because of their stupid religious bringing I was their first, their only. I can't begin to accurately describe the way eats my blood to come home from spending the last hour with another and lacing my innocent mate. Just thinking about it is almost enough to send me r the edge, to imagine how delicious it is to defile them that way. It's even more icious when I throw my many affairs in their face, when I allow them to catch with another lover. The look on their face is always priceless and the way they rays believe me to be sorry is wonderful. I don't even apologize. I just act like hing happened and the pathetic fool follows suit, convincing themselves that ill never happen again.

I suppose I should feel sorry for the pet, that I should set it free, but I n't. No, just like their pathetic religion made them stay chaste till marriage, it o taught them that divorce is never an option. Yes, when I picked them for my te I made the perfect choice. They're perfectly naïve and compliant; no matter at I do they stay faithful. Perhaps because their warped imagination has made sm believe that I do truly love them, that I am just scared of commitment. I n't know or care. I can't be bothered to correct them either way.

I must confess though, my favorite part of this unity is that no matter at they do, we will never have a child. They want a child so bad, went to take ts and everything, only to be told that it will never happen. I know I'm not the oblem, I've had to get rid of a growing spawn more than once. They try to rvince me to agree to other options to have one, but I won't hear it. I don't want hild; I don't want to deal with one. Who would? While I do find it enticing to agine another like me, someone I can teach my trade to and show them how to : what they want, it infuriates me to think of all of its needs. It would need astant attention for years, constant affections that I will not give. It also disgusts e to think that it could end up like my mate, a naïve fool. I don't consider it being nix of us two, because no matter what, my partner's pathetic disposition would ke it weak. No, I don't want a child. I don't want competition for partners and efinately don't want to deal with its needs.

While I do little more than tolerate my partner, I do enjoy the events their esence allows me into. I hate having to deal with them, to constantly listen to eir voice, but I love how they make it possible for me to enter new hunting ounds. It's the most gratifying feeling to enter a fancy dinner party and catch the e of a new person, single or married. I love the hunt, having them act like they n't want me only to convince them to enter a coat closet or upstairs room with e. I love being the one they cheat with, the name they are screaming loud enough draw attention. I especially love when I am their first, whether it be their first qual partner or their first partner of the same sex. That's another thing that I'm re upsets my innocent little mate, the fact that I am open to all partners in my

bed.

I guess that is where my greed really shows its face. It's not just the sex that feeds my appetite, it's the knowledge that I have something against them because all the attendants of these parties are well off members of society, prominent figures of our country. I love that I am able to use my conquest to get me whatever I want, whether it be money or a new toy. Don't misunderstand, my job is one of the best and my host family keeps my bank account very well fed, but it's the fact that I get to use them. It doesn't matter how I get the means to blackmail them, either because I slept with them or their partner or even their kid, I use it. I threaten to go to anyone who will listen with the story of the liaison. I threaten their image of a wholesome, faithful person or their sexuality. I lie and say I recorded it, that I have proof, and they are begging for me to tell them what I want. Sometimes I torture them with it, smile sadistically and make them wait for my response, sometimes for days. Sometimes I prattle off some materialistic thing I don't really want or need. At that point I really don't care. The hunt is over and my greed is being fed.

I am a very attractive individual. I am the creature people drool over, so on the very rare occasions I am refused, I realize that I may be slightly tinged by wrath as well. I refuse to be rejected, no matter who it is. I am the perfect example of human perfection; I am the greatest thing they will ever have. How could they reject me? I don't care for their pathetic reason why, bullshit about being faithful or not wanting to just be another conquest. How dare they refuse me! While it has only happened a few times, when it does happen I immediately see red and feel my blood boil with rage. I stop hearing their reason why; I stop seeing them as a conquest and start seeing them as something that needs to be destroyed. The first time I didn't do much more than rough them up, make them consent to my seduction and enjoyed their tears, their begging. But that was the first time. I was lenient then; I didn't fully understand my greatness. I'm not so nice now.

Which is how I find myself here, staring down at the body before me and contemplating my plans. I haven't yet decided how I'm going to get rid of it, if I want to burn it to a crisp or drive it out to the desert for the scavengers to take care of. I contemplate my course of action as I pick at the blood under my nails. I'm not worried about being caught; by now I know how to get rid of the evidence. I have jugs of water to wash the blood off with and another set of clothes to change into. I know to burn my bloodied garments and that killing them needs to be done in the woods so the evidence can easily be hidden. I know no one saw me with them. I know that no one knows we were going to be together, and I know my partner can be counted on to provide and alibi if it comes to it. Plus, no one would ever think someone of my position would do something so dumb, would lose all they have for simple sex.

I sigh in annoyed frustration, irritated that I really didn't think my night

ould end like this no matter how prepared I am for it. I blame the dead person front of me for this turn of events; if they simply wouldn't have said no, neither us would be where we are now. They would be going about their business and would be home with my annoying mate, making them whimper with sexual bliss I defile our marriage more. No, this is all their fault. I check my watch as I stand here thinking, noting that more time than I would like has passed as I stand here thinking. I shake my head in anger and note that it is quite a drive to the desert, so taking into account that I will have to tear out my trunk lining and then sell more effort than I care to take. I decide against the desert and instead pick up the body and drag it farther into the woods, well off the path that is barely there.

I know this part of the path is rarely ever used and the few occasions that is used the hikers are lax to veer off course. But just to be careful I go a few hundred feet away and then a few hundred more, walking half a mile away from the path before I let my load go and set about clearing the area of underbrush. I take in the scene and again wonder what I should do, if I should even bother lighting it on fire this far out. I weigh my options as I stare down at the tan hand that has escaped the tarp the rest of it is attached to. I flick the top of my lighter a few times as I think, noting that since it is still daylight the smoke will be seen and might be enough to draw a curious hiker or ranger. I give the lighter a final click closed as I make my decision, deciding that I will just cover it with underbrush and rocks and allow nature to take its course.

Once I'm finished hiding the body well enough that even I have trouble finding where it is, I strip off my clothes and start walking, throwing random items this way and that as I go. I am careful though, making sure that they always land on the ground, kicking dirt and leaves on top. I know that since they are made of cotton they will eventually decompose, but I am still confident that they will never be discovered. I have tossed and covered the last piece when I notice that I still have a few hundred feet to walk naked, an inconvenience more than anything. I could usually pass the time on my phone, checking on business and answering messages, but I turned it off when my seduction went south, cautious of the authorities making a connection and tracing my GPS. So instead I walk, thinking out my next hunt instead of the one that went wrong today.

When I finally make it out of the woods and onto the barely there path, I start walking south, towards where I left my vehicle. I smile as I walk, content that even if the day didn't end with blissful ecstasy it still was enough to feed my many fettes, even the one that I very rarely feel. It grows when I remember that the day is still young and I have all night to find another to chase, another to surrender to my lust. I unlock my trunk and use the jugs of water to wash up before stepping into my clothes; by the time I am done, I climb behind my wheel with a smile on my face as I imagine how my night is going to end. As I imagine the violent, rage fueled seduction awaiting my prey.

## Mediocre Title

Mercedes Roth

*Well fuck!* I think as I stare at the time in the corner of my laptop and note that I only have about thirty minutes to come up with an idea, type it up, and email it to my professor before it is counted late and I am officially fucked. *FUCK!* I have been staring at my walls, staring at my *Supernatural* poster—*boy, those men are super yummy*—and talking to my cats for the past three hours without a single idea popping into my head that fits the criteria for this assignment.

*Fuckity, fuck, fuck, FUCK!* My time just went down by two more fucking minutes. *Okay, if I start RIGHT now, I can get three pages done. It doesn't have to be pretty; just write that shit and hit send,* I think as I watch my cat chase his own tail, wondering why I couldn't have been born a cat. I could totally be a kick ass cat. I would be so fucking pretty and bad ass and throw raging cat parties. I wish I was a cat.

*What kind of cat would I be? I think I'd want to be an unusual cat, like one that's all fluffy but cool colored. I'd want to have blue and green eyes and be black—NO, blue! Yeah, I'd be a sexy ass blue cat. I'd be this ball of fury even Satan would be scared of, and my humans would bow down to my fluffy ass. Yeah, I'd be a God cat. Bow down, bitches.* I'm lost in my imaginings, entertained by my life as a cat and scare the Hell out of my own cats when I come out of my musings to see that I have even less time to do my assignment.

*FUCK! Okay, time to focus! I picked my first line, so now I just have to write around it. I can do this. I am creative! I am woman! I will not cry into a glass of wine and Google how to become a drug dealer because I'm realizing college is just not my scene. FOCUS!*

I type "My body goes numb" on my documents and then just stare at the mocking, blinking line at the end, telling me that I'm a talentless loser. *Fuck you, line; your life is determined by me. I own your ass, so don't act like a condescending asshole to me. I am your creator!*

I throw my pillow across my room as I realize I'm having a conversation with a line in my head and more time has passed, causing me to think about changing my name and moving.

*I'm gonna buy a ticket to Norway, change my name to Aerity, and marry the first single guy I see. If anyone asks I'll say I have no idea what happened to that college student, I have never been to America in my life, and I don't have any family in the States because they all died in a fire. This can work. This can totally work.*

I'm really into my plans when I realize that I can't afford to buy a bus ticket to Austin, let alone Norway, and I hate other humans so I couldn't marry the

irst single guy I see. The language barrier is probably a concern too.

*I wonder if they speak three semesters of broken French up there, I muse to myself before realizing that I have about fifteen minutes to type up three or more pages and email it in.*

*FUCK! Alright, it's the final countdown and you can do this! Think of all those heroines in those books you read; they totally pull through in the last few minutes and save the day! I mean, yeah, they're usually The Chosen One, but hey're still mostly human and they save the whole world; you're just writing a story. Hey, I wonder when the next book in that series is coming out.*

I open a tab in my browser and log onto my favorite book website to see if I can find out when the next book in a fast favorite series is coming out, getting distracted by book quizzes once I'm in.

*Ooohhh, what's my patronus? I really hope it's something cute. Hmm . . . night or day? Night, I'm not even human before noon and the Sun hurts. Fire, rain or wind? Ermm . . . well, I guess rain, although I do like fire. Stars or moon? Fuck! I love both of them! Can I pick both? No? Fuck, stars I guess. Why did I get m here again? Do I have any more of that wine? I need some wine. What would I rather? A key, scroll, or crown? I'm already a princess. I don't need a crown to prove it, so I guess I'll choose the scroll since it's close to a book.*

I'm lost in the quiz and nearly throw my laptop off my bed when I see that I have exactly eight minutes to write my story. I feel the panic rising and have a strong urge to burst into tears and scream until my throat explodes but swallow both down, determined not to be beaten by an assignment.

*I can do this. If I can write a poem that the school chooses to publish, I can write a bullshit story with a predetermined first line. I am creative, and I am going to kick ass on this story. Ignore all of the distractions and type!*

I exit out of all my distracting browsers, turn up my creative playlist, rub my penguin sticker for luck, and set my fingers on my keys. I watch my countdown roll down to seven before I exhale loudly and get to work.

My body goes numb as the euphoria of the drug takes effect, not even noticing the needle fall out of my vein. The faces around me blur as it becomes impossible for me to see sound, the drug changing the scope of my senses.

*This is good, this could work, although I have no idea where to go from here. What do drugs do to a person? I know pot chills you out, but what about the harder shit? FUCK!*

I hit the backspace and watch those couple sentences disappear, sweat breaking out on my brow as the time ticks down.

*What if I can't come up with anything? A few minutes late is one thing, but at this rate I won't turn one in until next semester. Am I gonna fail? I'm never gonna be able to get a job because I didn't turn in one fucking assignment and failed the class! I'm gonna have to drop out and become a stripper. Fuck, I don't*

*have the body to strip! Can I be a prostitute? The guys are so desperate for sex I feel like they won't care what I look like. Fuck!*

I shake my head, ignore the clock, and start to type, hoping this idea turns into something.

My body goes numb as the fifth John of the night enters me, grunting from the feel. I think I make a sound of pleasure, but they're all pathetic assholes with small dicks, so I doubt he cares about my enjoyment. I run through a list of groceries I need while he starts to thrust, his sweat dripping onto me, causing me to shudder.

*This is good shit; this can work. Okay, so what now? This has to be three pages at least, so do I make him finish and her go on her merry way or drag out the sex? How much does sex with a prostitute cost? Maybe I should have the cops find them and then one of the cops has sex with her so she blackmails him. Hmm . . . I have no idea what to do with this. FUCK!*

I hit the backspace AGAIN and feel tears prick my vision as I watch each letter disappear, my future along with it.

*Why is this so hard? Why now? I have never had this much trouble coming up with an idea and writing it, but of course on THIS one it happens. Why do I have writer's block? WHY?!*

I allow a few tears to fall before I suck it up and decide that the next idea I come up with will be the one I complete, even if it is a complete train wreck, like my life. I take a deep breath through my nose then start to type, completely ignoring the fact that my time is officially up.

My body goes numb as I watch the cars pass by on the interstate, all of the occupants blind to my body lying in the ditch. Why can't they see me? Why is this happening to me? It was just supposed to be a fun party; it wasn't supposed to end like this. I read all the stories cautioning against this, survivors telling what happened to them. I thought I would be fine. How could I be so stupid? I'm going to die in a ditch, another rape statistic, because I accepted ONE drink from a cute boy.

The words seem to fly from my mind to my fingers, almost too fast for them to keep up. I feel my lips turn up in a small smile as the story flows, the scene playing in my mind, the images breaking my heart.

*This was the idea I've been ping ponging in my mind for a week, having people tell me it was too dark, and this is the story that works. It's so real, so relatable and edgy and beautifully broken. I love this story. I don't care what they say; this is the story I should have been working on from day one. It is too dark, but it's dealing with a real issue. This is life, not a fairytale; it doesn't end with happily ever after all the time. For some people it ends in a ditch, I think as a tear falls down my cheek, the salty drop falling into my mouth as I take a shuddering breath, my heart breaking with every word.*

Please, find my body, cover me up before my family identifies me. Please, find the monster who did this to me. Don't let him get away with this crime; don't give him the chance to do this to another girl. Please, I was a person before I was a corpse. I was a loving daughter, a little sister, a fun friend, a dedicated student. Please, someone look in the ditch! The last thing I see before oblivion takes me is a shadow blocking the blazing headlights streaking past.

I type the last word of my heartbreaking story then save it on my flash drive before logging onto my email and sending it to my professor.

*Sorry it's an hour late, but I wouldn't trade this story for the world, even if it meant it could be an hour early and get published. It being late is kind of a bummer, tragically hilarious story, but I hope you accept it and enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thanks,—M.*

I type before attaching my story and hitting send, staring at the screen until it tells me it was sent.

*Well fuck, I forgot to study for my French test tomorrow, I groan loudly while pushing my laptop off my lap and throwing myself back onto my pillows, lying on my back at my ceiling as I wonder about the jail time if you get caught selling drugs.*

## A Bump in the Road

Ashley Thibodeaux

The bright spectacle in the blue sky peaks out from the clouds, and its light waves scatter across the cars parked in a nearly empty parking lot. Autumn's boyfriend's dirt-filled Jeep Wrangler stands out like a sore thumb. Dusting off her Labrador's fur from the navy blue hoodie she threw on this morning, her eyes focus on the determined protestors through the floor-to-ceiling windows as they march in circles near the building's entrance. Their cries of *Pro-life* and *Justice for the Unborn* echo through the waiting room. Her mother, who communicates through Skype these days, always tells her to trust her choices. Choices. This one proves to be a mistake—a mistake made many nights ago that led her to this place. A place most women try to avoid.

Autumn turns her attention to her phone as she reads over an e-mail titled "Welcome to the University of Texas at San Antonio." Acceptance into a graduate school: check. A voicemail saved in her phone captures a peppy woman's voice announcing her offer for a paid internship position at a nearby museum. Landing an internship at her favorite place in the city: check. Both opportunities keep Autumn grounded—that is, until a couple of days ago.

Adam, her boyfriend of three years who graduated from the same university she will be attending in the fall, sits in the adjacent chair with his left arm over her slouched shoulder.

"Once this is done, you'll be able to focus on school and prepare for this great opportunity at the museum," Adam reassures Autumn.

"It's gonna be ok."

Autumn nods, keeping her eyes on the floor. *Trust your choices. Trust your choices . . .*

A receptionist with bright blue eyeshadow and blood red lipstick steps out into the waiting room, interrupting the twenty-three-year-old's thoughts.

"Autumn Montgomery."

Autumn stands slowly, taking in deep breaths.

"I'll be here when it's done."

Adam embraces Autumn and gives her a quick peck on the lips before she starts towards the receptionist who's tapping her foot on the carpeted floor.

She notices her twenty-five-year-old boyfriend shooting her a reassuring smile before the door closes behind her.

\* \* \*

Autumn has her measurements recorded, both height and weight, and the receptionist finishes the easy part of the appointment by saving her medical history in the computer. "If you'll just wait in here, one of our nurses will be in

ortly.”

The receptionist nods to the room in front of her. Before Autumn can turn herself towards the entryway, the receptionist closes the door, sealing her fate.

The room Autumn is assigned to holds shades of off-white and beige with linoleum floor that may belong to a psychiatric hospital. No dust—nothing but cleanliness. The sight of it makes Autumn nauseated. A red bin hanging on the wall displays a biohazard symbol, holding syringes sealed with the pasts of other women who went through the procedure she would undergo in minutes. Before Autumn can take in any more of this sterile environment, a nurse carrying a Miss Dior scent arrives with a tiny Dell laptop tucked under her arm.

“Hello, Ms. Montgomery. How are you doing, today?”

“M . . . I’m fine. You?”

“I’m doing well. My name’s Rachel, and I’ll be your nurse throughout the procedure along with Dr. Williams.”

Ms. Rachel positions herself in front of a desk attached to the beige-colored walls, and she begins pulling up Autumn’s records on the laptop.

“M’kay Ms. Montgomery, before we begin prepping for the procedure I’m gonna ask you a couple questions—some of them are sensitive in nature, so if you feel uncomfortable answering a question just let me know,” the nurse announces as she pulls up the file.

“You’ve opted for vacuum aspiration abortion, correct?”

“Yes,” Autumn replies.

I can do this, she reassures herself.

\* \* \*

“Last question,” Ms. Rachel announces.

“Is there anyone pressuring you into getting this abortion done today?”

“No . . . it’s just . . . my boyfriend and I have talked ’bout gettin’ married and havin’ kids . . . well kid. We talked ’bout havin’ one. And, um . . . we both are still tryin’ to reach our goals and stuff, so havin’ a baby right now is not somethin’ we can handle.”

“Do you and your boyfriend have unprotected sex often?” Ms. Rachel asks.

“No . . . it’s just the one time.”

They are both responsible and have been for years. But one night of passion was all it took, Autumn thinks.

“M’kay, Ms. Montgomery. I’m gonna let you change into a gown.” Ms. Rachel points to a wide drawer next to the attached desk.

“You will need to remove all articles of clothing, including your underwear and bra. Unfold the gown, carefully. Have the opening of the gown face you, and just slide it on so the back part is open.”

Ms. Rachel pulls the stirrups apart on the ends of the operation chair.

“Once you’re dressed, you’ll need to lay flat on your back and place your

feet in these stirrups. Make sure you scoot your bottom up as close to the edge as possible. While you’re doin’ that, I’m gonna notify the doctor to begin the procedure.”

Ms. Rachel walks out of the room, and a chill runs through Autumn’s spine. Her hands find the drawer, but opening it seems difficult. Her chest aches from the beating drum that is her heart. Sweat cascades down her forehead to the freckled-covered skin on her chest. Her fingers betray her as she slowly opens the drawer with uncontrollable tremors.

Get it together, she yells to herself.

After putting the delicate, thin gown on and tying her thick, tangle-free auburn hair back in a ponytail, Autumn positions herself on the chair and places her feet in the stirrups. She can’t help but notice her feet starting to shake uncontrollably.

Just breathe, she whispers to herself.

After giving up on controlling the involuntary movements of her hands and feet, she focuses on the depressions in the ceiling as her mind begins to wander off . . .

\* \* \*

*“I . . . I can’t look. Can you do it for me?”*

*Autumn closes her eyes as she exits the clothes-and-towel-covered bathroom in her and Adam’s apartment. They had just made it back home from Walgreens with three different brands of pregnancy tests.*

*“Hun, this is the third test you’ve taken. The others have that pink plus sign on it, so I’m pretty sure you’re pregnant. Plus, you’ve felt nauseous every morning for the past few weeks. You’re strugglin’ to get outta bed because you’re so tired all the time. Let’s not mention how you pee like fifty times a day . . .”*

*“Well, this is the Clearblue test. They say it’s the most effective one on the market. Maybe if it comes back negative . . .”*

*“It won’t come back negative,” Adam interrupts.*

*He saunters over to Autumn and, taking the applicator out of her hand, places it on the bathroom counter and pulls her into his arms.*

*“I’m scared, too. But we’ll get through this together.”*

*Since Adam stands exactly six feet tall, Autumn, standing five feet five inches tall, has to position herself on her toes to place her chin on top of his shoulders, wrapping her arms around his neck.*

*“We made a mistake that night by not usin’ protect—”*

*“Yes, we. WE didn’t use protection, but I feel so horrible for not—”*

*“No, Autumn,” Adam’s blue eyes meet Autumn’s green ones, “don’t you DARE blame yourself.”*

*Autumn slides herself down to the mahogany floors in the book-covered hallway, cupping her face. Adam positions himself next her.*

"You're an intelligent, funny, kind-hearted woman," Adam proclaims to Autumn, who ushers a snort in response.

"I was thinkin' I could have an . . ."

"Hun, you really need to think 'bout this first," Adam interrupts, not letting Autumn say the word "abortion."

The couple sits in silence, listening to jazz music reverberate through the hallway from their Amazon Echo.

"We . . . we just have to establish ourselves first, and give ourselves security so we'll be able to take our relationship to the next level."

"College, marriage, then family," Autumn answers as she does every so often at their three-step plan.

"We talked 'bout havin' our future weddin' at a Florida beach. Then we'll wait a few years 'til we know we're ready to start a family." Adam replays their future goals.

"A small family," Autumn reminds him, glancing over at their two-year-old Labrador sleeping on the hallway carpet.

"Yeah, a small family," Adam confirms, smiling at the dog.

"L . . . let's just see what it says." Autumn rises up from the floor and heads towards the bathroom counter where the Clearblue test lays.

Pregnant 2-3.

Autumn stands there silently, tracing each letter and number with her eyes as if it would eventually disappear. Not only is she pregnant, but she is about four to five weeks along.

\* \* \*

"Good afternoon, Ms. Montgomery. I'm Dr. Williams, and I'll be performing your vacuum aspiration abortion."

Dr. Williams shakes Autumn's hand and motions Ms. Rachel to move to the opposite side of the operation chair. Autumn watches as the doctor slips on a pair of white latex gloves and instructs Ms. Rachel to lay out the instruments. The nurse injects the needle part of the syringe into a small vile of clear blue liquid, pulling back the plunger slowly as the liquid fills the barrel.

This is happening—this is *really* happening, Autumn thinks.

Both the doctor and nurse, now wearing white sanitary masks, surround the pregnant woman in the operation chair.

"M'kay Autumn, I need for ya to take a few deep breaths as I insert this speculum," Dr. Williams orders.

Autumn's breaths are slower, deeper. Dr. Williams places the speculum in her vagina.

*Trust your choices, trust your choices . . .*

"I understand that you've had your sonogram done two days ago, correct?"

Autumn sucks in a breath.

"Y . . . yes, sss . . . sir. I did."

She did all right. She wants to forget that day ever happened

\* \* \*

Autumn feared this day would come too quickly. She has read articles on women who, once they heard a heartbeat during a sonogram, instantly changed their minds and stopped the abortion. No, this cannot happen to her. She has her first year as a graduate student to look forward to, not to mention the amazing offer awarded to her from the museum.

*Let's just get this over with, Autumn thinks.*

Dr. Holloway, Autumn's primary doctor, flicks the light switches off in Room 101.

Autumn lays stiff on an operation chair, clutching Adam's hand. She keeps her eyes shut and turns her head towards her boyfriend, who strokes her forehead with one hand, and holds her hand in the other.

"I don't doubt this will be hard for y'all, but it's the law. I have to perform this sonogram so Autumn will be able to have the abortion."

Dr. Holloway sits on a red stool and applies clear white gel on Autumn's exposed belly.

"You guys chose to listen to the heartbeat, correct?" Dr. Holloway asks as she places the transducer on the exposed belly.

"Yeah," Adam answers, not taking his eyes off of Autumn. The couple decided to opt for the heartbeat instead of having images printed out so they wouldn't have to carry what will cease to be with them.

"Now, I'll have to describe the fetus to y'all, m'kay," Dr. Holloway informs as she slides the transducer all over the gel-filled belly.

Autumn keeps her eyes tightly shut and focuses on the movement of the device shuffle left and right, up and down.

"You're about twelve weeks pregnant." Dr. Holloway slides the device around the lower right part of Autumn's belly.

"I see a head . . . the right and left arm . . . the legs are kinda hard to see." Dr. Holloway presses the transducer more into the belly.

"Mm . . . yeah, the legs are gonna be kinda hard to see," Dr. Holloway ponders.

She only had to move the device an inch up from where she captures a visual of the fetus when a noise begins to reverberate through the machine. Lub dub . . . Lub dub . . . Lub dub.

Autumn's grip begins to tighten in Adam's hand. A tear escapes from one of her tightly shut eyes. Adam stops caressing his girlfriend's forehead and listens intently at the sound of their baby's heartbeat.

There it is. A heartbeat. Never had the sound of a heartbeat felt so

compelling that Autumn's closed eyes wanted to spring open and admire the nurse from where the melody played.

Finally, after what seems like centuries, Dr. Holloway announces that the procedure is complete.

The doctor turns on the lights and wipes off the remaining gel from her belly.

Several minutes later, the couple makes it back to their Jeep Wrangler and pulls out of the parking lot. The couple rides in silence as the sound of Chris Martin's voice from Coldplay singing "Fix You" echoes through the car . . .

\* \* \*

"Now what I'm gonna do is inject the Lidocaine into the cervix, so I'm gonna need you to take a deep breath in and let out a strong cough." Dr. Williams holds up the syringe filled with the anesthesia.

Autumn draws in a deep breath, but it is quickly extinguished as her heart begins to pound through her ribcage. Sweat begins to pour down her forehead like Niagara Falls.

*You'll have a family in the future.*

*It just isn't meant to be right now . . .*

"Ms. Montgomery, I'm gonna need you to lay as still as possible. Try to relax for me," Dr. Williams instructs as he positions the syringe back to where it was.

"Now take a deep breath in for me."

Autumn draws in another deep breath.

*You and Adam will have careers, then get married, then start a family.*

*Everything's gonna be okay.*

Dr. Williams instructs Autumn to relax for the next five minutes as the numbness takes effect in her cervix. The numbness, Autumn soon learns, becomes her best friend, in addition to the depressions in the ceiling for which she longingly stares at for the next five hours.

## A Man's Love for His Dog

Ashley Thibodeaux

Dr. Barnes announces the familiar name in the brightly colored waiting room.

"Oliver Knight."

"That's us, Ollie," Robert announces to his companion.

Rising out of the wobbly chair, Robert lifts Oliver out of his lap and makes his way towards Room One. Measuring exactly six feet, three inches tall, Robert straightens his off-white shirt and stained blue jeans while Dr. Barnes' veterinary technician places Oliver back on the stainless steel table. As Robert starts to sit down in that same uncomfortable chair, he tucks his long curly brown hair back to make himself seem more attentive. Measuring only eight inches tall, Robert's black smooth-haired Dachshund leans against the vet technician for support. His ashen-colored face shows signs of aging, but his dark brown eyes shine like the surface of the ocean during a sunset. Robert studies the Q-tip filled container near an open counter. The sounds of howls and meows from the waiting room sends his anxiety to the roof. A pungent smell of wet grass and dried dirt tickles his nose hairs as Dr. Barnes saunters into the room.

"Thank you for waiting so patiently. Oliver did very well while we performed the CT scan."

Then, his eyes wander to the left side of the room at a dimly lit illuminator. In a few seconds, that device will be brought to life, and Oliver's future will be determined by what's found within the images.

"Before we discuss the results, I just want you to know, as your veterinarian of seventeen years, I've watched Oliver grow from a playful puppy to a healthy adult."

Robert quickly breaks into a nervous sweat, hands clenched on both sides. The veterinary technician caresses the lethargic Dachshund as Dr. Barnes continues.

"Looking at these images, I was able to locate three tumors about the size of a golf ball growing around the stomach line. Unfortunately, at this stage, there's not much we can do."

Silence fills the enclosed room.

"I am truly sorry, Robert."

Oliver's ears push back as a loud shriek travels from Room One to the waiting area, silencing the howls and meows from other pets.

\* \* \*

Driving out of the parking lot in his 2013 gray Nissan Juke, Robert glances at his eighteen-year-old companion with sadness in his eyes. "Don't you worry,

Ollie. Everything's going to be okay," Robert reassures his pal matter-of-factly as he turns up the volume on the radio. "Don't Stop" by Fleetwood Mac begins playing. The rear view mirror, holding a wedding photo of Robert and David taken in Las Vegas, witnesses a tear slowly cascading down Robert's face.

As he pulls up into the driveway of his townhouse, Robert quickly gets out of the car and power walks towards the passenger side where Oliver sits patiently in his lightweight booster seat.

"I don't want you to be out here in this heat for too long."

David opens the front door and looks out towards the driveway.

"I knew from the moment he threw up blood at the dog park that that dog was dying." Robert bypasses David at the door and moves directly towards the living room, each step making clicking noises on the spotless, wooden floors. He slowly lays Oliver down on the white, suede sofa and turns on the Samsung 55" television screen. Spiritual books by Sylvia Browne line the middle bookshelf while an autographed photo of the medium John Edward stands on the left corner.

"I haven't seen you cry this much since the day we had to cancel our trip to San Francisco."

Robert continues to ignore David.

"Pets are replaceable, Rob. You'll find another companion to love, and bring it to bed with you as well."

Robert's anger ceases his silence. "Shut the hell up! Just shut up!"

David chuckles. "Aww c'mon. You knew this day would come. Don't act like such a sissy."

"Why is it that you've never supported me taking care of Oliver? You never used to act like a . . ."

"Pessimist," David finishes.

"An asshole," Robert barks.

David tenses. "You know what's embarrassing? Having to tell waiters at a restaurant that you are running late because you're too busy making sure Oliver has a home-cooked meal before you leave the house."

Robert hoists Oliver up and cradles him, reassuring his friend that everything's going to be okay.

"What pisses me off is that you haven't been able to keep a steady job in over four years. I have to make sure we survive off my income. Instead of looking for a job, I find you binge watching *Mad Men* on TV."

David sighs. "Whatever. I've been up since 6 a.m., so I'm going to bed."

As David starts towards the guest room, Robert intervenes.

"I really am trying to find a job. It's just hard, you know. Oliver needs me and—"

David halts. "No! You are so obsessed with this dog, it's unhealthy. It's clouding your judgment and you can't even—"

"Good night, Dave," Robert concludes.

David stops in front of the bedroom door and turns his head towards his husband. "You know, I ask myself why are we still together. And honestly, I can't remember. Even if my life depended on it."

Before Robert can say anything else, David slams the bedroom door shut, ending the nightly routine of the married couple.

\* \* \*

*"At this stage, Oliver's health will decrease incredibly. Most owners choose to put their dogs down so as not to let them suffer in their last hours, days, weeks, what have you."*

Robert continues playing the conversation with Dr. Barnes in his head as he prepares a light breakfast for him and his companion on a rainy Friday morning.

"Do you want bacon and eggs? We're out of sausage."

Robert looks towards Oliver, who lays outstretched on the white, suede sofa. After he discards the cooked food into a bowl and feeds his companion with a silver fork, Robert glances towards the polka dot photo album under the black coffee table. After Oliver slowly finishes his gourmet meal, Robert grabs the album and opens it, releasing those treasured memories out into the open.

A picture on the top left corner of the first page shows a shivering one-month-old Oliver cradled in Robert's arms as he sat on that same suede sofa. Robert was smiling right at David, who was capturing the moment. Oliver stared in adoration at Robert. Skimming through each page, Robert reminisces at his growing love for Oliver. Pictures of him and David were tucked in the very back of the album, making room for new pictures of the two best friends. A gleaming Robert and five-year-old Oliver walking towards the ocean on Virginia Beach brought tears into his eyes. A cheesy picture of Oliver dressed as a pirate three Halloweens ago brought out a chuckle in Robert. Turning each page meant traveling forward in time: Oliver's birthday parties, signs of a bulging belly, and whitening of the face meant his years were numbered. The last photo made Robert freeze: Oliver's recovery photo from hip dysplasia. His Dachshund grew incredibly close to his other friend, a deteriorating teddy bear with a missing eye, when he began to sleep all day and night. Robert never would have thought this day would come.

As Robert closes the album, a hacking sound snaps his head to the left where Oliver lay.

Dark red puddles encircle the Dachshund as his chin drips with more red ooze.

"Ollie! Oh, no. No, no, no!"

Robert shouts towards the guest room upstairs. "David! I need help here!"  
Silence.



"David! Come down here!"

Still no answer. Robert runs straight upstairs to the bedroom. The door was slightly cracked open, so he threw it open and ran straight inside. Preparing to stumble over dirty clothes, old polaroid pictures, and leftovers from numerous fast food restaurants, Robert notices the floor is spotless. His eyes quickly scan the made-up bed. No evidence of anyone ever sleeping here last night. In fact, no sign of anyone ever living in this room. A huge wave of emotions sends Robert out of the bedroom and straight to the kitchen cabinet. Was it panic? No. Was it anger? No. Robert never felt this way before. He didn't want to admit to himself how he really felt.

"I can't think about this right now. Ollie needs me."

\* \* \*

A bell chime, echoing from his iPhone 6, alerts an exhausted Robert. One ray of light escapes from the closed blinds in the gloomy bedroom. The time on the hanging wall clock located across the room reads 7:30 a.m. Oliver's "appointment" is at 8:30 a.m. Taking his time, Robert makes his way into the bathroom and does his usual Monday morning routine. As he dresses in a clean white t-shirt and pressed blue jeans, Oliver begins to pace around the bed.

"I'm almost done, Ollie. I'll make you your favorite breakfast."

Robert finishes dressing by combing his curly hair back in one slick wave. It's going to be okay, Robert reassures himself.

\* \* \*

The clock in the Nissan Juke reads 8:01 a.m. as Robert places Oliver in his booster seat.

"Look who I found in the back of the closet."

Robert places a deeply stained tiny stuffed bear next to Oliver. Sluggishly, Oliver's nose meets the top of the toy's head. He moves closer to his friend as Robert stuffs freshly printed resumes in the glove compartment. Once buckled in the driver's seat, Robert cautiously drives out into the road and heads towards Dr. Barnes' clinic. Halting at a stoplight, Robert glances at an Olive Garden to his right. The empty parking lot allows him to notice a little bit of the blue dumpster around the corner of the restaurant. In that moment, the memories start to flood through

"See, love! I knew you should have ordered the Zuppa Toscana soup instead of that nasty creamy mushroom soup."

David holds Robert close to his side as they walk out into the parking lot on a busy Saturday night.

"Yes, Dave, I know."

Robert slips a defeated look at his newly-wedded husband.

"It's still date night. How can we end the night on a high note?"

David flashes a wink at Robert. "Hmm, maybe we can wa—"

"Don't suggest we watch *Love Story* again. 'Love means never having to say you're sorry.'"

David mimics Ali MacGraw.

"Too sad for me. Let me come up with another idea."

"Oh . . . well, okay . . ."

As David begins to suggest another way to end a romantic night, a soft whimper silences the two lovers. Robert picks up his pace and moves directly towards the blue dumpster.

"Aww, Dave. Look at him." Robert finds a shivering puppy crouched near the wheels of the dumpsters.

"Poor baby. Hey, Dave. Hand me a blanket from the car, will you?"

Dave sighs. "Fine, but just know we are not keeping that filthy thing."

As David walks towards the vehicle, Robert nestles the puppy near his chest. "Why would someone abandon you like this? Well, you don't have to worry any more. I'm here now."

Oliver shows his appreciation by licking Robert's cold cheek.

"Let's see. Why don't I call you Olive . . . no . . . Oliver."

David comes back from the car with a UC Berkeley embroidered blanket.

"I named him Oliver, since we found him near Olive Garden."

"Ugh, Robert. Just promise me you'll bring him to the animal shelter in the morning?"

Robert never confirms David's promise as all three of them make their way towards the car . . .

Red light changes to green as Robert is knocked back into the present. "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac faintly plays on the radio as he slowly begins to accelerate. He shakily pushes the turn signal down and turns right onto Filaree Road. Robert glances at Oliver and slowly moves his hand forward to pet him. Then, he returns his eyes to the road and hopes that traffic will slow everyone, and everything, to a stop.

## The Grave's Pull

Anna Carver

Grief washes over human souls in the form of turbulent waves, its frothy waters forever beating against the psyche while inconspicuous pieces of it slowly float adrift. Sometimes the waters remain far off in the distance, not even lapping at the beach, and unable to grasp at the heart's musing—but other times they will flood the senses with stinging, briny memories that contain absolute sorrow. For confessional and gothic poet Sylvia Plath, waves of fierce grief carve out a natural harbor where both raw emotion and literature thrive. The woman's storm began in her early childhood when her father, Otto Emil Plath, flowed to the other side. The death brought on a less than healthy relationship with his memory and she ultimately blamed the man both for her failed marriage and impaired ability to mother her own children. After the divorce, Plath plunged herself into the depths of her writing, and in a single October she wrote a book of poems titled *Ariel* before performing a successful suicide. Among these dwells the poem "Daddy," where the author fabricates every negative emotion she's ever had toward her father into a single work. First she describes how suppressed she has felt by his character, "barely able to breathe or Achoo" (Plath, line 5) for fear of upsetting his ghost. The man's specter constantly skulks her throughout life, so she uses an expanse of words comparing him to any and every inherent evil she can fathom. However, the efficient woman propels through the cold, cruel torture he caused and rids herself of both him and his "model" (Plath, line 64) that she found along the way. In the poem "Daddy," Sylvia Plath expresses her true drastic nature and the predominant emotions she's carried for her father all her life.

A key concept of the poem centralizes around the notion of Plath viewing herself as the victim of horrendous circumstances. In her mind, the oppressive men in her life practically engulfed her in seas of distress due to the immense agony they caused upon her person. To start off with, literary psychoanalyst Elisabeth Bronfen portrays the woman as having genuinely believed that "her father sought to torture and destroy her" (82) and as such, Plath casts his character in "Daddy" through such a way that it capitalizes on the concept of being a casualty of his pure sadism. The poet characterizes that she "may well be a Jew" (Plath, line 35) living under his "swastika" (Plath, line 46) for she feels fear for him where instead there should exist hope from a higher power. The author even has the gall to outrightly deem it appropriate in using, according to cultural critic Bruce Bawer, "hyperbolic metaphors that equate [her] suffering with that of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps," to get her afflictions across to readers. Whether the man ran a tyranny in his household or not remains unclear; he died when his daughter was of such an early age and she never provides distinct

examples of mistreatment. Edward Butscher, a professional biographer who devoted himself to writing about the distraught poet, writes that Plath definitely was "still hurting from the profound wound of her father's rejection and abandonment of her" (67) towards the end of her own life. With her father gone she bobbed through life both wistfully and respectably so as not to anger Otto's callous "phantom" (Bronfen) over her. Constantly the gothic icon found herself frightened and dangerously riled by the less than absolute perfect life she led. The young woman felt an overwhelming crash of pressure from his memory anytime she strayed from his authoritarian ways of raising her. By allowing herself to succumb to his wrath, she did not "realize to what degree she [was] in fact her own destroyer, her own victim" (Bawer) because Plath allowed her father to become such a dastard evil within herself. Plath doomed her psyche.

This harrowing piece of literature from *Ariel* exists as one of the most notable insights we have into Plath's troubled anima, wrecked with exceptional denigration and self-harm. "Nowhere else in her verse does Plath more bluntly address her most fundamental psychological conflicts" (Bawer) as she does in "Daddy," for she illustrates every detrimental feeling she has ever experienced while blatantly, and knowingly, sharing these issues with her readers in the outside world. Due to the sense of authority she erected in her father's place, writer Anne Stevenson claims the novelist harbored a "dangerous animosity, directed particularly toward herself" (47) that caused substantial damage to her wellbeing. The distorted way of life she lived did not exist below the surface, however, for the narrator made them quite clear in her diction. Plath identifies the exact disagreeable decisions she made to get to her present state of depressed, hostile affairs. During one of her first career opportunities, she experienced minor hardships—but it was enough for her to snap and "at twenty [she] tried to die and get back, back, back to" (Plath, line 59) the father who left her. Hate for the fact that he left her alone, turned her toward living in the "imprisoning house of her madness" (Stevenson 48) that ultimately convinced her to succumb—just to spite his impression and return to him anyway. Then once enrolled in Cambridge she happened upon, or rather deliberately sought out, Ted Hughes; this was a man whom she recognized as being quite similar to her father from the very beginning, and easily was able to say the words "I do, I do," (Plath, line 67) when it quickly came time to marry the man. Even more so, she was able to "subordinat[e] herself to him without difficulty," (Bawer) demonstrating that she found it simple and easy to surrender herself to her father's ghost yet again, despite any repercussions it would have on her life. The affair and divorce were the final push leading up to Plath finally engrossing herself in a "raw, lurid exhibition of private agony and blood-letting" (Bawer) that were her October poems. She sought out psychiatric help but did nothing to change her way of living, despite becoming a single mother. Her literature was "proudly flaunting self-destruction" (Bawer) and that

is exactly what took place a few short months post *Ariel*. After securing her children in their room with food and drink, she journeyed down into the kitchen and ended her life using the gas stove. The confessional poet was at the mercy of her own mind; the environment she frequented was one she molded for herself throughout decades, in the expanse of abandonment and its paper debris.

One shattering characteristic of Plath's writing lies with the overwhelming sense of animosity that she allows to fester within her before exploding onto the page. Her vivid imagery of resentment is abruptly vicious and raw. The anger has a sudden, unstoppable passion, like a wild hurricane that seeks to ravage anything and everything caught in its path, leaving only devastation in its nightmarish wake. The years of coiled up mania unhinge painstakingly, only to boil up from within her and aggressively lash out at any reminder of the first man to ever ruin and devastate her. The grotesque ending of "Daddy" distinguishes the transformation that the memory of his death has undertaken in exchange for the poet undergoing "a lifetime of largely suppressed rage" (Bawer) because of her father. After all of these years, the narrator is just "aching to go on a rampage of destruction" (Butscher 67) in her own name, without regard for he who has had decades to loom over her. He must have his fill by now. She even so far as imagines driving "a stake" clear through to the other side of his "fat black heart" (Plath, line 76); to her, he deserves any living, excruciating pain he could get for the things he has done to her. To reinforce the rush of cruel satisfaction she has from this image, she depicts villagers mockingly dancing on his grave, openly elated by his searing, barbaric demise. In addition to the bitterness she feels for the dead, there still lives the ex-husband. The vehemence of agitation she feels for the stand-in is nothing to scoff at either; she goes into a solid furor over "the vampire" who "drank [her] blood for a year, seven years, if you want to know" (Plath, lines 73–74) just how long the anguish of the relationship lasted. The poem has a "mad, unbridled hostility, plainly express[ing] the poet's sudden helplessness" (Bawer) now that her life appears ruined to her. The work has a "force" about it, "a force that derives precisely from the speaker's mad, unreasoning hate" (Bawer) for the men who swindled her of her sanity, and any peace of mind, she may have once possessed. The vast pool of indomitable fury that the narrator feels in the poem comes from years of neglect that inevitably led to the author's downfall.

Without question, Plath's writing inspiration emerges from the sheer intensity of her feelings and the experiences she withstood to communicate them. The woman suffered through the hardships of not only losing her father at a young age but also witnessing his mortality demonstrate the expiration of humanity before her innocent, feeble eyes. Thus, death always possessed her in its tides; it pulled her in for one suicide attempt and likewise pushed her forward to continue living. She was meant to pursue a better life for herself than the life she chose to

give up. As such, the narratives she not only published but still presides over from the afterlife are both utterly fierce and dramatic, instigating young authors to not only embrace the liberation of the whirling storms of angst held within themselves—but to also express them in artistic ways that color the world. Her anger throughout life held fast and kept her progressing for as long as it could sustain her. The poet may not have survived her own demons, but she granted insight for the living.

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## Edgar Allan Poe and the Detective Character

Savannah Foreman

As Robert Daniel attests, Edgar Allan Poe is often deemed the "father of the detective story." In his tales of ratiocination, Poe creates a detective hero who, operating on logic as well as intuition, "not only restores law and order to the world . . . He also explains the seemingly inexplicable" (Kennedy 184). Poe develops his detective story motif through the use of character and symbolism as well as the quite nearly unprecedented investigative style later adapted by the master sleuths of the detective genre. Additionally, Poe's preoccupation with the bifurcation of emotional subjectivity and ratiocination, or intuition combined with the process of exact thinking or reasoning, formulates the prevalent analytical theme in his detective short stories of 1840–1844 (Kennedy 184). However, Poe's modern, urbane master sleuth began as derivative of the nineteenth-century phenomenon known as the "flaneur."

The beginning of Poe's transition from gothic horror narratives to detective fiction is characterized by a short story entitled "The Man of the Crowd," published in 1840. The unnamed narrator in this story, Poe's first attempt at a detective-like character, may be similarly described as a flaneur. The term "flaneur" refers to men who often spend their time strolling and observing the people and events in a large urban environment, often at night. James V. Werner offers an interpretation of Poe's narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" that suggests that "the relationship between Poe's detective and the flaneur" is a strong one (5). Likewise, Dana Brand maintains that the man in the crowd represents Poe's "critique of the interpretive strategies of the flaneur" (88). Originally theorized by Walter Benjamin and sometimes a difficult definition to pin down, the flaneur is characterized by three main qualities, according to Werner.

The first element that "plays a central role in flanerie" is "the ancient 'pseudo-science' of physiognomy, [or] reading a person's facial features and external characteristics for evidence of inner qualities" (Werner 5). The next critical quality is "the flaneur's apparently detached, aimless, and desultory (but in reality, highly present and focused) observation" (Werner 6). The third quality is the flaneur's intuitive methodology. Werner claims the flaneur purportedly "bases his conclusions solely on observation and inference" (6).

Comparatively, Poe's narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" shares all three qualities of a flaneur. In the beginning of the narrative, the narrator is sitting in a coffeehouse observing passersby through a window, and he attempts to use physiognomic detection to categorize people into different social classes. He claims that "the tribe of clerks was an obvious one and here [he] discerned two remarkable divisions. There were the junior clerks of flash houses—young

gentlemen with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips" ("Man" 21). Despite his supposed ability to interpret the visages of the people in the crowd, the narrator is baffled by a particular face of an older man. He describes it as "a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed [his] whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression" ("Man" 23). (In this scene alone, the narrator's label of "flaneur" rather than "detective" is apparent in his lack of professional experience with physiognomy, his failed attempt to remain aloof, and his implausible conclusions about the crowd. Thus, Poe's narrator is more or less an amateur sleuth. He pursues an unknown man in a crowd in a detective-like way but falters during the pursuit in two major areas: he fails to grasp basic investigative skills, such as an objective analysis of the situation, and he lacks basic surveillance tactics (Kennedy 188).

The first indication that the narrator is not fully capable of unbiased thought is revealed in the beginning of the story when he discloses that he is recuperating from some sort of mental ailment. He is desperately seeking the logic of things but cannot seem to attain it. William L. Howarth claims that in Poe's detective stories written during this time "the theme of identity took on darker tones, reflecting [Poe's] interest in problems of mental aberration" (Howarth 3). Moreover, Kennedy notes that Poe's "preoccupation with the relationship between the mind, or rational consciousness, and the sensational influence of the world beyond the self" is a looming "point of focus" in Poe's detective fiction (Kennedy 185). The narrator thus claims to be able to make assumptions about people based on observation, such as noting that the "upper clerks of staunch firms" are known "by their coats and pantaloons" ("Man" 21). He also believes that because of his "peculiar mental state," he is able to know a person's past based on a mere glance (21). The narrator's presumptions about the crowd and his supposedly heightened state of mind are a clear indicator that he is incapable of remaining objective. Thus, as the night continues, the narrator's curiosity about the man in the crowd becomes obsessive. The deviation from objective analysis is not only influenced by his intensifying desire to follow the man but also by his changing perception of the crowd's "gentler features" to "harsher ones" (Kennedy 188). By the narrator's own admission, "the 'wild effects' of the gas lamps have 'enchained' him to 'an examination of individual faces.' Gradually fancy subverts abstract reason" (Kennedy 188). The narrator's lack of control of his own imagination is further exemplified by his inability to observe the man equitably.

The decision to abandon his seat in the coffee shop and pursue the man is also symbolic of the narrator's migration towards the emotional and away from the analytical (Kennedy 188). His tendency toward emotional analysis is further manifested in his judgment of the now "evil" man in the crowd. He suspects the man to be a creature "of malice, of blood thirstiness, of excessive terror" ("Man" 21). These assumptions about the man are illogically based off of

hallucination-like observations fueled by the eerie setting of the city at night. The idea that the setting or the "milieu," as Daniel describes it, negatively influences the narrator's state of mind is strongly implied in this scene. The "mad energy" that the narrator believes the man to possess is merely a reflection of his own distressed state of mind (Kennedy 190). The narrator is "seeking knowledge of the man's inner nature through a detective-like scrutiny of his outward appearance and behavior"; however, he fails to obtain any factual information about the man because he allows his emotions to overcome him and lacks professional investigative skills (Kennedy 186).

A second trait that characterizes the narrator as an amateur sleuth consists in the method and execution of his surveillance of the man in the crowd. He reassures the reader many times that he is being extremely stealthy while on the pursuit, and he claims to trail the man "closely, yet cautiously, so as not to attract his attention" ("Man" 23). Despite the narrator's reassurance to the reader that he is not following too closely, his description of the man implies that he is actually within arm's reach at one point: "He was short in stature, very thin, and apparently very feeble. His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture" ("Man" 23). The great amount of detail "indicate[s] that the narrator has been virtually face to face with his counterpart" (Kennedy 190). The narrator even claims at one point to walk very "close at his elbow," and he begins using plural pronouns to describe the scene, further suggesting this closeness ("Man" 23). For example he states that "a blaze of light burst upon *our* sight, and *we* stood before one of the huge suburban temples" (25). Moreover, it becomes clear that the man has noticed the narrator following him because of the change in the man's manner. Kennedy recounts the narrator's observation that the man "crosses and recrosses streets 'without apparent aim,' retraces his path around a square several times, and then wheels about 'with sudden movement'" (Kennedy 190). The narrator's poor surveillance tactics further reveal his flaneur-like identity.

The narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" is a precursor to Poe's later creation of the famous detective C. Auguste Dupin, but Poe creates Dupin with three additional elements: the love and characterization of paradox, the ability to remain aloof when reading someone's personal characteristics, and a "genius for solving puzzles" (Daniel 104). Dupin's character is actually presented as a paradox within itself from the very beginning of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," paralleling his own "love of paradox" (Daniel 104). Daniel claims that Poe "would often try out particular paradoxes . . . and then rework them around the figure of Dupin," so that "the characterization of Dupin depends on contradiction from the start" (Daniel 105-106). For example, Dupin is "unable to cope with the ordinary exigencies of life," such as his decaying home. However, despite eccentric behavior

such as only leaving his home at night, "he solves crimes that have baffled the trained intelligence of the Paris police" (Daniel 106).

Furthermore, Dupin (unlike the flaneur) possesses the ability to be simultaneously present and aloof in the moment, "neither in nor out" as Poe describes it. This trait can be seen in his "capacity for 'reading' the hidden thoughts of other characters. To do so, he must be fully present, alive to sensory stimuli" (Werner 11). He must empathize with other characters in order to gain a full understanding of their thought processes. According to Dupin in "The Purloined Letter," one may be able to achieve this state by assessing the expression of his or her opponent's face as in the case of the clever school boy who uses this tactic to win a game of marbles. Similarly, Dupin obtains an even greater understanding of his opponents by maneuvering himself into and out of their thoughts, even though he appears aloof and almost indifferent. His victories over opponents such as the Minister D— reveal that he possesses a physiognomic skill, much like the flaneur; yet unlike the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," he is able to make "a host of observations and inferences" and obtains an objective "comprehension of all the sources whence legitimate advantage may be derived" ("Murders" 81).

Dupin may also be compared to Poe's more reliable narrators because of his prevalent talent for reason and logic. Howarth claims that Dupin "gives detailed explanation of his cases because he knows—as the unreliable narrators do not—that cause and effect are often complex" (Howarth 22). Dupin's reliability, in contrast to an unreliable narrator such as in "The Man of the Crowd," verges on the artistic: "In the act of ratiocination Dupin becomes a creative artist, seeking to visualize what he has never directly experienced. The unreliable narrators also go this route, but they only create monstrous images of themselves" (Howarth 22). In order to reach conclusions, Dupin "challenges every assumption and questions every source" (Howarth 22). He is also able to "control his solvent, or analytical side, by eliminating personal bias" (Howarth 22). In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" he "pays minute attention to details regarding facial features, expressions, and body language" (Werner 10). He "believes that truth is simple, not twisted and obscure; that it rests in the actual, not the imagined" (Howarth 21).

Dupin's lengthy analysis of facts in Poe's ratiocinative narratives allows for a combination of both logical analysis and creativity. For example, his success in finding the purloined letter can also be attributed to his ability to identify "himself with the intellect of the purloiner" (Daniel 109). Relying on intuition, he realizes that "a clever man would resort to the sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all" (Howarth 21–22). Daniel claims that the police and professional investigators "have been misled by the simplicity of the subject—a paradox" (Daniel 105). They only think of how they would hide the letter, while

Dupin uses his imagination. He *knows* the Minister D— in an imaginative way and therefore takes into consideration that he is "a bold intrigant" ("Purloined" 14).

In addition, Daniel also believes that to an extent Poe's detective character "reflects his [own] sense of alienation from society"; Poe himself could also be considered something of a flaneur (Daniel 105). Daniel claims that Dupin's character is almost a mirror image of Poe's, suggesting that "Dupin's adverse criticism of the bumbling policemen, whom he treats much as Poe treated most of the authors whom he reviewed" (Daniel 105). Daniel also suggests that the detective stories closely resemble extensions of Poe's literary criticism (Daniel 103).

In sum, while most critics come to a convergence of opinion that Poe created the modern detective story, readers may benefit by understanding Poe's own personal ideas through his process of developing the detective character. From the beginning prototype of the flaneur to the more objective and ingenious detective, Poe created and transformed the detective character through his well-known detective fiction works.

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## The Reality of War

Tyler Martin

The Civil War ushered in a groundbreaking era of writing, referred to as Realism. Writers of this time period turned away from the traditional, flamboyant writing style of the past, and instead, began focusing on everyday elements of the real world, especially the gruesome traits of war. "A Year's Casualties" written by Ambrose Bierce and "War is Kind" written by Stephen Crane are the epitome of realism literary work, in that both works sought to highlight and bring true comprehension of the reality of war. Both writers were immensely effective and powerful in these two pieces; however, they came from starkly different backgrounds. Through styles distinctly unique to each writer and written from perspectives on opposite ends of the spectrum, Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce sought to change the idea of war as America knew it.

In both poems, one crucial element that determines the overall effect of the piece is the author's style. Style plays a crucial role in grasping the audience's attention and tugging at their emotions. Ambrose Bierce's word choice in "A Year's Casualties" provokes immense emotion and is an important aspect to observe in his dynamic style. In this poem, Bierce held a strong sentiment toward the raw subject of war. As described by literary analyst Craig Carey, it is as if all of his words were "fighting words" (629). For example, on the first line of "A Year's Casualties," Bierce used the phrase "slain as they lay" (Bierce 118) to open the poem. The word slain has a deeply depressing and hopeless resonance to the reader. It brings on the idea that Bierce saw death on the battlefield on the same level as murder, or as if the soldiers never had a chance at life. Another example of negative wordage used by Bierce is on line two, where he used the phrase "Pitiless hand of an unforeseen foe" (Bierce 118). Similarly, Bierce's word selection in this line exudes the idea that soldiers were cut down by savages and never saw death coming. Bierce gave the dead soldiers an air of innocence and allows the reader to have pity for them. Aside from his attention to the dead soldiers, Bierce was also direct in his writing style in this poem. According to Craig Carey in a study he compiled on Bierce, Bierce was a "writer who drills readers to stay focused on material points" (631). It is Bierce's no nonsense attitude that contributes to his effective writing style in "A Year's Casualties." For example, Bierce gave a somewhat detailed number of the soldiers who had died, rather than exaggerating or down playing the number. Also, Bierce gave the reader a specific time frame on which the poem is based, which is about a year.

Very much like Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane also used bold expression as part of his unique style to connect with the reader. However, in "War is Kind," Crane's style of writing is completely opposite from Bierce's, in that Crane

conveyed a message of horror, rather than pity. As mentioned by writer Lorrie Goldensohn in a piece discussing war poetry, Crane completely discarded all mournfulness in his writing style in this poem. For example, on line eleven of "War is Kind," Crane described the bodies of the deceased soldiers as "corpses" (Crane 1503). Crane's use of the word corpse is grotesque and seems extremely inappropriate and heartless, especially since he was describing the tragic death of young soldiers. A more reserved choice of words may be expected in the description of such an emotional topic. In another instance on line two, Crane used the phrase "threw wild hands toward the sky" (Crane 1503) to give the reader a vivid image of a man's final moments before death. This image also seems excessively descriptive of such a terrible event, especially considering that Crane's targeted audience was mothers and wives of fallen soldiers, which is indicated in an analysis of "War is Kind" written by Randall Huff. One would falsely assume that he would convey sorrow. Although one may find Crane's language in "War is Kind" to be explicit or even offensive, his phraseology was acutely strategic. Crane utilized vivid, obscene imagery to bolster the overall effectiveness of his writing (Huff). Crane's style snatches the reader's attention and truly drives the reader's emotion of fear and horror. In other words, it is Crane's style that forces one to pay attention to the message in the poem.

Stephen Crane's and Ambrose Bierce's writing styles in "War is Kind" and "A Year's Casualties" are directly derived from their individual perspectives of war. Both men underwent different journeys that, in return, molded their attitudes toward war. Ambrose Bierce was a soldier who had served in some of the most atrocious battles of the Civil War. Bierce's war experience can be observed through his matter-of-fact, bold tone. On the contrary, Stephen Crane came from a more affluent, educated background and thus embodied a more dramatic, eloquent tone in his writing. According to writer Pamela Toler, Bierce undoubtedly experienced gory atrocities that were ingrained in his mind for the rest of his life. Because Bierce suffered alongside the very soldiers he described in "A Year's Casualties," he developed a connection with them. Therefore, Bierce identified with the dying soldiers' agony. The reader can directly observe Bierce's deep-rooted connection to the soldiers in his poem, when he suddenly shifted from third-person to first-person perspective in the second to last line of the last stanza. Bierce fervently wrote, "pray give us release" (Bierce 118). Bierce incorporated the word "us" in this line to inform the reader that he was once a soldier that he was then writing about, and that he was wretched with emotional pain every time another soldier gave his life. The "personal quality of his witness" (Toler), as Bierce's perspective has been described, has a tremendous sobering effect on the reader. According to writer David Yost in a work he compiled on Bierce and Crane, it is Bierce's defining perspective, shaped on the battlefield, that gives the reader insight on why he refuses to glorify any element of war in this work (Yost 249).

Stephen Crane, on the other hand, gained his perspective on war from an entirely different background than Bierce. Because Crane was raised in a family that placed great emphasis on the power of language, he spent many of his younger years in various religious and military schools where he often learned to "play soldier" (Paoli), according to Dennis Paoli in an analysis he composed on Crane's writing career. Using this upbringing, Crane spent much of his career as a journalist, where he often discussed topics of war. Though he visited a few battlefields toward the end of his life for the sake of his career in journalism and writing, Crane never experienced the true life of a soldier; he only had the view of war from the outside looking in (Paoli). In fact, Crane was actually surprised by the accuracy of his descriptions, which were derived from his imagination (Paoli). The reader can truly witness Crane's lack of soldiering experience in his poem "War is Kind." Crane's viewpoint was in utter absence of all compassion for the fighting soldier and the soldier's family. Rather, Crane wrote critically, a method learned from his career. Crane chastised war, which thus seems as if he is criticized the individual soldier. His job as a journalist, as all journalists attempt to do, was to sway public opinion in some form, even if that meant casting negativity to undeserving parties, such as soldiers who merely were tasked with orders. An actual experienced soldier, for example Ambrose Bierce, might criticize war, but still show charity to the individual fighting man. Also, Crane focused on the gory details of war in his poem, which might be omitted by an experienced soldier to spare the public. Again, highlighting such explicit details was how Crane was effective as a journalist with the public.

Aside from contrasting method and viewpoint, Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce had similar missions in writing their poems "War is Kind" and "A Year's Casualties"; both strove to alter the idea of war held by the American people. In this time period, many Americans felt that war was a necessity and justified this projection on moral grounds or with imperialistic attitudes (Huff). Tragically, many neglected to see the total cost of such warmongering mentalities. Therefore, Bierce and Crane felt the need to properly educate the public through these poems. In fact, Crane's "War is Kind" is said to have been written in a way to "directly challenge the aggressive mood of the nation" (Huff). Similarly, Ambrose Bierce's war literature, like his poem "A Year's Casualties," was written out of his intense irritation derived from the world's values and attitudes on war, according to writer William Conlogue in a study of Bierce's work (266). Ambrose Bierce felt that war's carnage was "fundamentally incompatible" (Yost 249) with the noble view of war at the time, which can be directly observed in his tone in Bierce's poem.

Both authors used irony to exacerbate their war-shaming ideology. Crane, for example, referred to the slaughter of soldiers as virtuous on line twenty and described killing as "excellent" on line twenty-one of "War is Kind" (Crane 1503).



## Works Cited

Obviously, these two lines from Crane's poem are satirical in nature. He created somewhat of an oxymoron by juxtaposing words, such as slaughter and virtue, which would never appear next to one another in normal language. This was Crane's attempt to explain just how ignorant and asinine the war-praising mentality held by the American public actually was. Similarly, Bierce confronted the idea that war was a tool to bring peace by describing it as a "horror of peace" (Bierce 118) on the last line of "A Year's Casualties." Like Crane, Bierce ironically described peace as horror to challenge the irrational viewpoint of war held by the public.

Not only did Bierce and Crane use irony to criticize war itself, but they also cast down the idea of courage and military valor that the American public fed upon (Yost 247, 256). On line nine of "War is Kind," Crane referred to the American flag as a symbol of "unexplained glory" (Crane 1503). Here, Crane questioned the very foundation of American involvement in war. Crane pointed out in this statement just how oblivious a soldier may have been to the true underlying reasons of why he was fighting, when the soldier merely believed that he was fighting for honor and glory for his country. Similarly to Crane's message, Bierce mentioned on lines eight and nine of "A Year's Casualties" that pension agents wept and statesmen wailed loudly as each soldier gave his life (Bierce 118). In this description, Bierce pointed out that war was not characterized by valor or a soldier's courageousness under fire, but is characterized rather by money and political gain. Bierce conveyed to the reader the senselessness of politicians and other members of government by indicating that they grew emotional and sickened over the loss of wealth and credibility, instead of being poignant over the loss of soldier's lives. These were the same soldiers who were fighting the very war that benefited them. Both "War is Kind" and "A Year's Casualties" uncovered the idea that the gloriousness that often shrouds war is fabricated and misleading to the American public.

"War is Kind" by Stephen Crane and "A Year's Casualties" by Ambrose Bierce both carry a tremendously powerful message. Whether this message was proclaimed through the explicit, gory, possibly controversial imagery of Stephen Crane or by the direct, experienced, sympathetic voice of Ambrose Bierce, both poems achieved lasting affects because they were able to reach and appeal to different audiences. Every willing reader of these two poems was exposed to the reality of war in ways that they could comprehend, either vividly or compassionately. While the particular reader may believe that war is necessary in some instances, these two poems can create pause in this belief. "War is Kind" and "A Year's Casualties" force the reader to question if war is really worth the impeccable costs, which is exactly the effect that Crane and Bierce sought to achieve.

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## The Depiction of Women in *The Arabian Nights*

Ashley Thibodeaux

The collection of folktales and short stories in *The Arabian Nights* depicted women in different ways. Shahrazad used these tales to persuade King Shahrayar to spare the lives of the women, including herself, in a society during the Sasanid dynasty. At first, Shahrazad's depiction of women seemed negative and contradicted her goal of sparing the women's lives. However, as Shahrazad's story-telling continued, the women in these stories possessed the power to influence and persuade men. Although men became the common obstacle in these stories, the women in *The Arabian Nights* held the power to influence men with their beauty, persistence, wealth, or trickery as a way to overcome the suppressed-woman stereotype in Ancient Islamic society.

Shahrazad told King Shahrayar "The Story of Nur al-Din Ali ibn-Bakkar and the Slave-Girl Shams al-Nahar" to show that one slave-girl devised a plan behind a king's back to continue her affair with another man. In this story, Shams al-Nahar served as King Harun al-Rashid's slave-girl. Her role involved serving the king with sexual pleasures. Then, Nur al-Din's presence in the king's palace sparked conflict in that he and Shams al-Nahar fell in love. Since Shams al-Nahar served as a slave-girl to the king, her love for Nur al-Din made serving the king complicated. Instead of giving up on Nur al-Din, Shams al-Nahar used her maid to speak to the jeweler, a friend of Nur al-Din, and decide on a meet-up place for her and Nur al-Din. Shams al-Nahar planned for her maid to "bring you [the jeweler] news from me and act as our go-between" in order to meet up with Nur al-Din away from the king's palace (395). Although King Harun al-Rashid served as an obstacle for Shams al-Nahar's chance at true love, Nur al-Din symbolized an empowerment against her incapability of choosing whom she wished to marry. Of course, Shams al-Nahar asked for her maid to serve as a messenger outside of the palace in order to avoid attention in the palace. However, one woman's role in "The Story of the Two Viziers" used her beauty to draw attention from an attractive man, whom she believed to be her future husband.

In "The Story of the Two Viziers," Sit al-Husn's extraordinary beauty bewitched Badr al-Din into sleeping with her. Like Shams al-Nahar, Sit al-Husn held no power over whom she wished to marry, so she used her beauty and gracefulness to attract Badr al-Din, whom she thought to be her future husband. Badr al-Din described Sit al-Husn as a woman "with eyes sharper than a bare sword, lashes that captivate the heart, rosy cheeks, and a swinging gait, she advanced dazzling the eyes with beauty beyond description" (210). Badr al-Din described Sit al-Husn in a way that proved she held the power to persuade any man in the room, and no man stood a chance at drawing himself away from her.

Nur al-Din described Shams al-Nahar in a similar way in "The Story of Nur al-Din Ali ibn-Bakkar and the Slave-Girl Shams al-Nahar." Shams al-Nahar, with "abundant hair, dressed in a delicate, gold-embroidered blue robe that revealed the clothes and precious stones she wore underneath" (363). For Shams al-Nahar and Sit al-Husn, the power they held remained in their respective palaces, and until Nur al-Din and Badr al-Din introduced themselves to these women, they held no power under the king's, or the vizier's in Sit al-Husn's case, rule. However, not every woman Shahrazad described in *The Arabian Nights* held a certain amount of power over men.

Shahrazad's father used one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights* as a way to warn her about the consequences of marrying King Shahrayar. He told Shahrazad "The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife," which depicted the wife in the story as a disobedient woman. In this tale, the merchant secretly possessed the ability to hear animals communicate. Due to her persistence in wanting to know her husband's secret, the wife received several beatings from him. After the merchant asked his wife if she insisted he tell her his secret, the wife responded with, "yes, I insist, even if you have to die" (18). As a result of a conversation the merchant overheard from the rooster and the dog, he took the rooster's unintentional advice and decided to beat his wife in order to change her mind about wanting to know his secret. Although the wife's persistence to know her husband's secret mirrored that of Shams al-Nahar's and Sit al-Husn's persuasive power to influence men, the wife never found out her husband's secret and instead received several beatings from him. As a result of the wife's curiosity, she "emerged penitent, the husband learned good management, and everybody was happy, and the mourning turned into a celebration" (20). While the woman in "The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife" remained a dutiful wife in the household, one woman tried to break away from the stereotypes of a woman's job on the home front.

Shahrazad told King Shahrayar a tale about a woman who lived as an outsider, because she refused to abide by the stereotype of women in the household. The woman in "The Tale of the First Lady" embarked on a journey to another city to separate herself from her younger sisters, whose husbands left them and refused to give them money. The eldest sister refused to marry, and instead made her way to a city where she eventually met the king's son. Because the king's son worshiped Allah and felt lonely for he believed himself to be the one true follower, the eldest sister told him, "come with me to the city of Baghdad, for this girl standing before you is . . . a businesswoman of considerable wealth, part of which is on the very ship that, after straying . . . by the will of God who drove us here that I might meet you" (168). Like Shams al-Nahar and Sit al-Husn, the eldest sister believed she held the power to persuade a man to do as she wished. Unfortunately, her ship capsized and the king's son drowned. Additionally, the

eldest sister came across another obstacle that proved worse than men: a serpent. The compassion the eldest sister felt towards the serpent led her to an oath she never believed herself to be a part of. The serpent forced the eldest sister to "give them [her sisters] every night three hundred blows with the rod, as a punishment for what they did," and if she refused, the serpent will turn her "into a bitch like them" (170). In this tale, the eldest sister's consequence for helping the serpent stemmed from her sister's abusiveness towards her, whereas the women in the other three stories dealt with the consequences of men's power, for they became the obstacle. At first, the eldest sister lived an independent life, since she never married, but her compassion as a woman resulted in a curse that led to a life without independence not brought on by marriage.

Shams al-Nahar, Sit al-Husn, the merchant's wife, and the eldest sister used beauty, persistence, wealth, or trickery to persuade men and overcome stereotypes that women found themselves subjected to in ancient Islamic society. Shahrazad used these stories to persuade King Shahrayar to spare all the women's lives in their society. Although women in ancient Islamic societies never held power in a political, social, and economic setting, in Shahrazad's case, as well as the women in these stories, she emotionally manipulated the king to spare the lives of all the women. As a result, women in *The Arabian Nights* transformed from sexual objects to valued human beings that represented the backbone of Ancient Islamic society.

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Acrostic

Chelsey Galloway

Placing pen to paper,  
Or fingertips to keys.  
Every fiber of my being is still.  
There is nothing being written on the page.  
Ringing in my ears are the words:  
You cannot write poetry.

## At a Loss for Words

Katherine Waterbury

Some stand, silent, while others start to cry.  
I sit, contemplating all I should say.  
The words won't come, regardless what I try.

There is no answer to the question "Why?"  
Hours pass. Tomorrow becomes today.  
Some stand, silent, while others start to cry.

Time stands still, all the while, it seems to fly.  
They say, "Go home." I say, "No, I'll stay."  
The words won't come, regardless what I try.

Hours pass. Anxieties begin to climb.  
Even the strongest of spirits can fray.  
Some stand silent, while others start to cry.

I start to speak—my mouth, my throat—are dry.  
I sit back down, I can wait one more day.  
The words won't come, regardless what I try.

If I could have spoken, and you replied . . .  
It's over now. There is nothing I can say.  
The words never came, regardless what I tried.  
Some stood silent, while I sat and cried.

## Crepuscular Cat

Meagan Phillips

Night begins to fall  
Crepuscular cat curls up under the moon  
Never knowing the darkness has anything to do with  
How the Earth spins as it puts an end to another one of his days  
I wish I could share in his unknowing.

## Love

Meagan Phillips

Our language offers little when it comes to elucidating love  
And even less when I want to speak of your laugh  
And the light it puts in my life

## The Garden

Meagan Phillips

This is the Garden of Understanding  
Here you will come to know  
That the light from the sunshine  
And the rain from the storm  
Each give us things we need  
To grow

## To My Baby Sister on Her Wedding Day

Meagan Phillips

My sweet sister  
My forever friend  
In our journey  
From silly summer girls  
To smart strong women  
The world has shown us good and ugly  
But now—  
A diamond on your hand  
A dream in your heart  
Dressed in love and lace  
Never before has the universe come together so beautifully

## My Studies

Roben Vallar

Nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs.  
Day in day out gets on my nerves.  
Gerunds, participles, infinitives.  
How's knowing their functions relate to the life I live?  
Subordinate, coordinate, correlative conjunctions.  
I think I understand how they function.  
Commas, semicolons, dashes, and hyphens.  
The symbols most misused  
and avoided—no one likes them.  
Clichés, fragments and dangling modifiers  
Avoiding these no-no's are easy,  
says the beautiful liar.  
Phrases, clauses, and prepositions.  
Be specific when you write and avoid repetition.  
Intro, conclusion, and body paragraphs.  
Write them wrong, then everyone laughs.  
Abstracts, proposals, prose and poetry.  
Can you guess my specialty?  
I am language and language is me!



## The Cost of Saving My Own Soul

Roben Vallar

100 pounds ago, I felt myself slipping away  
Insomnia by night, and narcolepsy by day.  
After 4 months of exercise and cutting back  
I joined my local gym.  
Despite my diligent distance down recovery road,  
This is where my troubles began.  
The T.A. at my Zumba class made my life a living hell.  
Twice a week like clockwork  
Toya, her mom, and the weight trainer Paul  
Lid this very very well.  
Toya encouraged her two kids to diss my daughter and me.  
One kicked my kid in the back,  
The other constantly eye-rolled me.  
Our instructor Jenna would witness all this  
and simply stare in Wonder like Stevie.  
Paul always mean-mugged me, Toya and her mom  
knocked my dance moves to La Noche and Fancy.  
All 3 even called me names.  
Obese, fat cow, etc. That Monster High-like behavior?  
I know now how Rudolph felt during the Reindeer games.  
Should I ignore this mess like Jenna did?  
Should I fight back?  
Hell yes, but not verbally.  
I'll keep going, lose the weight, face my haters,  
and in the process, practice common courtesy.  
My hand really twitches to cold-cock these bitches.  
Or maybe even pay someone to do it?  
It's so easy to say I should ignore them and their ways.  
Especially when you've never been through it.

## Untamed

Roben Vallar

She runs very deep.  
Eminent to all as the Queen of No Sleep.  
From afar she appears to be peaceful and whole,  
But approach her unprepared and she'll devour your soul.  
Those in her presence who dare to create a disturbance,  
in the end, regretfully feel her turbulence.  
Coastal citizens afoot or afloat in their boats bear the duty  
to invariably respect her beauty.  
The Neches, a beautiful creature I only admire from afar.  
For whenever I'm within her proximity I can hear her roar.

## A Word for You

Maegan White

A word for you, who broke my heart  
Who left my soul torn apart:  
Karma.

A word for you, who ruined my life  
Who caused such suffering and strife:  
Revenge.

A word for you who made me lose myself  
Who ruined me for anyone else:  
Pain.

A word for you who now lies on the floor  
Who calls for help, and again once more:  
Regret.

Some words for you who crawls away,  
Who said the things you'd thought you'd never say:  
Today is simply not your day.

## I Wrote a Poem

Maegan White

I wrote a poem one day  
And read it aloud without delay.  
With rushing, racing heartbeats,  
I expected the audience to rise from their seats.  
I poured out my heart and soul.  
To make them feel, was my goal.  
But as I read, with teary eyes,  
I noticed that I only I was starting to cry.  
The audience sat, with stagnant stares.  
I continued to read but no one cared.  
With a heavy heart, I read to the room  
Of hardened creatures, full of gloom.  
I read of love and war and hate  
I read of things that humans could relate.  
I read of suffering, innocence, and fear.  
But it was as if this audience could not hear.  
Why was it so hard to make them see  
That they all meant such a great deal to me?  
I want to save them; I want to help.  
But all was silent—except a tiny yelp!  
At last, a noise! A sound!  
I searched for the speaker all around,  
When at last I saw a little boy,  
Clutching his mom and holding a toy.  
“I care! I care!” he cried.  
I smiled. With relief, I sighed.

Someone understood at last,  
But this understanding was not too happy, too fast.  
I preached my poetry still,  
And with each word I felt my heart fill.  
After that brave little boy who spoke first,  
Others, one by one, they too became versed.  
His mother stood up and nodded her head.  
Another man, who before was full of dread.  
Then, a family of three or four,  
Next the third row; twenty people or more.

started to cry, they started to cheer.  
ometimes it takes a tiny voice, to help people hear.

## Sundance

Maegan White

Before the race, the horses stomp;  
The colts jump, buck, and romp  
While waiting for their trainer to appear  
And when they do, the horses cheer.  
They neigh, they whinny  
A tub of food! They'll never be skinny!  
With bellies full and hearts strong  
The trainer readies saddles and sings a song.  
Together, they run and jump and chase.  
They'll be prepared for the big race.

On the big day, one horse is ready  
He is saddled, stalled, and steady.  
The jockey focuses his mind  
Together, they'll leave the other riders behind.  
The gun goes off, the doors open wide,  
The horses begin their powerful stride.  
The jockeys whip and the horses zip  
Around the loop, but one of them trips  
And rolls their hoof. It is his horse, his friend.  
The others leave him at the end.

The jockey rolls across the track  
The horse starts to have a heart attack.  
His rider races to his side,  
The horse neighed and his eyes grew wide.

He was in pain, but it was becoming less  
But his wound needed to be addressed.  
The jockey wailed and cried,  
He was sure his horse was going to die.  
But after that day, his leg was healed  
But the vet sadly revealed,  
There'd be no more racing for him.  
Then the jockey grew dark and then he grew grim.  
There was no more use in keeping his friend,  
So then with a heavy heart, he sentenced him to his end.

The truck for the slaughterhouse came,  
So terribly early in the day,  
That the jockey missed his chance,  
To say goodbye to his dear Sundance.

## College Acceptance

Meagan Phillips

The car groans and creaks as it comes to a stop on the side of the street. I stay inside for a moment, listening to the radio before I cut the engine. I take off my nametag and stare at the way the first few letters of "Natalie" are peeling off. Good, it creeps me out when customers call me by my name, anyway. Pulling the visor down, I use the tiny mirror to straighten my new nose piercing and run my fingers through my faded blue hair. I stare into my own eyes for a few moments before slamming the visor shut.

I check my phone for the time and sigh. Finding nothing else to fiddle with, I throw the door open, climb out of the car, and kick it shut. Clinging to my messenger bag, I jump over a puddle and onto the sidewalk. I smile back at a woman who comes over from the nice apartments across the street to let her dog shit on the low-income lawns before I stop to check the mail. Flipping through the stack, I walk along the sidewalk in front of the tightly-packed houses. Bills, bills, junk, Mom's disability check—score—more bills, and—oh! I stop short of the front door. Staring at the envelope, I run my fingers over the shiny red lettering in the top left corner, flip it over hesitantly, and slip it in my bag, just in case Mom is in the living room. Turning the knob and pulling up slightly at the same time, I slam my shoulder into the door and go inside.

"Mom? Are you ready to go?" I call out through the empty living room, tossing the rest of the mail on the ever-growing pile of past due notices on the table. I step into the kitchenette and peer into the yellowing fridge. After staring for a minute at the same expired carton of milk and condiment collection I contemplated for breakfast, I slam the door shut. Still not hearing a response, I walk down the dark hall to my mother's room and find the door shut. I assume she is changing and continue down to my bedroom.

Lobbing my bag toward the mattress on the floor, I begin kicking my shoes and pants off and tossing my work clothes in the direction of the hamper. Muscling the closet door back on its runner, I slide it open and rummage through my clothes. I pick the same plain black dress I wear for every occasion. Scanning the room for my only pair of black heels, I notice the letter I slipped in my bag spilling out onto my mattress.

I glance at the clock, then back to the letter. I sit down next to it on the mattress, shoving my feet haphazardly into my shoes. I stare at the letter for a moment longer, then tear the envelope open, delicately at first and then with more force when the paper does not rip fast enough. I close my eyes, and attempt to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, or maybe in through the mouth and out through the nose. I can never get it right, whatever the counselor

the free clinic recommended for the anxiety. Opening my eyes, I read the letter. I bounce up from the mattress, and have to steady myself in my heels.

I got in. I can't believe it.

"Yes!" I can't help shouting.

"What?" I hear my mother call from the other room.

"Nothing!" I shout back as I shove the acceptance letter into my bag and sink back down into the mattress. Shit. I am going to have to address this problem eventually. I look back at the clock, then drag myself up, walk down the hall to my mother's door.

"Do you need any help getting ready? . . . What the—? What are you doing in bed!? Are you not coming tonight?" I fire off at Mom. I turn on the lamp next to the bed and my mother winces at the sudden light. I study her face. "You are so totally glazed over. Did you take your medicine already?"

"Well, yeah . . . I wasn't feeling good."

"Did you forget about Sam's going-away dinner tonight!?" I demand.

"No . . ."

"So are you planning on going?" I ask.

"Well . . . I was going to but—"

"So, no, then," I bark. "And what should I tell them when they ask me where you are? That you got into your pills a little too early?"

"I just told you I wasn't feeling good," my mother grumbles as she turns over in the twin size bed to face the wall. "Tell them every muscle I have aches, it hurts just moving around to get dressed. I'm so sorry if it's annoying, it's just part of having a chron—"

I roll my eyes and cut off my mother's spiel.

"I know," I say, sounding a bit more forceful than I intend, "I know you can't help it. I'm sorry I got snappy. I just didn't really wanna go alone," I add more gently.

"I know. I'm sorry, too. I just . . . can't, Nattie."

I sigh and sit down on the edge of the bed. My mother turns her head to look back at me. I half-smiled and try to make her perpetual cowlick lay flat. Giving up, I pull the blanket up over Mom's shoulders and lean in to kiss her temple.

"I know, Eddie's house is rough for me too, Mom."

"I wish you wouldn't call him that. He's still your dad," my mother says.

I can't help rolling my eyes. "I better get going. I'll see if I can sneak you some leftovers," I tell her.

"Mmkay, love you," Mom says. "Oh, wait, will you bring that little present on my dresser to Sam?"

I cross the room and pick up the tiny gift bag. I hold it up and examine the cute design and matching tissue paper, wondering how much effort it had taken

my mother to get down to the store to pick it up. I hold it up and look at Mom, raising my eyebrows.

"Earrings. They were your Gran's favorites. I just wanted her to have a piece of us, you know. This side of the family," Mom answers.

I smile. "I'm sure she'll love them."

I turn Mom's radio to the station she likes to fall asleep to, double back for my bag, and am out the door and on the road again. I decide to take a new, slightly longer route, needing the time alone to think. I have scraped up enough money to pay for SAT prep classes, but tuition is going to cost a little more than that. Even if I am smart enough to get a scholarship, will it cover everything else I need for school? Will I have to attend full time to be eligible? If that is the case, when would I be able to work? Reality setting in, I can feel myself starting to hyperventilate. I try to do my breathing exercises, quickly plug in my phone, and start my "Calm Down" playlist.

Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I look around at everyone else on the road. To distract myself, I try to imagine what kind of weekend plans they are all excited about. I wish I could be more excited about my own, but I know this dinner is going to be awkward at best. I do not really feel like celebrating my sister going away to graduate school in London; it feels more like just another obstacle. It feels a lot like being left behind to take care of Mom all over again.

I slow to stop at a yellow light instead of racing to make it through, and sit lost in my thoughts. It is not as though Samantha does much to help out with Mom, anyway. She got out of the situation when she was twelve and I only nine. Our father decided he couldn't handle our mother's diagnosis; her constant need for care, inability to keep a job, and all those medical bills were really getting in the way of him living his own life, and starting a new business. He had been complaining for a long time, but I think I was still surprised when he actually left. I remember him throwing clothes into his open suitcase that day.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked, staring up at him. I will always remember his answer.

"Why am I staying?"

"For me," I say out loud to myself in my empty car. But that had not been a good enough reason, it seems. Samantha chose to live with him after the divorce; they had always been close. I stayed with Mom, a child unable to comprehend life without my mother. Sam moved a couple of hours away with Eddie, and we eventually all lost touch completely. We have only recently reconnected in the last few years.

The car behind me honks its horn, and, realizing the light has turned green, I pull forward. Even if Samantha does not help out much, the idea of literally being the only person left on the continent who cares about Mom seems huge to me. How the hell am I going to have the time to actually attend the

iversity I was just accepted in to while still working enough hours to pay for rent, bills, other luxuries like food and gas—let alone my mother's mounting medical expenses? More importantly, how the hell am I going to live with myself all I ever do with my life was scrape by working at the mall? Scrunching up my face and shaking my head, I turn the radio way up.

Turning on to my father's street, I have to count the near-identical grey-brick two-stories to make sure I get the right house. After parking, I walk up to the front door, and find it locked. Walking around to the patio and entering through the French doors on the side of the house instead, I run in to my father in the kitchen. His hair is greyer now, but I still have to stare up at him. A red Hawaiian shirt covers the beer belly that now balances out his 6-foot frame.

"Saw you yanking on the front door, thought you knew we never used it," Eddie says.

"Nah, I didn't realize. Only have the one door at my house," I tell him.

"Yeah, well, we keep that one locked. We can't always hear if someone comes in since it's so far away from everything," he explains.

"Definitely not a problem at my house."

We stand and stare at each other from across the huge kitchen for a moment until Samantha walks in and throws her arms around me. "Oooh, is this for me?" Samantha asks as she takes the small gift bag from my hands.

"Yeah, Mom sent it with me. She wasn't feeling good . . . but you're not actually leaving for a couple of days, right? She said she'd take us both out to lunch before you go, just us girls," I cover. Samantha eyes me. I can tell she knows I'm lying.

"Open it, open it," I redirect.

Samantha pulls the dangling turquoise earrings out and gasps. She holds one up to her ear and it sparkles against her long dark hair. She gushes, "They're beautiful! How do they look?"

"Great! They were Gran's. Her favorites," I tell her.

"Yeah, I was wondering how Mom could afford them," Sam mumbles as she slips the earrings back in the bag. I wrinkle my brow at my sister.

"Who's hungry?!" asks Eddie's wife Susan as she walks into the room. She's slimmer than the first couple of times I met her, but still has the same curly, auburn hair. She is wearing an apron that has a picture of a corkscrew on it that reads "My Favorite Kitchen Utensil." I smile at her. I like Susan; she is nice enough. I sometimes wonder how she ended up with a jerk like my dad. She motions for everyone to join her in the dining room, and we follow. The table is set with dinner already served and there is a "Bon Voyage, Sam!" banner hanging above the fireplace.

I eat my fill and only sort of follow along with the conversation Susan and Eddie have with Samantha and Susan's own two teenage daughters. I notice

Samantha staring at me but choose to ignore it—until she will no longer let me.

"You seem a little preoccupied. What's up?" Samantha asks.

"Nothing, just tired. Worked all day. You know how it is," I smile wryly. Samantha definitely does not know how that is.

"No, there's something more," Samantha says. "Spill."

"Alright, fine," I say, annoyed my sister can read me so well. "I wasn't going to bring it up tonight because I didn't want to, like, steal your thunder. But remember how I told you about applying for college? Well, I got an acceptance letter today."

"Oh my god! That's awesome, Nattie!" Samantha exclaims.

"Yeah, great job!" Susan says.

Susan's girls congratulate me, too, but I notice that Eddie remains quiet.

"What do you think about that, Eddie? Proud?" I prod.

"Oh yeah. I just feel like there's a 'but' coming," he eventually answers. I lower my eyes, hating that he is right.

"Well . . . yeah. Mom's still sick. It's not really the kind of thing that goes away. Someone has to take care of her. Even if I can get a scholarship to cover tuition, there's probably not any way I will have the time to do school well *and* work enough to take care of us both," I explain.

"What's Mom got to say about all this?" Samantha asks.

"I haven't told her yet. I didn't want her to feel guilty if I decided not to go."

"Oh come on, Nattie, you've got to go! Let her figure it out for herself, for once," Samantha tells me.

My answer is the same as always: "You know I can't do that. Mom's sick, not some delinquent teen who needs to be taught a lesson with a little tough love."

Eddie sighs loudly.

"What?" I press, my voice acid.

"You have to let her fall on her ass, Natalie. It's the only way she'll ever do anything for herself," he answers.

"Oh, like you did? Except you didn't let her fall on her ass, you let her fall on me."

I feel my face turn red. I cannot believe I said it out loud. I have imagined telling him off a million times; it was always more satisfying in my daydreams. Everyone else at the table shifts uncomfortably, only making eye contact with the food they are pushing around on their plates.

"You could have come with us, you know that, Nattie," Samantha says.

I look hard at my sister. I think about the luxurious house we are all sitting in and the expensive school where Eddie was about to send Samantha.

"Yeah, and I guess this all could have been mine, too," I say, gesturing around the room, "if I had just been willing to desert my own mother like you guys

id.”

“You wouldn’t be sitting here worrying about whether you could go to school if you had. You would never have had to question it,” Eddie points out.

I cannot believe the two of them are acting as if everything had been so simple. Of course I would have been better off not having to take care of my mother my whole life, but I would have had to abandon *my mother*. Couldn’t they see how that was a problem? “You’re right, I could have had everything handed to me, if only I could turn my conscience off,” I spit at them.

When breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth can no longer quell me, I jump up from the table, make an excuse about work in the morning, and head in to the kitchen. I scavenge the cabinets and drawers until I find some Tupperware I have no intention of ever returning and begin filling it up with leftovers from the stove. Eddie and Samantha both follow me in and are just watching. Samantha breaks the silence first.

“We didn’t mean to upset you, Nattie. I just hate that she makes you take care of her like that.”

“I’m fine, and she doesn’t *make* me do anything, Sam. We’re a family. We stick together,” I tell her.

“But you could do so much more,” Samantha says.

“It’s not fair to you,” Eddie adds.

I laugh weakly. “Yeah, I know, if only there was someone else who could help me out, someone who had like, I don’t know, *vowed* to take care of her in sickness or health.”

“Natalie,” Eddie starts, “I know you’re still mad at me for the way things happened, and that’s fine. It’s easier to be mad than to see my side of the story. But the wife I knew was gone. And I felt a lot like you feel now—stuck. I was hurting too, Baby.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap. I wish I hadn’t after seeing the sting of it on his face.

“Okay. Just don’t forget that you have options,” he says.

“Options? What *option* do I have?” I demand.

“We could help you out, Natalie. We have enough money. And a spare bedroom. I know you’re not going to let me buy your love or forgiveness, but please, I just . . . would really hate to see you waste this opportunity,” Eddie answers.

My mouth hangs open. I have never once considered that Eddie might help me. Samantha walks toward him and gives him a hug. I stare at the two of them for a moment.

“I . . . don’t know what to say,” I eventually get out.

“Just think about it. I’m serious. Don’t let pride or loyalty to your mom get in the way of your dreams,” he says, with one arm still around Samantha.

I narrow my eyes, trying to figure out his intentions. Is this a joke, or some last-ditch effort to win me over from Mom? Or is he serious; does he really care that much about me? He holds his hands up and backs out of the room.

“You know I can’t take his money,” I tell my sister when we were alone.

“Yes, you can. You should. Maybe think about you, just this once.”

I finish packing up the leftovers with Samantha standing by quietly. Taking money from Eddie would feel dirty—like cheating. Any other night, I would have said he was just doing this to ease his guilt, but he seemed genuinely hurt at my rejection. Does he actually still care about what happens to me? When I am done loading up the food, I pull my sister into a long hug.

“I’ll think about it. Love you,” I whisper to Samantha before heading out toward the car.

When I got home, I couldn’t remember much about the drive, except kind-of considering a Tarot card shop I drove past. How the hell else am I going to make this decision? Can I take my dad’s money? Probably, he owes me that much. But can I really move in with him, too? I love the idea of being taken care of, for once. I could just focus on school and wouldn’t have to worry about working if I lived with him, but it means leaving Mom behind.

Walking up to the house, I can see through the window that the TV is on in the living room. I pause in front of the door and pull the acceptance letter out from my bag. I could walk in, show it to my mother, and have a hard, important conversation about both of our futures. I turn the letter over in my hands and sigh. Slipping it back into my bag, I pull out the food instead; then turn and pull the knob up slightly and slam my shoulder in the door again.

Setting the leftovers on the coffee table in front of Mom, I plop down next to her. “Oh, thanks,” she says, turning the volume down and digging in to the Tupperware. I stare at her disheveled short brown hair and the long, green flannel nightgown she is always in. I usually find her appearance annoying—a constant reminder that she laid in bed all day while I worked to support us both. But I would miss her crazy fly-aways, and the familiar constant of her always being on the couch if I need someone to talk to.

Reaching for more food, Mom knocks her glass of water over and spills it all over her lap. She jumps reflexively, and immediately I can see the pain in her eyes from having jerked so quickly. I jump up to get her a towel, and grab her heating pad from her room for the ache in her back that is sure to come now. I help clean her up and get her situated, then sit back down next to her on the couch.

What would she do without me here? This spill was no big deal, but there have been other, bigger accidents—like the time last year when she fell out of bed and hit her head on the nightstand. There would be no one to take care of her; I doubt Eddie’s generosity would extend to a live-in nurse to take my place. That



probably does not fall under letting her “fall on her ass.” He wants me to just leave her behind, take his money, and skip off into the same sunset he and Samantha had more than a decade ago. I can’t just let Mom be abandoned again—not for any price. I feel stupid for ever thinking Eddie’s money was going to solve any of my problems.

“How was dinner?” Mom asks, flipping through the channels.

“Fine, uneventful,” I lie, as I recline on the couch and prop my feet up in her lap.

## Gramma’s Cookies

Katherine Waterbury

The room at the center of my childhood memories, which hosted every good moment of my youth, sat inside a small house on a corner lot, in a tiny Texas town. It had wall to wall white carpet, immaculately clean, but not pretentious, and a small couch sat on the far wall, underneath a family photo taken years before disease, death, or scandal ever touched our family. The opposite wall was decorated by a small piano, out of tune and only ever played by toddlers who loved to bang their chubby fingers on broken, out of tune keys. The room always smelled like vanilla and sugar, like Christmas cookies regardless of the time of year. Every wall was covered with pictures of children in tutus, prom dresses, graduation décor, wedding gowns and tuxedos—entire lifetimes played out on photo color paper for the world to see how beautiful life always was.

“You need to come on home, honey. It’s time to say goodbye to Gramma.” My father’s voice still echoed in my ears from the morning before.

Everything about the place now was different—smaller, darker, less magical. Thick layers of dust covered the pictures, which now only made me cringe, made me want to rip them down just to not have to look into the eyes of the ghosts staring back me. The worst, of course, being the family photo above the couch.

My grandmother was the center of the photo. She sat in a rocking chair, wearing her favorite Sunday dress; she must have worn it to church at least twice a month. It was a brilliant lavender, soft, but not worn out. She would wear it with stockings, not pantyhose—what a crude word she thought that was—and a pair of black heels. She always seems to be wearing that dress when I think of her. She was smiling the only genuine smile in the photo. I still don’t know where her happiness came from.

Standing next to her was my mother, looking beautiful and perfect, as always. Her brown hair showed no signs of gray. Her skin was the perfect shade of tan, with no blemishes or wrinkles. She was only twenty-seven when the picture was taken and she was stunning. Her waistline was tiny, not like now. My mother held on to her figure until she was in her early thirties, when her “problems” started. Holding Momma’s hand, with his arm around her shoulder, was Daddy. He was not handsome in this picture. One of their fights had happened that morning. I remember the loud voices and felt the tension that filled the house. It was something about church. It was always something about church. Daddy always said that Momma’s faith in the Lord was greater than her common sense. I didn’t understand that back then. Part of me wishes that I didn’t understand it now.

And on a little chair sat the ten-year-old version of me. I hated that dress Momma put me in so much. I had thrown a royal fit that morning. I had refused to let her brush my hair and had sobbed for over an hour when she told me I couldn't wear my "My Little Pony" t-shirt. I was a brat, no doubt, but Momma always took it to extremes. We had to be perfect for that picture. Had to make the world think that everything was perfect inside our happy little family. I sat in the living room of my grandmother's house and stared, blankly and silently, wishing was anywhere but here.

Not like when I was little. I remember one Christmas, short and pudgy, pigtails, crooked and bouncing as I ran back and forth from my grandma's recliner to the Christmas tree. She would hand me each delicate bobble, each one a different color, shape, size. As I made my way back to the tree to find the perfect lace for each treasure, she would tell me the story of its origin:

"We got that one when we drove down to Florida in '59 to visit your great grandmother at the hospital." She left out the part where her mother died during that visit and they spent Christmas at the funeral home and cemetery.

"This one was from the first time I took your mother and uncles to Disney World. What a grand trip!" No need to talk about the fact that my grandfather had beaten the holy hell out of her during that family get away.

When all of the ornaments had found their home, and after she praised me for my excellent decorating skills, we moved into the kitchen.

The table was covered with sheets of thick wax paper. Small bowls held caches of sprinkles in the most beautiful shades of silver, gold, red, and green. In a wicker basket at the center were every imaginable Christmas cookie cutter ever made. Want to eat the baby Jesus? My grandma had the cutter for it. She would remove a ball of cookie dough from the fridge, and, every year, walk me through the process.

"First, Margret Anne, you have to sprinkle the flour on the paper so our dough doesn't stick." She would stifle a giggle as I dumped half a bag onto the table.

"That's right, Sugar, just like that. Now, we have to roll out the dough, not too thin, but not so thick it won't cook right either." She would smile as I pounded the ball with the wooden rolling pin she kept above the stove.

"Perfect! Now, most important, we have to make this dough turn into cookies fit for Christmas morning! Be very careful when you pick your first shape, the first one always has to go to Santa Claus."

We would spend hours in that kitchen, me making a mess and her laughing and cleaning up and putting pan after pan of my creations into the oven, a smile each time she pulled them out.

That was my happy childhood. As many times as I have tried, I cannot recall a joyful memory that starred any other member of my family.

I knew it was my mother in that tiny kitchen now, bustling back and forth from the stove to the sink, wiping her hands on her lace trimmed apron, ignoring reality. The women of my family lived by the country girl motto: when all else fails, add sugar, flour, and butter. That's probably why we were all mildly obese at some point in our lives. I knew from a young age there was nothing in this world that couldn't be fixed with apple cobbler.

I stood up and walked into the kitchen, refusing to look at that picture any longer. I passed through the few people sitting in the living room without even considering that perhaps I should speak to the family members who were congregating.

"Hi, Momma"

"Maggie Anne, girl put on your apron and come help me with this, sweetheart." She was up to her elbows kneading biscuit dough, her cheeks red and flushed from the heat and her speed. Flour covered her voluptuous chest. Why she only wore skirt aprons, I had never figured out. All of my childhood her boobs always looked like they were next up to be deep fried.

The burners were filled with pots of various sizes, each one emitting its own delicious southern aroma. I could feel my waistline re-expanding from calories floating in the air.

"Momma, what on Earth—who in God's name is gonna eat all this?" My mother's head snapped in my direction.

"Margret Anne Dupree, the Lord don't take kindly to his servants using His name in vain, little girl."

"Momma, I think we both know the Lord don't look too kindly on much that I do."

I regretted it as soon as the words hit the air. I was thirty-six years old and that hurt, puppy dog look in my momma's eyes could make me feel like that twelve-year old at church camp who had just gotten busted making out with a girl in the counselor's cabin.

"Sorry, Momma. I didn't mean it." For the first time in a long time, I couldn't raise my face to look into my mother's eyes. Every second I was here, I could feel thousands of dollars' worth of therapy circling the drain.

"Maggie, you've made your choices, and I know that you think you know what you are doing. But in your grandmother's home, you will not bring it up. I pray for you every night, girl. The church ain't turned its back on you neither. Pastor Kline tells me every Sunday at the support group how God's gonna help you see your errors and bring you back home before Judgment Day. Jesus ain't left you girl. I promise you that." Her voice turned my skin into a sea of fleshy-goosebumps.

I could feel my blood running hot, my temples pounding, and the tears welling up in my eyes. Maybe I should tell her that we go to church every Sunday,

hat I read my Bible every night. Maybe that would help.

"Momma, I know how you feel about my life, but don't you think maybe you could just try to have one conversation with me where you don't condemn me to Hell?" I regretted the words before I finished speaking them.

"Maggie," her voice softened, "I will never stop telling you that you are making a mistake, that you are choosing to be an abomination rather than a child of God. I love you, little girl, but you are a sinner, and it wouldn't do good for me to pretend that weren't so."

She began wiping the dough from her hands, shaking her head the whole time. She walked over to me and gently cupped my face in her hands. There were tears streaming down her fleshy cheeks and her voice tremble as she spoke.

"What did I do wrong, sweetheart? When did you get so confused? I pray every night that God will show me the way to bring you home. Just tell me, darling. Tell me how to help you."

She looked so much older now, her hair showing more grey than the beautiful brown it had always been. And the wrinkles that surrounded her eyes now seemed deeper and more defined, like they had been carved in by a sculptor. Even the feeling of her hands on my face were different. They were no longer soft. They were cold and chapped. I gently took them in mine. I could feel the tears beginning to well up. I swallowed the giant lump in my throat.

"Momma, sit down, please."

She moved a few feet to the splintered, wooden stool that sat beneath the phone my grandma still had mounted to her kitchen wall. I couldn't look her in the eye, instead I focused on the "While You Were Out" memo pad hanging from a string on a nail next to the phone. I put my hand in my pocket, placed the ring on my finger, and stretched out my hand to her.

"I don't . . .," she began.

"There is more." I took a deep breath. "Momma, I am eight weeks pregnant."

She jumped off the stool, and, to my astonishment, hit her knees, moving quicker than I knew she was capable of.

"Dear Father in Heaven, we thank You. Jesus, our Savior, we thank You. Oh my Lord. You brought my baby home." My mother was weeping uncontrollably. Unknown to her, so was I.

I whispered through my sobs, "Momma, please."

She heard nothing.

"Momma!" I shouted, not really meaning to.

She looked at me, startled. She grabbed the counter, and began to pull herself back into a standing position.

"Oh my girl, why are you crying? The Lord has brought you home. A husband and a baby on the way. Now, you should have told me sooner."

"Momma, wait. You don't understand . . ."

"Well, I'm surprised but I understand."

"No, Momma, please listen." I couldn't even look at her.

"Were y'all married in the Church?"

"Yes, Momma, but please . . ."

"Well, that's a blessing. That means it's a blessed marriage. And of course that little angel you're carrying will have to be baptized. Is he Baptist? Lord, I hope so. Just makes it easier in raising a baby if everybody is on the same page."

"Her name is Grace, Momma." I couldn't believe I actually said it. I had sworn to myself, and to Grace, that this was not going to be the trip to announce it.

"I—I don't understand. What does that mean?"

I hung my head and tried to think of the best way to approach this. I knew it had been a mistake telling her like this. I couldn't have chosen a worse time, and I have no clue why I thought she would be able to handle this kind of news.

"Grace, Momma, her name is *Grace*." I looked up, brushing a strand of red hair away from my eyes. We looked at each other, and I could see the hurt.

"But you said you were married in the Church. No church would condone such a thing"

"No, Momma. That just isn't true. Lots of churches perform same sex marriages."

From behind my mother's silhouette, I saw him coming. My heart sunk even more. I didn't want him to find out like this.

"Momma, please, calm down. We can talk about it later. Please," I was begging like a frightened child, but he had already entered the kitchen as she began to speak again. His 6'2" frame was hovering over my tiny mother. She turned into his chest and began to openly weep.

He held her gently, looking at me like a father who wished he could take away all the pain.

"What in the world are you two carrying on about? What is she going on about, Maggie?"

"Nothing, Daddy. It's nothing. Now isn't the time to talk about it." I started to stand, wiping the tears from my eyes, trying to find the quickest way to escape the room.

"Well, I just don't think that's true. I'm standing here, holding your crying mother, and you're sitting there like you can't even move. And you say it's nothing?"

"Tell him. Tell your father what you have gone and done," she moaned from the corner of his chest.

"No, I am going to go back to the hotel. I'll come back this evening to check on Gramma. Momma, please. Just calm down. We can talk later."

I started to walk past my father, but I should have known better. In a move that he had perfected years ago, he grabbed me by the arm and turned me to look straight into his eyes. This was not the first mother-daughter fight my father had refereed.

"You will not walk away. My mother-in-law is on her deathbed, we got a house full of family, and you've got your mother in here sobbing. You tell me what's happened so we can focus on what's important here."

My hands still firmly locked onto the counter for balance, I took a deep breath.

"Well Daddy, I have gone and gotten married. That's why she is crying, that's why she is so upset."

I sat back down on the stool and waited for his response.

"Married?"

The way he mumbled it I wasn't sure if he was speaking to me or to himself.

"Yes, Daddy. I am married. We had been dating for the last two years, and six months ago, we went to the church and were married." I leaned into the wall, and held out my hand to show the white gold band with its 16 carat diamond which adorned my ring finger.

"You're married? But I didn't know y'all could do that."

My mother detached herself from my father.

"She is not married. She is not welcome in this house, either."

"I am married, Momma, whether you accept it or not. I am married in the eyes of the state, in the eyes of the Church, and in the eyes of the Lord."

I never saw it coming. The sting was familiar, as was the metallic taste of the blood oozing into my mouth, but I never saw the slap coming.

I burst into laughter. I must have been shocked.

"Anna!" My father gasped in a way that let me know he was just as surprised as I was. I was sobbing.

"Get her out of this house, Jacob," she spoke every word staring straight into my eyes.

"Anna, I want to talk to my daughter." The calmness in his voice startled me.

"Who are you married to, girl? Who?" He was trying to understand the situation.

I sighed, feeling exhausted and nauseous. I looked past my mother's gaze, and stared directly into my father's face. And answered him as matter-of-factly as I could.

"I am married to a lawyer from Nevada named Grace. She is thirty-two years old. She is a partner at a prestigious law firm, the youngest lawyer to ever make partner there. We met at church about two years ago, went out for coffee,

dated for six months, and then moved in together. Eight months ago we bought a house. A three bedroom split-level right outside of Henderson, in one of the nicest cities in the state. Six months ago we decided we wanted a family. After a few tries, six weeks ago, I found out I was pregnant."

"But I don't understand. How do you marry a girl? And where did the baby come from?" His naïveté was almost enduring in its ignorance. I started to answer, but she shut me down.

"For the love of God, Jacob. You can't. She can't. It isn't real. Just more of her acting out. I won't hear another word of this. Get her out. Now!"

"Anna, couldn't we just listen to her this time? She's gonna have a baby. Won't that be our blood, our grandbaby?"

"No. It most certainly will not. It will be a poor bastard child. And I'll be no part of it."

I was done. I stood up, shook my head and walked out of the room without a word from either of them. As I entered into my grandmother's dusty living room, I knew in an instant that there was not a soul in the room who hadn't heard the entire family drama play out. I avoided the staring eyes of sixth cousins, nineteen times removed, people whose names I didn't even know, grabbed my purse from the rack next to the front door, and walked out, letting the screen door slam behind me just to spite my mother.

The sky was darkening outside. My blouse hung to my skin, my cold chills combining with the heat made me shudder. Part of me hoped that my father would come running out, trying to stop me. But he didn't. And I knew. I think I had always known. My baby wouldn't grow up with those same Christmas cookies that formed my childhood.

I walked to my car, left my grandmother's house, drove to the airport and flew out of Port Arthur for the last time.

My grandmother died that night.

## The Cottage in the Woods

Maegan White

It was a cloudy day when I wandered into the woods. The sky was painted in shades of deep blue and grey and the wind steadily whipped the leaves of the trees from side to side. The scent of rain was in the air. The damp earth was left with only the slightest impressions from my feet as I skipped along the path. My skirts danced about my shoulders as I sang a song we'd learned in school that week—some little jingle about fairy tale creatures. It was a short stroll home; within one or two songs, I was back. Not on this day, though. I'd completed five of our fairy tale songs and had yet to reach home. It was the same path, but it felt different. I thought perhaps the weather was just making me nervous. I continued to sing as the sky grew darker. The wind grew stronger and I pulled my shawl tighter. I knew mother would be worried if I wasn't home soon. I quickened my pace. When I reached a familiar fork in the path, I was surprised to see a large tree had fallen, blocking my usual route. With my sweet worried mother still on my mind, I quickly sped around the tree. Little vines and brambles clung to my stockings. One particular vine snagged the fabric enough to rip a small hole. I reached down to untangle myself and noticed that I was surrounded by a ring of perfect little white mushrooms. Despite my hurry, I paused to appreciate their strange beauty. Something about them fascinated me. My observations were cut short by a loud strike of lightning alarmingly close by. In an instant, the mushrooms were forgotten and I was rushing through the forest, trying to zigzag to avoid potential lightning strikes. My maneuvers had unfortunately left me lost. My heart pounded as I searched desperately to recover the path. The pounding rain obscured my vision. I squinted my eyes and raced about in a panic. The sky grew darker and the thunder crashed so terribly that I could feel it in my chest. I blindly stumbled through the woods until I at last came to a small clearing. In the center of the clearing was a small cottage. Without thought, I bolted to the entrance, and without knocking, I burst through the door.

The fireplace was lit. Something was cooking over it. It smelled like stew. My drenched clothing dripped puddles of water upon the hearth. Immediately I felt uncomfortable and realized the rashness of my decision. I turned quickly, but before I even stepped out the door, a voice sounded behind me.

"Dearie, don't tell me you're about to go back out in that mess," chimed an old woman. I whipped my head around and was greeted with a friendly smile. The woman's face was withered, but beautiful. Her tan skin still held brightness and her cheeks and her long grey hair flowed past her waist. She was wrapped in layers of black lace shawls and a forest green cloak. She carried an engraved walking stick and had big welcoming brown eyes. Flustered and a little

embarrassed for breaking and entering, I shuddered.

"I'm—I'm sorry. The storm was so bad. I got lost. I'm really sorry," I managed to stammer. The woman laughed warmly. She motioned for me to sit in one of the wooden chairs in the kitchen. I glanced back at the door. I knew I shouldn't trust strangers, no matter how harmless they appeared. I certainly couldn't go back outside either. I wished I could send word to my mother in the village, but there was no way to reach her. I reluctantly sat in the chair that she was gesturing to. She slowly moved about the room. She fetched a bowl and filled it with some of the stew that I smelled earlier.

"Here, child," said the woman, handing the bowl to me. Her eyes watched me intently. I didn't want any of the stew, but her eyes never left me. I slowly lifted the spoon and she nodded her head happily. I slurped the tiniest amount of stew and the woman grinned proudly.

"Good, isn't it? It's a recipe of my own design. I'm Agatha, by the way," chimed the woman. A slender black cat leapt onto the table. The woman seemed charmed by this and chuckled, "And this is Eve." For some reason, the fact that she had a cat made me feel more comfortable. I slurped a little more stew. The storm howled outside. Agatha and Eve seemed unfazed by the weather.

"I'm Ryn," I said quietly. Agatha smiled and walked to the window. The wind was still whistling. Agatha turned to me.

"Well, nice to meet you, Ryn. I am sorry to hear that you're lost. Once this storm clears, I'll give you directions back to the village. In the meantime, how about a story? I've always found stories are wonderful ways to pass the time," she said. I relaxed my tense shoulders a bit. It didn't seem as if this woman planned on trying to keep me here. Eve bounced over to me and jumped into my lap, causing me to nearly spill my stew. I speedily ate the rest of it so that I could put the bowl to the side. Eve purred and anxiously awaited to be petted.

"Sure," I said. "A story sounds nice. It doesn't look like I'll be able to start for home any time soon anyhow."

"My thoughts exactly!" exclaimed Agatha. "Hm. I think I'll tell a story that was told to me before by my grandmother. She was a wonderful story-teller." I nodded for her to continue. "She lived in these very woods."

I gazed out the window, listening to her story as Eve purred next to me. The storm continued. Leaves blew past, riding on the harsh gusts of wind.

"Long ago, in the days when my grandmother was a little girl, these lands were a dangerous place," she began. She'd caught my attention and I turned from the window to face her. She raised an eyebrow and smirked with satisfaction. "My grandmother and her best friend loved to pick flowers. You see, they loved it so much that they constantly challenged each other to find new types of flowers. This meant that each day, they'd travel farther and farther from home, even if it wasn't safe to do so," Agatha sighed and shook her head. "Terrible creatures lived in the

rest that surrounded their village. 'Atrocious disfigured vagabonds,' I believe the village people called them. They were Ogres or Trolls. Something of that nature. Terribly dangerous to encounter. Everyone told the children never to enter the forest alone, because those who did, never came back." I raised my eyebrow suspiciously.

"Of course, this didn't stop the brave children. It tempted them, even. My grandmother and her best friend were among the brave. They'd learned that rare flowers grew in the dark places of the forest. So that is where they snuck off to after school one day. Grandmother said they followed a path so deep into the forest that it took them to a place where the trees completely blocked out the light from the sun. It was dark and cold. Brightly colored mushrooms grew all around in the darkness, but no flowers that they saw. So they went even deeper into the forest. Eventually they came to a cliff edge. Along this edge were the most beautiful blue flowers they'd ever seen! The two girls raced to the edge, each determined to collect the flowers first. Well, Grandmother wasn't exactly the most coordinated girl, shall I say. She was a little overzealous, ran too fast, and slipped off the side. She barely grabbed a rock in time to save herself from the terrible fall. Her friend rushed to her aid and tried to hold onto her arm. The two struggled. Her best friend tried to pull her up, but they were sweating. My grandmother began to slip. Just as she slid from the grasp of her best friend, something grabbed her and slung her back up onto flat land. Both girls yelled from surprise to see that the rescuer was a troll! Except something was funny about this 'troll.' He looked exactly like a normal man, except he was very hairy. He had long brown hair all over his body and he wore nothing but a loin cloth. They were scared at first, but the hairy man started to speak!"

"The troll spoke English?" I asked quizzically, now becoming a little confused. I glanced out the window. The storm still raged. Mother was likely in a state of worry.

Agatha nodded. "Yes!" she said, "but that's the thing. He wasn't a troll at all! He was a Wildman. He asked the girls if they were alright and warned them to stay away from the cliff's edge. After realizing that he meant no harm and certainly wasn't a troll, the girls were led back to their path so they could find their way home. And on their way, you'd never guess what they found!"

"What?" The word slipped out of my mouth.

"Remember how I said that the children who went into the woods never came back?" Agatha asked. I nodded. "Well it turns out that the children had all just run away and they were living alongside a colony of Wildmen! My grandmother even recognized an older boy from their village starting a fire in the middle of the camp. They seemed happy, Grandmother told me. They had dinner with the Wildmen, who were very friendly as it turns out. They had a huge garden, full of healthy fruits and vegetables. They even had chickens, who laid delicious

eggs. The Wildmen, the 'trolls,' weren't so wild after all."

I smiled. "So everyone in the village . . . they were wrong about everything. What did they do when your grandmother and her friend told them about the children and the Wildmen?" I asked.

She smiled. "They didn't tell them," she said. My mouth gaped with surprise. "Sometimes, it's best to leave people to their beliefs," she explained. "By not telling anyone, the girls saved the Wildmen and the boys. The villagers would've thought that the Wildmen were trolls and that they'd kidnapped the boys. They would've burned the camp and hunted the gentle Wildmen."

"They could've explained . . ." I suggested.

"They wouldn't have believed them. Two little girls, with a grand story to contradict everything the villagers thought. Sometimes, secrets must be kept to protect people," said Agatha with a frown. Then, her eyes rose to the window. The rain had ceased.

"Well, you best be getting home, dear. The storm has cleared. Do you need a map to find your way?" I nodded.

"I think I can find my way, now that it isn't raining, but a map doesn't hurt," I answered. Agatha smiled. Eve urged me to pet her one last time. Agatha disappeared behind a curtain and emerged with a detailed map of the woods. She handed it to me and smiled. "Thank you so much. I enjoyed your story," I told her.

As I stepped back into the forest, the smell of rainy earth filled the air. I turned one last time to look upon the strange, kind old woman. With one hand, she clutched her shawl and with the other, she waved slowly, almost sadly.

"Come back any time. I have loads of stories. And remember, dearie, things aren't always what they seem!" she added. I frowned, confused. With a shrug, I went about my way. The woods were muddy, but I managed to find my way home fairly quickly. The sun had at last made an appearance in the sky. I walked into my home with shoes covered in mud and torn stockings. Mother was shaken and rushed to hug me.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I got lost in the storm. My path was blocked and the woods got so dark . . ." I began, but she cut me off.

"How did you find shelter? The storm was treacherous!" she wailed, stroking my hair.

"I came across a cottage in the woods," I explained. She pulled away from her embrace a moment to look me in the eye.

"I'm so glad you're safe. But next time be more careful. Very dangerous hermits live in the cottages in the woods. You're lucky you found an abandoned one. Those savages are very hostile," said Mother.

I was about to tell her about the old woman, when I remembered the story about the Wildmen. People didn't understand them, but they hated them for no reason. I stopped and nodded simply to her. After many more hugs and assurance

at I was alright, I was at last able to get some rest.

In the following weeks, I continued my daily walks home from school, and every few days I'd stop for a quick story from Agatha. I found myself becoming very fond of her stories and her company. I even brought treats for Eve some of the days. One day Agatha told me a story about a little girl who stole a lobster from the market.

"The fishermen had just set up their catch along the corner of the market. The sun had begun to peak its golden head above the horizon. The little girl had been told by her mother to pick up a small lobster. It was to last the family most of the week. Well, the girl happily skipped to market, all the way up to the stall. When she saw that the sailors were selling live lobsters she became very sad. She watched the lobsters moving around, wiggling and shuffling in the large pail. And she felt terrible that they were going to be eaten. So, what did she do?" Agatha asked, raising a thin eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. "I guess she took one of them?" Agatha nodded and chuckled artily, slightly startling Eve.

"Yes, but how?" she asked. I shrugged again. "She was a smart little girl. She pointed to a large dead fish that she wanted and made a very specific request: how she wanted it cut. Of course she had no intention of buying it, but it was enough to distract the fisherman. He turned to go get a knife and the little girl quickly grabbed the lobster, just so that it couldn't pinch her. She sprinted back through the forest. Now this little girl didn't know that lobsters lived only in saltwater, so she found a small pond and let it go free. As it turned out, this lobster was a baby lobster, who had a lot of eggs to lay. That lobster laid her eggs in that pond. While she was never seen by the girl again, her babies were. In the fresh water, they did not grow to full size. They stayed very small. Come, I'll show you," Agatha said with a gesture.

I followed her outside. She slowly walked along a narrow path. A few hundred yards away from the cottage was a pristine little pond. The sides were lined with what looked like tiny huts of mud. Agatha pointed to the water's edge. Stepping a little closer, I examined the water. Just below the surface was what looked like tiny baby lobsters. I looked at her with wonderment.

"Over the years, they adapted to the freshwater and even come out to look like these little huts. People don't call them lobsters though. They call these babyfish. I'm quite fond of their little houses. Artistic, don't you think?" Agatha asked.

"Yes, very. I--wait a minute. Is this the same pond?" I asked. Agatha nodded proudly. "And you're the little girl, aren't you?" She smirked.

"You're a bright young lady," chimed Agatha. "You see, the mother lobster died, she wasn't meant to live in a pond like this, but her children knew no fear. They lived their whole life in that pond. Their bodies adapted and they

learned to thrive. It's sort of like people. They don't always know they're overcoming obstacles unless they're aware of the obstacles' existence. Often, they can adapt to just about any situation without even realizing it."

That evening I walked home, pondering the story Agatha had told me. Every story she told seemed to have a lesson to be learned. I thought how wonderful it would be to write all of her stories down to be told in the future and vowed to do so when I got back home. As I neared the village, however, there was a large gust of wind and crack of lightning. Alarmed, I raced along the path. Rain began to fall and the sky grew ominous. Despite the fast pace that I was running through the forest, home seemed farther and farther away. Without warning, the ground gave way beneath my feet. The wind gained speed again. I raised up and noticed that I'd tripped over a large toadstool, one within a large circle of them. I got a strange sense that someone was watching me and immediately bolted toward home, covered in mud and moss.

When I at last arrived home, the storm had cleared, as if by magic. I entered the cottage, washed up for dinner, and proceeded to gather a quill and parchment to write down those stories. I wrote into the early hours of morning, falling asleep only after my candle had burned out.

I was awoken by a loud crash at the door. The wind was blowing and the rain poured down. The storm had picked back up. I raced to the sound of the crash. To my surprise, it was a little girl with pig tails. She was soaking wet and looked miserable.

"I'm—I'm sorry. The storm was so bad. I got lost. I'm really sorry," she said apologetically. I motioned for the poor creature to take a seat. I fetched some warm stew for her, while Eve purred beside my feet. The girl took a small sip of the stew.

"Good, isn't it? It's a recipe of my own design. I'm Agatha, by the way," I said. Right then, I had an idea to tell stories while we waited for the storm to clear. I had a whole a book's worth of them.

## Feminist Analysis Capstone: Motherhood and Feminism

Chelsey Galloway

"[The mother] is no longer an object subjugated by a subject; nor is she any longer a subject anguished by her freedom, she is this ambivalent reality: life."

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949

The multifaceted matter of motherhood has been an issue of ongoing concern and debate throughout the various feminist movements and is still a cause of much feminist dialogue today. Ideas about motherhood and women's rights over their own bodies have been taken up since the second-wave feminist movements, and the subject is still met with much controversy and dispute. While there has been a widely held notion that choosing to become a mother is anti-feminist and adhering to a patriarchal society in which women are seen as submissive and enslaved to their domestic roles, there has also been a push toward the embracement of motherhood as an empowering element of femininity in which women at once become connected to their natural power as the perpetuators of life as well as sources of strength and stability for future generations. This dichotomy is riddled with arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to become a mother, and feminists have yet to come to a general consensus on the role of motherhood for women even today. And so in following the work set forth by Lauri Umansky in her book *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*, I have chosen to embark on this exploratory essay as I continue to grapple with my own ideas of what it means to be a feminist and also a mother in today's society.

Our society has held divided ideas on motherhood as good for/bad for feminists movements, and this divide has been taken up throughout the history of women's movements most notably beginning in the 1960s to the present. As a modern day feminist and new mother, I, too, struggle to decide whether motherhood is actually a perpetuation of women's oppression in society or an empowering embracement of feminine power and privilege. While caring for my infant human, I am currently struggling to decide exactly where the role of motherhood fits into my own feminist agenda and existence. There are many times in my day-to-day experiences that I feel like motherhood has trapped me in this private/domestic realm of existence, and I worry that in becoming a mother I have lost a large portion of the woman I used to be. I am no longer able to be an independent person as I am hardly able to be alone anymore; I am sure this will change as the baby get older, but at the same time, my child is always going to need me even as she grows into her own little, independent person. Also, prior to motherhood, I was a working, self-sufficient woman who perhaps desired but



ver needed a partner. But now I stay home with my child, which of course is empty of work in itself; however, it has also left me completely dependent on my husband. In this sense, I have lost almost all sense of my independence, and motherhood is the reason for this. But I have also gained this whole new sense of self at the same time. I have gained a new empowerment and strength of mind and body that I never thought possible prior to carrying, birthing, and now raising my child. For the nine months that she was inside of my womb and the nine months since she has been born, I have been all that my daughter has needed to thrive—I am her sole means of sustenance and survival. In performing this role of motherhood, I have reached this remarkable realization of just how strong and powerful my physical body can be when I have the right mind-set. And so I am free. I have lost a lot of myself, but I have also gained so much more. I feel like motherhood has stifled my feminism and empowered it all at the same time. And taking a look at some of the works of second-wave and modern day feminists, I hope to come to some sort of conclusion, however complex and convoluted.

Lauri Umansky takes up the task of placing motherhood within the realm of American feminism in her book *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Pragmatics of the Sixties*. Her introduction to this work, entitled "Motherhood: The Problem that Modern Feminists can Face," broadly discusses some of the ideas that different feminist groups have had in regards to motherhood. And she has noted that when it comes to motherhood there are mixed reviews regarding the acceptance or rejection of motherhood as a feminist issue. On the one hand, Umansky remarks that motherhood can be regarded as "a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of a woman's independence" (2). And to a certain point this is a reasonable remark because it would seem that upon entering motherhood a woman is forced into these particular parameters and expected to perform a specific role as the mother that could stifle any sense of independence and freedom. But on the other hand, Umansky notes that motherhood is also seen "a positive force" with the "potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self" (3). So while it might seem that motherhood is a removal of freedom for a woman, it could also be argued that motherhood is a liberating experience in itself wherein a woman can find a new sense of self-empowerment. Furthermore, the potential power of motherhood goes beyond the mother, herself. Through motherhood, women hold the power to change the future through the manner in which they raise the next generation. In this way, mothers are uniquely capable of disrupting and altering societal values and norms with how they shape their children from birth. Umansky aptly states that "if people were different, society would be different and mothering holds the key to changing both" (3).

In regards to motherhood, Umansky goes on to discuss how "feminist thought has concentrated on the topic from every possible angle" (3), as is

demonstrated throughout the history of women's movements. While some feminist movements have tended to reject mothers and their families from their cause, they have still shed light on the thoughts and concerns about motherhood in doing so. It would seem that motherhood, in whatever light, could never be ignored by feminists because it is a common experience for women. Umansky explains "that in daughterhood, and in potential or actual motherhood, all women participate in a community of shared experience" (4), which is inescapably true. Whether a woman chooses to become a mother or not, she is still a part of this social and cultural experience of motherhood. Also, it would seem that there is a united push toward the embracement of motherhood in modern society with the promotion of natural childbirth and breastfeeding, and many feminists today look at these acts as a challenge to male dominance and a celebration of the female body. Furthermore, motherhood can be understood as a unifying aspect of feminism because it provides a connection among the various feminisms which were divided by issues pertaining to race or class. Umansky discusses how in the history of feminist movements, women were often divided. Many of the first-wave movements were headed by white, upper-class women, and women of color or lower-class status did not identify with these first-wave feminist issues. However, as feminism moved into the second wave, women of all classes and races began to join a united front, and Umansky explains that motherhood had something to do with this newfound unity because it shed light on "women's common needs as mothers" (5); in this way, motherhood, according to Umansky, could be seen "as a powerful universalizing issue" (5).

While it may not have been an agreeable topic initially, motherhood has played a role in resolving the dilemma of defining the discourse of feminism, which has continued to be a difficult task. The struggle with providing an accurate and all-inclusive definition to the feminist movement is one that comes with the task of defining any discourse—there are simply too many aspects of the topic to pinpoint a concise and cohesive conclusion. Umansky explains that while people might share the same ideas within a movement, they also have different and even competing arguments and agendas. And when it comes to feminist discourse, Umansky remarks that participants might "share a common goal . . . to understand and change women's subordination," but "they interpret that goal and the means to its achievement in many different ways" (7). Umansky discusses how many various types of people have contributed to the definition of feminism from scholars to professionals to "ordinary" people. The degree to which various people participate in feminism ranges from small to large, private to public/social, and provide a wide range of outlets for their views. Ultimately, Umansky concludes that "the boundaries of feminist discourse have been remarkably fluid" (7). She discusses American Feminism primarily from the 1960s to the 1980s, and she briefly references international influences.

One notable European influence on feminism and the issue of motherhood is Simone de Beauvoir, who was an advocate for women's rights over their own bodies to the extent that she was pro-abortion and anti-motherhood in a society that held contrary customs. De Beauvoir chose not to become a wife nor a mother because she rejected the suppressive, societal norms placed on women, and she maintained that participating in wifehood and motherhood only further perpetuated male dominance and power in society. However, her feminist insight into the circumstances of motherhood have helped to pave the way for modern feminist-mothers to better understand their situation and how to break the mold of outdated patriarchal customs. De Beauvoir sheds light on the situation of mothers as the ones responsible for carrying, birthing, nourishing, and raising the children, while their male counterparts do not equally share in the "burden" (as she calls it) of the new child. I think that we can already see how this family dynamic has been shifted in our society today as we see an increase in working mothers and stay-at-home fathers. In my own experience, I have taken on the ideal matriarchal role of the stay-at-home mother and housewife for now, but my position is guaranteed to change once I complete my degree plan and enter the workforce. Also, prior to motherhood, I was an equal contributor to my household, but it is not as if my husband expected me to just drop everything about myself at the birth of our child. My choice to stay home with the child was due to the fact that I was a full-time student working toward my ultimate career, while he has already established his career at his company; had the circumstances been reversed, then he would have stayed home with our child while I remained in the workforce. And perhaps it is due to the insight of second-wave feminists, like Simone de Beauvoir, that we are able to live in a society in which these ideas about a woman's place as a mother can be regarded in a new light and not as an oppressive existence. As Elisabeta Zelinka remarks in her article "Simone de Beauvoir: Transgressing Immanence, Motherhood and Social Constructs," "the mere fact that the young generation dares to reject surveillance is a paramount first step towards social change, [therefore] the future of bringing improvement to the condition of women lies with the younger generation" (127).

Fiona Joy Green takes up this same binary relationship in her article "Reconceptualizing Motherhood: Reaching Back to Move Forward" as she provides strategies to create social change using the ideas of second-wave feminists combined with modern maternal theorists in order to emphasize the need for a shift in the cultural structuring and understanding of motherhood and parenting, in general. In this work, Green aims at "rearticulating parenting in ways that challenge how we collectively regard motherhood, think about and judge mothers, and perform mothering" (197). Basically, Green takes those ideas of second-wave feminists and on and on moves towards a more general understanding of the roles of mothers and feminists in today's society. She, too, recognizes the

inherent dichotomy of motherhood in feminism, noting the "two means of motherhood [as] the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (197). In this way, Green is taking up the very same issue that I have been grappling with in my own understanding of my role as an independent feminist woman and a responsible mother and wife. Green argues that, in our modern day, motherhood is not an issue solely for women, and rather, we should be looking at the situation as one of parenting, not mothering, because men and women alike are accountable for the raising of a child. She notes that much of the still commonly held ideas that women should be the sole caregivers for children stems not from men oppressing women into the position, but from women who tend to feel that no one could care for their children in that same manner that they can—a concept she coins "intensive mothering." I am personally guilty of this concept, as I tend to regard myself more capable than my husband at the general care and well-being of our child. This common understanding of parental roles stems from a history of women as caregivers and men as providers, but in today's society with all of our modern day advances in technology there is no reason that a man cannot care for a child in the same way as a woman. Furthermore, Green urges the need to recognize "the enormous multiplicity of mothering circumstances related to overlapping social locations and cultural contents" (199). In other words, mothering functions differently for different societies and cultures based on their individual locations and circumstances. As Green aptly references Audre Lorde, it is not our differences that divide us, but rather "our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences" (199). What works for some mothers and parents may not work for others, and those differences do not make any one parenting style better or worse than another in the same way that motherhood does not make a woman any less of a feminist than a non-mother. Green goes on to remark that "making and accepting significant parenting changes is difficult for many women who've internalized cultural and social attitudes about their roles as mothers," which explains how women are just as guilty of placing themselves in this oppressive, domestic role as men are. Ultimately, Green believes that the feminist movement is pro-family, and that women need to embrace motherhood in the same way that men should embrace fatherhood—it's all a matter of parenting, rather than differences among the sexes and genders.

It all comes down to matters of choice. Being a mother or not is not the feminist issue here. Women can be forced into motherhood as much as women can be unable to become mothers. The state of being a mother is not the feminist concern, but the *choice* to become or not to become a mother is what makes you a feminist. A woman who chooses to become a mother is embracing her natural ability to contribute to society and connect to nature; a woman who chooses to

abstain from motherhood is making the decision to embrace independence and a life devoted to contributing to society by her own means. Either way it is a decision one way or the other, and it is the choice that is feminist. Women should not be considered more feminist because they make the decision not to embark on motherhood in the same way that women should not be considered anti-feminist for choosing to become mothers. Feminism needs both. We need women to contribute to society in a manner that goes beyond the confines of domestic, private life, and we equally need women to contribute to society by producing more babies to sustain future generations. In this sense, motherhood should be regarded as a promotion of feminism in the same way as the choice to abstain from motherhood. Motherhood does not have to be this oppressive act that confines women to the private, domestic roles in life in the same way that choosing to not have children does not necessarily place women in the forefront of public, social independence. The two aspects of womanhood are not mutually exclusive, and the choice either way yields more feminists and aspects of feminism as a discourse. In this new light, I have been able to see myself as newly liberated. While I may not currently be the socially self-sufficient woman that I was prior to motherhood, I also recognize that I have embarked on this new journey in which I am just as free to live my life now with the hopes of contributing to the future generation of feminist through the raising of my child. Feminism needs mothers as much as non-mothers in order to establish a more balanced perspective of life in modern day society.

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## Richard II: Financially Irresponsible and Morally Corrupt Reign

Erika Schnaas Mercado

Shakespeare's history play *Richard II* can be analyzed as a tragedy that represents decisive aspects of public service that cause decay due to the power of passion and ambition in the human race. Richard's realm was financially irresponsible and morally corrupt because of his inability to handle the monarchy's budget and the ethically incorrect ways in which he tried to handle the situation. The Elizabethan World View in Shakespeare's work, where people believed in a divine order referred to as the Great Chain of Being, causes the characters to duel between their loyalty to the throne and their desire to see justice done (Dobel 298). "Shakespeare's conception of public service is shaped through his portrayal of passion that is amplified by desire and ambition and intensified by the press of time" (Dobel 292). Shakespeare's tragedy *Richard II* teaches the consequences when time pressures a king to achieve what his ambition desires, and will ultimately result in the abandonment of the public service as a whole. Richard II's theoretically unlimited power was constrained by his obligation to respect the rule of law and the rights and liberties of his subjects.

In the construction of tragedies, Shakespeare shows a conflict that terminates in a catastrophe, and divides this plot into three parts. The first part—which consists of act one—is named the exposition and explains the situation from which the conflict arises. The second, which correlates with acts two, three, and four, even sometimes sections of acts one and five, deals with growth of the characters and an unpleasant change of fortune in the plot. The third part shows the issue of the conflict in a catastrophe dealing with the downfall of a tragic hero who confronts his hamartia, which stands for the tragic flaw. The division of these three parts that constitute a tragedy are arbitrary; one cannot draw lines between them precisely (Bradley 42). Only two scenes in *Richard II* are an invention of Shakespeare, in the first act, second scene, with the conversation between Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester, and the scene with the domestic pathos in act three, scene four, where the Queen converses with the Gardener (Heninger 319).

The main aspect of the exposition is to introduce the conditions of the characters, like their positions in life, their circumstances, and their relations to one another, opening a window into the characters themselves. The point is to give enough information to intrigue the readers or spectators about the situation that will follow the conditions described and capture their attention to follow the situation of the characters and the evident difficulties they will present in the future. The exposition is successful when it achieves to threaten the reader or spectator with a possible conflict in the story; Shakespeare's expositions are—in

most cases—masterpieces (Bradley 43). Usually, Shakespeare begins with scenes full of life that arouse strong feelings in the reader or spectator, building excitement. Secondly, “he proceeds to conversations at a lower pitch, accompanied by little action but conveying much information” (Bradley 44). In the exposition of *Richard II*, Shakespeare builds tension with the dispute between two noble courtiers—Henry Bolingbroke and the Duke of Hereford. The courtiers are having a dispute about the successful conspiracy to murder the Duke of Gloucester, the king’s uncle.

*Richard II* presents a graceful balance between the theme and the character, between the image which is poetically embodied and the image which is dramatically embodied. “The prophecy of the Bishop of Carlisle (which Shakespeare did not find in his sources, and which appeared only in the later editions of the play) constitutes the fullest statement of the moral history, the destruction of order and degree by the usurpation of Bolingbroke” (Bradbrook 12). Shakespeare successfully develops in his plays recurrent symphonic imagery instead of flat verbal patterns. This change of style is a visible sign of a different conception of structure, the multiplicity of points of view is what gives the play its tragic character. Multiple settings allow the dramatist to set several scenes on the stage side by side, creating many centers of sympathy through multiple characterization (Bradbrook 154). Bolingbroke, as the usurper of the English throne, can never enjoy the full privileges of kingship, since he does not derive his authority from natural order; “he actively seeks to fulfill the ideal of kingship, and fails only in his hereditary right and later in the culpability of usurpation” (Leninger 325). Bolingbroke, in act three of *Richard II*, is portrayed as a violator of God’s eternal law.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare was very successful at developing the events that set in motion England’s century of crisis. Shakespeare chose to tell the events of the history of England’s monarchy in reverse order. Shakespeare started his tetralogy with *Richard II*, continued with *Henry IV*, which was divided in two different parts, and ended with *Henry V*. Having already dramatized the conclusion of the civil war in an earlier tetralogy about Henry VI and Richard III, Shakespeare, in the first part of *Henry IV*, represents the beginning of the War of the Roses. Both sequences move from an outbreak of civil faction to the eventual triumph of political stability. Together they build the story of an England’s century, from the 1390s until Henry Tudor’s victory over Richard III in 1485, which was full of disturbance, confusion, and uncertainty. At last, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* deals with the education and kingly success of Prince Hal (Bevington vii).

Even though it was believed that Richard II was sent from God to reign over England, the awareness of mortality in conjunction with what nobility often receives as “the inconsequential nature of their accomplishments” (Dobel 293) increases the urgency to achieve glory. Focusing on the following three ingrained

sources of discontinuity and pressure, Shakespeare expresses his view of the public service ideal. First, the humanity in public leaders that drives figures like King Richard to allow his actions to be controlled by passion instead of reason. Second, these passions create psychological conflicts when amplified by powerful ambitions. Third, the consciousness of death and decay that will inevitably interfere with the accomplishments of public leaders, causing “those entrusted with safeguarding the public’s interests to remain fundamentally insecure” (Dobel 293). These insecurities cause countless conflicts between individuals and political organizations, generating crucial enemies and the need for revenge.

Shakespeare provides a variety of human responses to ethical crises. The tragedy *Richard II* begins with the murder of the Duke of Gloucester. Despite many members of the royal family being aware of the suspicions about the King’s involvement in the murder of his own uncle, they believe that the king represents God’s order on earth. John of Gaunt, who knows about Richard’s participation in Gloucester’s murder, finds it impossible to act against God’s will, even when Richard exiles Gaunt’s son, Bolingbroke, for being a suspect in the murder, demonstrating the fragility of the ideal public service, when his commitments to oaths and public welfare vanish in the presence of incompetence from a divine authority (Dobel 297).

*Richard II* illustrates how, without personal commitment to ethical ideas, the structure of the system breaks through insecure and ambitious leaders from not only Shakespeare’s world but also from today’s political system. Dobel explains that liberal democracy with ideal public service acting on behalf of the public good can achieve a responsible government with the development of public institutions that strengthen bonds between citizens (291). However, passion and ambition in human nature tend to corrupt public institutions. For a public service to be considered ideal, there are many circumstantial aspects of it that need to be analyzed. One must gain a wide understanding of contextual knowledge: institutional history, individual character, and cultural factors. In an “ideal of public service, a commitment to act on behalf of the public good from a sense of duty rather than self-interest is widely understood to be the epitome of ethical citizenship” (Dobel 291). *Richard II* illustrates the living realities of many aspects of public service, such as the power of passion, ambition, and decay as crucial aspects of a neglecting public service ideal. Shakespeare very successfully explores a wide range of emotions in his characters through his sonnets, and as Dobel says, “Shakespeare brings his unique literary genius to bear on these issues through his unparalleled capacity to connect the emotional and cognitive dimensions of ethical decision-making, as characters think their way through thorny moral problems” (292). Emotions are gradually spread over human ambition and civic life, allowing a display in expressions of emotion as well as cognition.

*Richard II* allows the reader to relate to ethical problems depicted

rough the characters. From the display of raw emotional power, the tension throughout the story provides a forum to reflect on a wide range of human responses to crisis of ethics. Richard's passion is increased by desire and ambition, making a public servant that is intensified by the circumstances of his time. At the end of Shakespeare's tragedy, Richard encounters his own morality and is forced to accept that betrayal, decay, and death set limits to what he can accomplish. Richard acknowledges that his predicament—the murder of the Duke of Gloucester—caused the catastrophe in his kingdom, after a financially responsible reign and the morally incorrect decision to take Bolingbroke's inheritance to fight the Irish rebels, when Richard himself banished his own cousin Bolingbroke for the murder of their uncle, Duke of Gloucester. The object of Richard's ambition limited what Richard had the potential to accomplish for England at the time, brought decay to his reign, and ultimately caused his death as he was forced to give his crown to Bolingbroke.

Aware of Richard's morally corrupted reign, and the ethically incorrect ways in which he tried to handle the situation, "Shakespeare teaches that the consequences can be severe, including a resort to revenge and the ultimate abandonment of the public service ideal altogether" (Dobel 292). In 1377, Richard's father, King Edward, experiences an early death and leaves the kingdom in the hands of his 11-year-old son, Richard II. Richard's uncles help him reign until Richard reaches 23 years old, becoming the King of England in 1398. The story of Richard's realm constitutes a skeptical attitude as to whether devotion to the public welfare can be sustained over time, since the king's ambition becomes too great to overcome.

Public service is meant to be an ethical ideal, where oaths and public loyalty should defeat the power of passion and ambition. However, *Richard II* demonstrates how culture, symbol, and ritual are not enough, because without personal commitment to ethical ideals, the ritual structures will be corrupted by passionate, insecure, and ambitious leaders (Dobel 299). The mixture of passion, ambition, divided loyalty, uncertainty, and urgency destroys the expectations of a public servant. In the 15th Century, when the entire population of the kingdom believed that their king was sent by God to rule them, it was impossible to question the morally corrupt and ethically incorrect ways in which Richard II handled the situation.

Richard's family knew about his responsibility over the Duke of Gloucester's death, but no one was capable of questioning God's intentions or will upon Richard II. Even though they understood Richard's mistakes and wrongdoings, no one else but Henry Bolingbroke was willing to question God's intentions. Everyone, at the time, believed God had a plan for Richard II and it was not their duty to fix all the injustices around Richard's realm. When Henry Bolingbroke hears the news that his cousin Richard stole his inheritance money

to fight the Irish rebels because of his inability to handle the monarchy's budget in a proper manner, Bolingbroke himself rebels against the monarchy in England. He builds an army supported on the injustice Richard II caused upon him, and at the end of Shakespeare's tragedy, Richard is forced to give up his crown and name his cousin Bolingbroke as King Henry IV.

In *Richard II*, the portrayal of John of Gaunt highlights his struggles with his dual loyalties and dual oaths to his family and to his king, Richard II. His conflict demonstrates how fragile the public service ideal is and how commitments to oaths and public welfare can erode in the face of a higher authority's incompetence and pettiness. Gaunt cannot bring himself to act against Richard II, even though Gaunt believes that Richard has caused the death of the Duke of Gloucester. He cannot act against the king because he believes that the king represents God's order on earth. Even though Richard exiles his son, Bolingbroke, Gaunt stays loyal to the king and the king's order:

God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,  
His deputy anointed in His sight,  
Hath caused his death: the which if wrongfully  
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift  
An angry arm against His minister. (Bevington 21)

In the eyes of Gloucester's widow, Richard is completely guilty of the murder of her husband. Additionally, the Duke of Lancaster assumes that Richard has caused Gloucester's death, and the Duke of York watches Richard II's incompetence and his nephew Bolingbroke's revolt in horror (Bevington ix).

An old tradition requires the need for leaders to have good and candid advisors as a moral obligation to rule well. However, advisors become selfish and manipulate advice for their own advantage. Richard II loses validity in office because he narrows his circle of advisors and intimates to a small percentage:

The king is not himself, but basely led  
By flatterers; and what they inform,  
Merely in hate, 'gainst any of us all,  
That will the King severely prosecute  
'Gainst us, our lives, our children, and our heirs. (Bevington 69)

Richard's terrible advisors together with his own financial irresponsibility drives Richard II to waste the monarchy's wealth on luxuries that cause him to face a financial crisis when in need of money to pursue a war against Irish Rebels. When Richard seizes the lands that rightfully belong to the exiled Bolingbroke, in order to afford the battle against the Irish Rebels, he hands Bolingbroke an emotional cause and moral justification for restoring his unjustly commandeered patrimony and convincing people of Richard's wrongdoing (Dobel 300).

Shakespeare calls attention to the imperious role of passion in human life and how it overwhelms rational decision-making and even rational calculations

self-interest. Interests permute constantly under the force of passion, and ambitions drive those holding public office to rationalize their behavior after the fact, instead of following the dictates of reason before their action. Reasons often become a tool to the passionate desire for status, achievement, and glory. In Shakespeare's world, ambition, glory, honor, and fear dominate all the concerns. Richard II's jealousy and suspicion of rivals, his apparent contempt for inherited rights, and his insensitivity to the aspirations of his subjects, provided the means by which his regime ended (Saul 41). This constitutes a skeptical attitude towards the public welfare; "Shakespeare suggests that the combined effects of passion, ambition, and decay cause the public service ideal to become too fragile to survive for long or to offer sufficient support to public servants as they try to sustain it in their own time" (Dobel 292). Richard II proves himself unfit to continue his rule, by violating the moral foundation of his reign with his incompetence, favoritism, injustice, and violence.

The king realized his obligation to respect the rule of law and the rights and liberties of the English population after he already made irreversible mistakes, such as granting exclusive privilege to a small group of individuals and spending the monarchy's wealth on personal luxuries. In the run-up to Brexit, some observers used the famous phrase "this scepter'd isle," a description of England used in *Richard II*. A scepter is an ornamented staff carried by rulers on ceremonial occasions as a symbol of sovereignty, an unforgettable image of a sovereign England owing allegiance to no outsider (Kirsch 80). Shakespeare's language still captures the essential mindset of the people in England, 400 years after his death.

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## Review of *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit

Meagan Phillips

American writer and human rights activist Rebecca Solnit is a contributing editor at *Harper's Magazine*, a monthly publication that covers a variety of topics including politics, culture, finance, and the arts. Solnit has written seventeen books and received two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships for Literature, a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, a Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction, as well as several other awards and nominations for her work. She is also credited with coining the term "mansplaining," thanks to the title essay of her 2014 book *Men Explain Things to Me*. Solnit's book is a collection of her feminist essays that address, among other things, the ways men silence and erase women. Solnit uses her essays to explore how the underlying root of men feeling the need to explain things to women—things women already know, and perhaps know *better* than said men—is that society does not think women have the same capabilities as men. There exists the belief that women cannot possibly know or do the kind of things men can, and therefore their opinion or account of things cannot be trusted. Solnit's aim is to expose the need to give women a voice, and for that voice to be taken seriously. As she proclaims, "Credibility is a basic survival tool" (5).

Solnit's now famed essay "Men Explain Things to Me" appears as the first chapter in her book. The piece details an encounter Solnit has at a party with a man who tries to tell her all about a very important new book without realizing she is the author of that book. Solnit's encounter serves as a microcosm for the way men often assume they know better than and are otherwise above women. The other eight essays gathered in *Men Explain Things to Me* address everything from men mansplaining their way through classrooms and boardrooms to the way power relations between men and women are mirrored in world political policy. Solnit covers one of her biggest influences, Virginia Woolf, and even John Keats's concept of Negative Capability, as well as an array of serious issues including rape culture and violence against women. The question that runs throughout is the matter of why we do not address the maleness factor behind most of the planet's violent crime. Men are responsible for ninety percent of the murder on the planet, but society rarely acknowledges this pattern. Solnit sums this problem up succinctly: "When you say lone gunman, everyone talks about loners and guns but not about men" (28). Her essays raise questions we are continuously asking ourselves, such as why things like violence against women are considered "women's problems" when we know "like racism, misogyny can never be adequately addressed by its victims alone" (153).

Even with its emphasis on the violence men perpetrate, Solnit's book is

inherently anti-men. She frequently commends the growing number of male feminists who are also furthering the goal of equality. Solnit simply calls attention to this disturbing pattern of male violence because she feels if we recognize it, "we might be able to theorize where violence comes from and what we can do about it a lot more productively" (24). She addresses the fact that when she wrote the essay "Men Explain Things to Me," she began by telling a story of one man being inebriated at a party, but ended up discussing rape and murder. "It's a slippery slope," Solnit says, and urges us to address that slope. Feminists and all women are often accused of being too easily offended by the "little things" that we are often accused of, like mansplaining, but Solnit warns against ignoring these "lesser" offenses, since they so often lead to more heinous acts that affect our very lives.

Because *Men Explain Things to Me* is a collection of essays that were not originally intended to be published together, there is some repetition of ideas and quotations throughout. Even with this repetition, and the book's coverage of concepts many feminist readers have probably considered before, Solnit finds a way to breathe new life into these ideas. Her writing can be sharp and blunt; she also makes some very powerful statements like "Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but does it does have a gender" (20). Her writing can also be flowery and almost poetic sounding, though: "Her name was silence. His name was power. Her name was poverty. His was wealth. Her name was Her, but what was his? His name was his and he presumed everything was his" (39-40). Solnit's interweaving of these styles keeps the reader from feeling too bogged down and hopeless to continue. Solnit knows that learning about abysmal rape statistics and the unfair treatment of women worldwide can make a feminist cry, but she urges readers to remember that feminism is trying to change something "very old, widespread, and deeply rooted in many, perhaps most cultures around the world . . . It takes time" (140). Solnit impresses, however, that we have come a long way, and even though we still have a long way left to go, we should give ourselves credit for and revel in the progress we have made.

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## Review of *Sex Object* by Jessica Valenti

Meagan Phillips

Feminist author Jessica Valenti founded the award-winning blog *Feministing* and now writes as a columnist for *The Guardian US*, which listed her as one of their "Top 100 Women" for helping bring the feminist movement online. Her articles have topped the "most-read" lists of *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Nation*, and she has also written for *The New York Times*, *Salon*, *Bitch*, and *Ms. Magazine*. Valenti has written or co-authored six books; her most recent, *Sex Object: A Memoir*, became a *New York Times* bestseller. In *Sex Object*, Valenti argues that despite the advances women have made, the world is still not fair for us. We exist in a man's world, and only then to be looked at, treated as little more than any other commodity, and often abused. She asks the question throughout: "Who would I be if I didn't live in a world that hated women?" (2). Valenti's book considers the normalization of this hatred and abuse of women.

Valenti sums up her book before it ever begins with a quote from feminist author Catharine A. MacKinnon: "All women live in objectification the way fish live in water." *Sex Object* explores Valenti's life growing up female and swimming around in all this objectification. Valenti's exposure to sex and women as sex objects began early in life as the street behind her childhood home hosted a prostitution ring, often leaving her sidewalk littered with used condoms. Living in such proximity to women who were so often bought and sold set the stage perfectly for what the rest of Valenti's life would be like. For every stage of her life, she has a story recounting the way being reduced to a sex object has affected her—from fellow classmates propositioning her in her pre-teen years all the way to the inappropriate comments made by her married friend in the present day. Valenti's book details her encounters with this series of men who have perhaps unwittingly shaped her feminism. She describes the insidious ways in which men take advantage of women—both their bodies and their sympathies, as well as society's inclination to train women to deal with this bad behavior, to just accept it as fact, rather than teach men to behave differently or even take responsibility for their own actions. "The message is clear," Valenti writes, "we are here for their enjoyment and little else" (64-65). She addresses the million micro-aggressions that women deal with every day that may not be overt sexual assault, but that wear them down and make sure they live in fear, so that their lives are controlled by the threat either way. *Sex Object* also details the pressure to succeed put on Valenti by her parents, her high risk pregnancy and two abortions, the ups and downs of her marriage, feelings of inadequacy surrounding motherhood, and the different ways women keep their families afloat. The interweaving of these stories of sexual harassment with the rest of Valenti's life story superbly demonstrates how

rained this harassment is in women's lives, so much so that she concludes being treated nicely [feels] wrong somehow" (107).

Valenti's writing, while clever and often very funny, is sharp and strikingly honest. Her raw storytelling pulls the reader in; her stories feel so real and familiar. Readers cannot help but smile wryly in recognition as Valenti's relates one of her younger self's realizations: "It hadn't yet occurred to me that boys maybe would want to hook up for any other reason than *they liked me*" (50). She brings bubbling to the surface the heartbreak and disappointments of growing up female and being forced in to the role of sex object. Valenti admits that she uses the term "sex object" more as "resignation than reclamation" (2). She is not trying to take back the word *shut* and pretend that it is powerful, but rather seeks to lay bare what growing up female is really like. She forces the reader to feel how she's been made to feel her whole life, and, while she effectively employs humor, it is not used to sugarcoat anything. Valenti highlights the importance of being so honest about our experiences. Drawing on Betty Friedan's "problem with no name," Valenti points out that "we still have no name for what happens to women living in a culture that hates them . . . We are sick people with no disease" (13). She urges readers that "if you are sick and want to be well, you need to relay the details of your symptoms: glossing over them ensures a lifetime of illness" (16). Valenti calls us to action; we must speak up or no change will be made.

Valenti repeatedly emphasizes that women live in a world that hates them, making it difficult to not start hating the men who keep us in this position. She has some kind words for her own husband, but does not offer much faith in men at large. The book sometimes felt repetitive, endlessly listing the string of interchangeable, disrespectful men in Valenti's life; however, perhaps this was her point: the repetition and commonality of these men leads us to the conclusion that this is just the way men are. Women are expected to know that "#NotAllMen" are vile, but Valenti's book demonstrates well how it comes to feel as though this "just what men [are] like. This [is] just what being a girl [is]" (73). Despite everything, the book ends on a somewhat hopeful note about the future—Valenti's daughter's in particular and all of ours as well. She keeps her head grounded in reality, yet leaves readers feeling as though they have the power to change the course of women's lives.

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## Smoke a Little Smoke: Motherhood, Marijuana, and Comedy

Katherine Waterbury

What is a mother to do when her husband dies on his morning jog, leaving her with two children, a beautiful home in a suburb of California, a stack of bills, no discernable talent, and not being able to maintain the lifestyle to which she and her children have become accustomed? It is simple: grab some scales, find a fairy weed-mother, and start selling pot. Enter the Home Box Office (HBO) highly successful television series *Weeds*, which premiered on August 7, 2005. As viewers embarked on their journey with the Botwin family, enduring all of the twists and turns which are bound to occur in such a lifestyle—rival drug dealers, problems with law enforcement, having to relocate your family in an instant to flee danger, having to relocate your family in an instant because your son kills a very important politician in Mexico, going to prison, being shot in the head—one cannot help but realize that there is a duality in theme running rampant through the series. Are we watching a series that portrays Nancy, its matriarch, as a selfish, whorish, immoral mother, woman, and drug dealer? Or are we witnessing the portrayal of a mother who, against all obstacles, is able to handle her own problems, take control of every situation she encounters, satisfy the needs of her sexuality, and create a family business for her children? The answer lies in the perspective of the viewer. The work of feminism has paved the way for television to focus the story line of a series around a female. The movement has also allowed for the normality of seeing a woman portrayed as the head of a household. Also, society is no longer shocked by seeing promiscuous sexual acts performed by a female on television. Nor are we deeply shocked by the use of illegal drugs. However, feminism is just begging to have a discussion on motherhood and the pigeonholes which being identified as a 'mother' can have on a woman. As Samira Kawash discusses in her article "New Directions in Motherhood Studies," "feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities (Kawash 997). In analyzing the television series *Weeds*, it can be argued that within this dark comedy focused on the life of the suburban drug dealer lies a feminist commentary on motherhood. Throughout the series, the viewer is exposed to mothers at every turn. The show works to show the strengths, weaknesses, successes, and downfalls of mothers. *Weeds* redefines motherhood by forcing its characters to exist in a patriarchal world, but focuses its action around women, mothers, who show the ugly side of motherhood.

"Dear Silas . . . umm . . . thank for raising yourself these past 18 years. You . . . you've done a great job" (*Weeds* 4.13).

Motherhood is one of those jobs which does not come with a handbook. No one pulls women out of the labor and delivery room to tell them the secrets to



ing a good mother. No one tells a woman how to feel, how to become selfless, how to devote all of her time and effort into making this tiny human a good person, the center of her universe. But, the world is incredibly quick to tell a mother when she is doing it wrong. Society will point out every mistake made, assuring that, if nothing else, no mother ever feels that she is good at this job which nature preselected her for. Motherhood for so long has been considered a woman's job—her main purpose in life. The upbringing of the child has been placed on the mother's shoulders. Andrea O'Reilly, in an article discussing the additional role of motherhood as well as applying a critical analysis regarding the shift of authority and agencies of mothers, entitled "Outlaw(Ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-First Century," notes that "A central, if not defining event in the rise of Western Modernity was the emergence of the public/private dichotomy in which the work of production was assigned to the public sphere and the work of reproduction to the private sphere. This dichotomy was, of course, gender coded: a man belonged in the public realm and was to embody the valued masculine traits of the emergent capitalist and industrial society, while a woman was to remain in the home domain and serve as the ornamental wife or, in the lexicon of the day, 'The Angel in the House'" (22). Simply put, men work, and women raise children. What, then, of the single mother, the lesbian mother, the adoptive mother? In what place do these women fit in the great scheme of mothering? But, maybe there is a new agenda brewing in the dynamics of motherhood. In her article, Kawash notes also that "the rise in popular attention to motherhood and its discontents in the United States has created the conditions for an emergent mothers' movement" (973).

#### Jill Price-Gray: "The Martyr Mother"

In season five, *Weeds* introduces Jill Price-Gray, the sister of the central character. This is the first time that viewers are made aware that a sister exists. Immediately, the audience is conscious of the fact that the two do not have a good relationship. Jill resents Nancy's flighty and selfish ways, and holds against Nancy for leaving while their parents were dying, leaving Jill with the responsibility of dealing with their deaths. Jill is married, with twin daughters. Her days are spent taking care of the needs of her husband and children. She has martyred herself to motherhood. Her existence now revolves only around her duties as a wife and mother. Jill enters the story line at this point in the series because there are no responsible characters in the cast at this point. Jill Price-Gray, who can only exist if she is serving someone's needs other than her own, is the only solution.

Jill is a reoccurring character in seasons five through seven. Nancy becomes involved with Esteban, a Mexican drug lord/politician. After giving birth to Esteban's child, fleeing Mexico after Shane kills Esteban's political partner,

turning herself in to the police, and being sentenced to prison time, Nancy is forced to give custody of her newborn, Stevie, to Jill. Jill, of course, takes the child in and begins raising him. Because it is the 'right' thing to do. Eventually, a custody fight between the two is resolved, and the Botwin and Price-Gray families merge, all moving into a large house to live together happily ever after. Of course, this cannot ever actually happen, and after Nancy is shot in the head, a love affair between Andy and Jill falls apart. Nancy finds love with a rabbi, and this dysfunctional family again falls apart.

Jill Price-Gray is a character with whom many mothers can identify. She has lost herself and her own identity in the act of mothering. As Samira Kawash indicates in her article, Jill personifies the idea that, "Despite several decades of feminist critique, it appears that new mothers continue to be surprised at the gap between idealized depictions of blissful maternity and the more complicated and exhausting reality, akin to running an emotional marathon every day (Kawash 984). Jill's nature now only allows her to respond with the mentality of a caregiver. When Nancy is shot in the head, Jill cares for her and her children. When Jill's own children rebel against Andy as their mother's partner, Jill pampers them. When her relationship with Andy fails, she turns to another man for support. Her purpose in life is only to mother.

#### Heylia James: "The Drug Supplying, Down to Earth, Ghetto Mother"

Heylia James is the first drug supplier that the audience meets within the series. She is a local pot distributor, risen in the hierarchy past the point of dealing dope on the streets, shrewd in the manner in which she handles her business, and always keeping it in the family. Heylia runs her business out of her home, weighing and bagging marijuana at her kitchen table with the help of her nephew, Conrad, her pregnant daughter, Vaneeta, and her son, Keeyon.

Regardless of the family business, Heylia keeps her children, and Conrad, her main focus in life. She is protective of her children and attempts to guide them throughout the series. As Heylia begins to notice that Conrad and Nancy are becoming too close, she attempts to put a stop to it. Not because she dislikes Nancy, but because she knows that it is Conrad who will be hurt in the end by any sort of relationship that could evolve out of their connection. After Conrad seeks revenge on a rival drug dealer who vandalized Nancy's car, Heylia forbids her nephew from seeing Nancy again. Heylia threatens to cut Conrad off if he disobeys her, telling him, "I mean, you even see a white girl on television, you change the channel or I swear 'fore God, I will freeze you out so cold you'll have to carry your ass to the North Pole to defrost" (*Weeds* 1.10). Later, when she finds out that Conrad has disobeyed her, gone behind her back and created a business with Nancy, and is now being held hostage by other dealers, Heylia saves her nephew,

ying off his debt to a drug dealer which he and Nancy owe money too. In doing Heylia leaves Nancy at the mercy of the kidnappers, without remorse. This is t because she is heartless or because she does not care for Nancy, but because nrad is her surrogate child, and for Heylia, blood is thicker than water.

Another example of Heylia's willingness to put her family above all is en James, a Nation of Islam leader with whom Heylia is dating, insults Vaneeta ring a family meal. When James insults her daughter, insinuating that neeta's pregnancy is due to whorish behaviors, Vaneeta responds to James' ults, snapping that, "You, comin' 'round here with your holier-than-thou llshit! 'We don't eat this, we don't do that! We like our women dressed like lking bee-keepers!" (*Weeds* 2.6). Heylia quickly silences the table. She removes mes from her house for insulting her daughter. However, once James is gone, e also admonishes Vaneeta for her behavior. Although she is protective of her ughter, she does not allow her children to be disrespectful in her home.

Heylia also serves as a mother to Nancy Botwin in the first two seasons the series. As Nancy's confidence in her ability to sell drugs grows, Heylia tries keep her grounded in her inexperience. She cautions Nancy to not forget that e is new to the drug business, telling her, "Yeah, lookin' in the dictionary the her day, saw your picture sittin' up in there. Right next to 'Dumb ass white ch'" (*Weeds* 1.1). She also maintains a strictly business relationship with Nancy. hen Nancy is desperate for money and product, Heylia refuses to give drugs to e suburban housewife without upfront cash. Heylia forces Nancy to leave her dding ring for collateral, even though she knows the emotional tie that Nancy s with the piece of jewelry, still wearing it although her husband has been dead r over a year. After Nancy agrees to Heylia's terms, leaving the ring on the table d storming out of Heylia's house with plenty of pot to sell, the audience sees ough dialogue that Heylia has complete confidence that Nancy will return with oney:

Vaneeta: How much you think we get for that? (referring to Nancy's wedding band and ring)

Heylia: Nothin'. She'll be back. (*Weeds* 1.2)

Heylia's home also serves as a reality for Nancy. In it, she encounters her st true insights to the dangers of life as a drug dealer. As the two women stand Heylia's kitchen, joking around and having fun, gunshots begin to tear through e room. Heylia's family drops to the floor, but Nancy stands, frozen with fear, id unaware of how to react. In this moment, we again see that Heylia nderstands Nancy's situation better than anyone in her life. Heylia reacts with mpassion toward Nancy, but treats the situation with a dose of reality:

Heylia: Everybody all right?

Vaneeta: Yeah

Conrad: Cool. Snowflake (Nancy)? Snowflake?

Vaneeta: She's in shock, slap her.

Conrad: I ain't slappin' no white woman.

Heylia: Move, I'll do it.

Nancy: No, I'm okay. (in a very shaky voice)

Heylia: You sure?

Nancy: Yeah. (sniff)

Heylia: All right, let's clean this shit up.

Nancy: (Giggling a little) Is somebody gonna call the police?

Heylia: Baby, that probably was the police.

Nancy: I'm gonna go. Wait, I need my keys.

Conrad: We got unsettled business, you haven't even talked to me about my car yet. How you gonna get your keys now?

Heylia: Boy! The girl just had her shootin' cherry broke, give her the keys.

Heylia: Shit, white folks get soda pop, niggas get bullets. (*Weeds* 1.5)

As any good mother does, Heylia treats Nancy with compassion, but with doses of reality as well. In seasons one and two, Heylia James is the strong female of the series.

#### Celia Hodes: "White Privilege, Image is Everything Mother"

The perfectly groomed mother of two, Celia Hodes, begins the series as the involved mother who is concerned with the nutrition being providing to the children of the community, struggling vehemently to keep her teenage daughter from participating in premarital sex with Nancy's son, Silas, and trying to provide comfort to her poor friend, Nancy.

Celia Hodes was no one's favorite character. Throughout the series, her actions show within her a selfishness that borderlines on true narcissism. As a mother, her intent seems to be only to create children, which will enhance her image as the perfect woman. From her disdain of her youngest child's physical appearance to her disgust of her eldest's sexual promiscuity, Celia's method of mothering is looked down upon, yet fairly common in American society. Celia's mothering techniques are highlighted mostly in season one of the series. In conversations with her children, we see the inability of Celia to interact with her children on an emotional level.

Isabelle, Celia's youngest child, is an intelligent girl with a close group of friends and who excels in sports and academics. Celia treats the girl with cruelty and disdain throughout the series. At a soccer game when Isabelle, the overweight daughter, kicks a winning goal, her mother can only comment on the child's weight. While Isabelle is seeking an emotional moment of praise, Celia responds with coldness and criticism:

Isabelle: Did you see my kick?

Celia: Yeah, I wanna see more running out there, Isa-belly, now that's what burns the fat. (*Weeds* 1.1)

In an effort to force Isabelle to hate food, Celia replaces the child's stash of chocolate candy with chocolate flavored laxatives. The next day, as Isabelle sits in her elementary school classroom, the child cannot get the teacher's attention long enough, and is humiliated in front of her peers. She tearfully explains to her mother, "They called me Shit Girl. I had to throw away my underwear in the woods" (*Weeds* 1.3). While trying to have a conversation with her mother, Isabelle picks up a glass which is sitting in front of Celia, but her mother quickly grabs the cup from the child's hands, telling her:

Celia Hodes: No-no-no-no no, no, that's grownup juice, not for you.

Isabelle Hodes: When can I have some grownup juice?

Celia Hodes: When you have a daughter who drives you to it. (*Weeds* 2.1)

Quinn is Celia's older child, an outspoken teenager who tries at every turn to make her mother unhappy, as teenagers do. Quinn despises the way that her mother treats Isabelle and attempts to thwart every attempt her mother makes to control Isabelle's food intake. Celia's plan to catch Isabelle in the act of sneaking food results in the discovery that her husband, Dean, has been having an affair with the tennis trainer from their country club. Quinn, aware of the affair, moves a hidden camera, which Celia has planted, to an area that she knows will capture her father and his lover in the act. Celia comments, "I should have had an intuition" (*Weeds* 1.1). She responds to the revelation of her husband's affair by sending Quinn to boarding school and shaving her husband's head in his sleep. When discussing with Silas the whereabouts of her daughter Quinn, she refuses to acknowledge that her daughter might have feelings, and disregards Silas's expressions of affection toward her daughter as well:

Silas: Tell me where she is!

Celia: Why? So you can fly down to Mexico and spring her from Casa Reforma?

Silas: I love her.

Celia: You stuck your penis in her. That's not love, believe me.

Silas: I am her family.

Celia: Ugh, God, poor thing. Do you really think that my daughter had deep romantic feelings for you? Is that what you think? Now I'm sure that you were a fun and sweaty diversion for her, but the truth is Quinn had a day and a half to get all of her ducks in a row before going to Mexico and she didn't call you. She didn't write or IM or e-mail you either, did she? But I'll tell you what she did do, she downloaded 2,000 songs into her iPod and dyed her hair pink with black on the tips. Because all that Quinn cares about is Quinn. (*Weeds* 1.1)

Celia's contribution to the discussion of motherhood is in that it shows the

viewer that money and privilege do not make a person a good mother. Celia is an embodied example of the theory that money and privilege do not automatically make a woman a perfect mother. Even before Celia loses her wealth and status, she is still not a mother in any aspect other than biologically. She never embodied the idealistic notions of motherhood.

#### Nancy Botwin: "The 'I Tried' Mother"

*Weeds* carries within its cast a barrage of mothers. The focus of the series, however, revolves around Nancy Botwin. Her approach to motherhood and her growth as a mother throughout the series cannot be denied. Nancy's maternal instincts in the beginning consist of ensuring the continuance of the lifestyle by which her children are accustomed. She begins her endeavors as a drug dealer, not for a personal desire to live a life of crime, but out of necessity to provide financially for her children. In the infancy of the series, the viewer believes that Nancy is deeply concerned about the well-being of her children.

Nancy Botwin is an involved parent at the start of the series. She attends PTA meetings, soccer games, and attempts to have family dinners. She fights for her children. She tries to shield them from her secret life. Nancy's detour in parenting comes as a result of her business. It is hard to be a soccer mom when rival drug dealers are stalking you, or DEA agents are tracking your every move. Still, in season one, Nancy is protective of her children. When a drunken Celia flashes Silas in an effort to be consoled over her mastectomy, Nancy shuts her down, telling her, "I don't give a flying fuck if you do have cancer, put your tits away in front of my kid" (*Weeds* 1.6). She protects Shane against schoolhouse bullies. She does her best to put a male role model into her children's life, allowing their Uncle Andy to become a live-in member of the family. Nancy delegates responsibilities to Andy, telling him, "Talk to Shane about jerking off" (*Weeds* 2.3). Perhaps her methods are unconventional, but they are attempts at creating a normalized life for her children.

As the series progresses, however, the viewer comes to see that parenting has taken a backseat in Nancy's priorities. Her drug dealing, and the problems which it creates, force her to take her family down a dark path. As she flees Agrestic, she is forced to uproot her children, taking them to strange homes, forcing them to interact with people that are virtually strangers. When she becomes involved with a leader of the Mexican cartel, she does not think of the danger which she is placing herself and her sons into, but the profit that can be made by the business arrangement. Upon her discovery that she is pregnant for a third time with the cartel leader's baby, her tearful confession to Andy shows that she is aware and remorseful of her lack of parenting. She tells Andy, "Been there, done that. Fucked it up. Twice" (*Weeds* 4.11). However, her self awareness does

t change her actions, and she uses the pregnancy to save her own life when her  
er decides that she has betrayed him and that she must be executed.

Her protection of her children does not stop, though. Rather, she alters  
r methods to her lifestyle. When Shane kills a women who is threatening Nancy,  
e does not call the police. Instead, she flees with her family. They attempt to  
rt over with new identities, living a life of normality—with assumed names, and  
sified identities. Nancy rationalizes to herself that she has been a good mother.  
e is incapable of accepting the possibility that her chosen career has anything  
with the problems of her children. When Silas approaches her about her  
oices, about the possibility that perhaps things could have been different for  
eir family if only they had attempted a normal life from the moment that Judah,  
eir father, passed, Nancy's response shows that she does not see that the lifestyle  
s anything to do with the outcome:

Silas Botwin: Normal Newmans from normal town. You really believe we  
could keep this up for any serious amount of time?

Nancy Botwin: This is who we are now. This is us.

Silas Botwin: What if you had gotten a real job after Dad died and we  
could have skipped all this shit?

Nancy Botwin: We would have had to sell the house, move to a very  
different zip code. You and Shane would have gone to even lousier public  
schools.

Silas Botwin: That doesn't sound so bad.

Nancy Botwin: You probably still would have knocked up a girl, only this  
one maybe would have been blind instead of deaf, or missing a limb. You  
would have struggled with your grades, smoked weed, dropped out,  
gotten your G.E.D. . . . Your brother still would have had rage issues. He  
would have lost his virginity to a skanky girl, or a skanky girl duo. He  
would have grown increasingly alienated, and ended up stabbing the  
mailman or my manager at the Gap. We would be in the exact same spot  
we're in now. (Shane walks in)

Silas Botwin: Shane, if Mom would have worked at the Gap instead of  
selling drugs, do you still think you would have killed somebody?

Shane Botwin: Probably. (*Weeds* 6.4)

When Silas finds out that his biological father is not the man who raised  
n, Nancy does not allow him to stay behind in an effort to start his own life,  
ther she forces him to run with his brothers and uncle to Denmark, while she  
es to prison. This is not selfishness in Nancy's eyes, but an act of protection.  
ancy turns herself in and agrees to go to prison so that her children can be safe  
d together. She utters in despair and acknowledgment of her failures, "Judah,  
you're still here, I tried" (*Weeds* 3.15).

As the series comes to a close, the viewers are taken into the future of the

Botwin's lives. Silas and Megan have reunited, are happily married, and have a  
newborn daughter. Shane is an alcoholic, gunshot-happy police officer. Andy has  
moved on from Nancy, creating his own live in California. We see Stevie, a young  
man about to celebrate his Bat Mitzvah, and who wants nothing more than to be  
sent to a boarding school so that he can pursue his dreams of professional soccer.  
Nancy again is the devoted mother. Now she owns a chain of retail marijuana  
stores and has offers from Starbucks to buy her entire operation for millions of  
dollars. We say goodbye to the Botwin family and are left with a sense of pity for  
Nancy. Her work as a drug queen pin has financially paid off. She has everything  
money could buy. She desperately tries to piece together a family who no longer  
wants her. She is alone.

The television series *Weeds*, and its creator, Jenji Kohan, address dark  
issues through comedy. HBO took a chance with this series, and with it had an  
instant hit. The series, however, leaves in question the many different faces of  
motherhood. As a society, we see different forms of mothering, we classify  
different people as mothers, but we have yet to engage in a truly academic  
discussion that deals with motherhood on a feminist level. The series forces  
conversations that deal with the multi-dimensions of motherhood, and brings  
forth questions which feminism has yet to answer. In Andrea Press's article "The  
Price of Motherhood: Feminism and Cultural Bias," she points out that "Most  
tragically, our belief that feminism has achieved its main goals—cornerstone of the  
popular postfeminist position—robs young women of the basic theoretical  
concepts they need to challenge the inequities still faced by women of all social  
classes and backgrounds. Not least of these is the societal expectation that most  
women will perform the labor involved in homemaking and childcare . . ." (123).  
Feminism has evolved throughout the years. The feminists of our past have paved  
the way for change, growth, and social acceptance. But can we say that the issue  
of motherhood has every truly been addressed, defined, or studied? In the area of  
motherhood, feminists discourse has been silent.

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