

INKBLOT

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 1st Annual Alumni Epsilon Journal – *Inkblot*. The organizer of this collection is the Alumni Epsilon Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta International Honor Society. The purpose of this journal is to provide an opportunity for Alumni Epsilon members to continue to use, hone, and share their skills and passion for writing with others. In this, we not only share the works of these authors, but also share a little about who they are and how they continue to pursue and integrate the passion for literature, language, and writing in their daily lives in and beyond the classroom. Sigma Tau Delta encourages a lifelong pursuit of bettering yourself, others, and your community through engagement in literacy. The Alumni Epsilon Chapter strives to continue to uphold this ideal.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: GLORIA C. ADAMS

Gloria C. Adams is a member of Alumni Epsilon.

SPLINTER

GLORIA C. ADAMS

I did not know I had been born a tree
until a man came to chop me down
and I found that I could not run.

When he accused me of getting under his skin,
I reminded him that wood splinters when being cut.
Everyone wants to know why I hurt him so badly;
they never noticed how often he sawed me in half,
only to complain that the pieces of me
he was trying to carve away got stuck in his hands.

If you google splinters,
it is easy to find information
on how to remove a splinter from your body,
but difficult to find information
on how to keep wood from splintering.

Maybe the bravest thing I've ever done
to fight the patriarchy
was trust a man again.

You did not know when you touched me
that the last hands laid on me
had fingers so sharp and palms so rough,
they left me more scab than callous.
In a world that teaches girls shame
for merely hosting the smudge of fingerprint,
how am I supposed to trust you to stay
when you see the scars on my thighs?

Why would you put your arms around a pincushion?
Why would you want to hold something
so thick and dense and full of sawdust
that might still be threaded
with some other man's needles?

How's a girl who was raised to be a tree

supposed to feel about a world
where men are raised to become lumberjacks?

I don't know what soft hands feel like.
I am trying to learn how to grow again.
I used to be a living thing.
I was tall and sturdy, rooted in the earth.
I drank water and bathed in sunlight.

Now, I feel like furniture.
Sandpaper hands make you smooth,
whittle away your sharp edges and splinters,
make you easier to hold
but harder to get a grip on.

At this point, I am well worn,
all curve, no bite. All smooth, no snap.
Finished and polished and comfortable.
But I am not ready for your hands.
If you're going to take me home,
can you at least treat me like an heirloom?

Go slow.
No sudden movements.
Ask before you touch me.
Even if you think I want you to.
Even if you know you're right.

I like to say yes.
I like to be comfortable saying no.
I like the sound of my voice
announcing when and how
I will be chopped down,
deciding what I will become
and who is allowed to rest here.

TEXT MESSAGE: TUESDAY: 3AM
GLORIA C. ADAMS

When he tells me
I am the one who got away

I think about the barbed wire in his palms:
how closely he kept his keys
and locked the gate,
leaving me winter cold and howling-
lone vicious beast in the moonlight.

I think about the prison of
everywhere without him,
how he would stay awake on the phone
and sing me to sleep – mandolin boy –
but in the morning hold other hands,
how his mouth was the classroom
where I learned crying over spilt milk,
every time he told me no
and wrapped his arms around me anyway.

It was in his arms I learned to be abandoned
and in his arms I learned to be held too tight.

I got away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: BRITTANY BARRON

In May 2016, Brittany J. Barron graduated from the University of North Georgia with a BA in English and minor in Gender Studies. Her undergraduate research has been recognized by *The Edith Wharton Review* as well as *Gender Forum*. Born and raised in Flowery Branch, GA, she enjoys practicing yoga, drinking coffee, listening to moody music, and watching *Outlander*. Currently, Brittany is a teaching fellow and second-year MFA candidate in poetry at Georgia College & State University.

CONFESSIONS OF FOURTH GRADE DEPRESSION

BRITTANY BARRON

I chewed bits of weight-loss bars
because girls who twirled
their ballerina legs
fed me lies in the disguise
of sacrament
I was saved
in a bathroom stall
learned how to purge my sins
and sing with the power of prayer
hymns for the thin
don't make me ugly
don't make me ugly
I confused mean girls for God
their ruling almighty when they banished me
from the swing set and monkey bars
walk the tightrope, little lamb
you won't make it far
alone, I circled
the playground at recess
my punishment along with my daily penance
while Mama scrubbed the kitchen sink raw
Daddy watched baseball
Sissy's migraines ate brain tissue
I tugged at my skin
until I was blinded
red and wild

GAME NIGHT
BRITTANY BARRON

Daddy's eyes:
metallic bottle caps
that hit the truck bed
when the baseball flies
His daughter's eyes:
green outfields
that span for miles
unnoticed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: HALEY BONNER

Haley Bonner graduated from Wayland Baptist University with a BA in English Literature and Language, and just handed up her thesis for her MA in English Modernities at the University College Cork. She had the distinct pleasure of presenting at Sigma Tau Delta's annual convention two times during her undergraduate career, and she would say that the open, inviting, and invested community that Sigma Tau Delta has contributed to inspiring her to publish.

GOSSAMER HALEY BONNER

Dry.

My mouth, it's dry. My tongue works to moisten cracked lips, but there isn't enough spit in this cotton mouth to accomplish even that.

Clearing my throat, I fold myself farther back on the hard carved bench, carefully keeping my spine extended, leaning heavily into tatty, faded brocade cushions, and shivering at the cool, dank air filling the bare room.

The desert in my mouth distracts me from the cold; it works in tandem with the drums inside my skull.

Gently bending my head down to meet my seeking hands, I softly rub my temples—granting myself some small kindness.

The word “kindness” is foreign in the insidious world I've landed in. Here, I've learned to rely only on myself for comfort, and as my identity fractures, even my kindness becomes suspect.

Strands of hair brush over cracked skin.

Running fingers through my tangled mane, I cringe at its unkempt state. But at least it's clean.

My skin itches, parched and begging for oils or lotions. Absently, I rub at the smooth part of my forearm, thinking but we know begging doesn't get you anything.

The thought makes me focus disillusioned eyes on barred windows. The barriers too strong for now feeble arms to wrestle with. The windows too high to jump from even were they not covered.

A cage that dismisses escape, that dares its trapped prey to flee.

We learned that running never works, and we've paid the price for our foolishness in flesh.

I stare back down at my fingers, cringing when the ache in my back becomes a pull. Slowly, I lift my head back up center; closing my eyes and pretending, for a brief and infinite moment, that I'm simply practicing a posture—that my back doesn't burn fire, my hair isn't heaped in piled curls atop my head in a mess that I'll never untangle, my body isn't suffering severe dehydration, and I'm not wearing a gown that, in another life, would have made me blush.

Its cloth slinks over my skin, gossamer and feather-light; the long length nothing more than an airy confection. It drapes seductively, creating the illusion of curves long gone; the white color standing as a cheap imitation of a virgin's wedding night. The deep dip between my breasts might have once embarrassed me and made me hot with humiliation, but no longer inspires any reaction. Thin straps steal between my shoulder blades and span the length of my back, connecting with the garment again just above a bow at the top of my ass.

I hate it. I *hate* it, and yet I'm glad for it.

Creaking doors alert me to the impending visit of my new guests.

I allow my lip to tremble, just once.

Steeling myself, I set aside what small part of me remains. I know how much they love stealing.

Footsteps echo down a corridor, not singular but several.

Tonight, I receive my penance. A sentence given by jealous jailors over a failed attempt at freedom. A lesson now twice learned.

From a calm place a galaxy away, I see violent men stalk into the space. I watch calloused hands jerk the too-thin girl off of her seat. I see a mass of bodies crowding, petting, pulling, tearing... I watch as they lead her to another door, see them carefully unlock the old mechanism to let the party through and then hastily bolt it once again.

I feel them push me—her! ...Her—down onto a dingy mattress. The gown rips away in a second, torn by too rough hands. I don't know why they make her wear the gowns, except for the satisfaction of tearing them. Another thing for them to break.

Practiced removal keeps her still, unflinching as they all take turns doing what is done in dark, locked rooms on old mattresses. In cu**s, and asses, and mouths. And she waits for it to end, so she can take another bath, wash her matted hair, and accept another gown.

In my galaxy, I think of my sisters—all of them dressed in gossamer gowns waiting for men to rend them. I think of emotion and of life, and I try to reach for feelings which have sustained me. Love and hope long since gone, I try to find hate—but I only taste defeat.

MASCULINE ROMANTICISM: A CRITIQUE OF BURKE & WORDSWORTH

HALEY BONNER

Romanticism as a literary movement responds to revolutionary events of the time. However, its revolutionary ideas around liberation and freedom the period aren't necessarily reflected in Romantic literature, at least not in a positive manner. Consider the idea of gender—representations of gender in romantic writings are contextually important when considering the political and social upheaval of the romantic period. This is particularly evident when referencing works written during or following the French revolution (1789). As scholar Gary Kelly says, 'the British cultural revolution [...] was a field of struggle in which the fortunes of various contestants, including Revolutionary feminism, were influenced by the changing course of the French Revolution' (1). For example, while Republicanism in France caused bourgeois revolutionaries to hope for better class equality, it affected gender by ultimately excluding women from its concept of equality. Edmund Burke's writing reflects this by dwelling on classicist and gendered ideals of culture and representations of power in England. He depicts the political activity of women in France as 'uncanny' and intrinsically implies that women are naturally and necessarily of a subordinate class (Zerilli 62). Burke's writing uses Britain's aristocracy to uphold gender roles, arguing male power and feminine omission as necessary for social/cultural survival. This marginalization of the female in what critics often term first-wave, or masculine, Romanticism is reflected in William Wordsworth's poetry through ideas of Nature. Burke's gendering of ideals like the sublime and beautiful, as well as his political commentary on the French Revolution, work together with Wordsworth's marginalization of the female in nature to promote a naturalized marginalization of the female gender in Romantic culture.

Firstly, one must establish what lies behind the idea of masculine Romanticism. In consequence, one needs also to address its counterpart, feminine Romanticism. It may seem effective to separate the terms masculine Romanticism and feminine Romanticism based on gender alone. While considering biological gender is not irrelevant or incorrect, regarding British Romanticism as purely a binary built on gender creates an incomplete view; the connection between masculine and feminine Romanticism is not made, as scholar Anne Mellor states, as a 'structural opposition but rather [as an] intersection along a fluid continuum. Any writer, male or female, could occupy the 'masculine' or the 'feminine' ideological or subject position' (Mellor 4). The obvious interpretation of Mellor's statement is that Romanticism involves a larger conversation than one that only addresses the division in the biological sexes of Romantic writers.

Masculine Romanticism, for a period of scholarship, masqueraded simply as 'Romanticism' without any acknowledgment of a counter tradition. A common understanding of this masculine Romanticism characterizes it as the epitome of the ego, a distinctly male ego, set in the framework of nature and history. However, a brief glance at male and female Romantic writers, take for example authors William Wordsworth and Mary Wollstonecraft, reveals differences on literary terrain such as 'thematic concerns, formal practices, and ideological [positions]' of canonized writers (Mellor 2).

According to Mellor, canonized poets receive such widespread canonization because 'they endorsed a concept of the self as a power that gains control over and gives significance to nature, a nature troped in their writings as female' (Mellor 2). Masculine Romanticism concerns itself with the assertion of a unified self, which is unique, active rather than passive, and aware of its own self existence (Mellor 145). However, authors in the feminine Romantic tradition celebrate the rational mind which they located both in male and female bodies in an act of social rebellion. Revolutionary female writers, like Wollstonecraft, spent their careers attempting to advance 'feminist arguments in writing' and 'challenging the entire male-dominated institution of writing' (Kelly 1). They critiqued masculine Romantic's apparent social obsession with what we may term 'female manners,' a sort of docile feminine existence subjugated to and dependent on their masculine counterparts. What emerges as central to both movements of Romanticism is a focus on the 'conception and linguistic representation of the self' (Mellor 144). For example, masculine Romantic poets, like Wordsworth, sought to prove and attain their 'self' through using claiming language in verse. This claiming language emerges in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, exhibited in his transformation from Book One's 'naked savage in the thunder-shower' to Book Thirteenth's man whose 'powers are so far confirmed, and such/ My knowledge, as to make me capable/ Of building up a work that should endure' (1 and 475, line 301 and lines 309-311). The constructs of Masculine Romanticism are evident in, and at least partially built on, what would become naturalized, or accepted, as a result of Edmund Burke's work on the concepts of what he calls the sublime and the beautiful.

Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in 1757 and hereafter referred to as *The Enquiry*, provides an early example of his 'analysis of the dissemination of power,' in which he genders the masculine as sublime and the feminine as beautiful (Fulford 32). This work discusses and defends Burke's view of the sublime and beautiful using superficial scientific ideas, which would affirm his opinions of gender roles. He explains his position on the sublime and the beautiful by identifying the causes of each feeling, and sets up this discussion by saying, 'when I speak of cause, and efficient cause, I only mean, certain affections of the mind, that cause certain changes in the body; or certain powers and properties in bodies, that work a change in the mind' (Burke 119). On the back of this statement, Burke creates a gender binary in his ideas of the sublime and beautiful; as he links the sublime with masculine qualities, like strength and size, capable of inducing ideas of 'pain,' 'danger,' or 'terror' of strength and size and the beautiful connects to feminine qualities of 'smoothness,' 'softness,' and 'sweetness' (Burke 13, 156). In Burke's work, these beautiful qualities seem to exist almost as a counterpoint to the sublime, useful for relaxing and soothing, but not fitted for any real labour of the body or mind.

Thus, Burke views the idea of a political woman as an unnatural quasi-feminized figure made of both the sublime and the beautiful—a being dangerous to behold as it belongs to neither group in exclusion and so, threatens the social binaries of masculine Romanticism. For example, in 1790 Edmund Burke wrote *Reflections on a Revolution in France*, hereafter *Reflections*, as a response to the disorder of the French Revolution and a critique for his British audience. In *Reflections*, he depicts the 'atrocious spectacle' of

the morning of October 6th, 1789—wherein he depicts a fictionalized account of the queen of France chased from her bedchambers (Burke, *Reflections* 93). The figure of the queen was especially important to Burke's idea of a political woman; a woman caught between the image of power—a royal title—and Burke's, fictional, account of her terrified flight from Versailles—nothing more than 'beauty in distress' (Zerilli 89). His account questions the nature and representation of power in culture through a gendered implication of femininity as 'beauty, order, and submission' (Zerilli 62). Feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft perceived the problem with 'exalting one royal woman' above all other women and held that 'Burke's main thrust was to refuse the political woman at all' (Fay 72). Though the existence of the political woman in France proved the ability for these two qualities to meet, Burke insists it 'in no way prove[d] "that they are any way allied"' (qtd. in Zerilli 66). His work in *The Enquiry* set up extreme binary views of the roles of the sublime and the beautiful—roles which would naturalize and affirm in England the subjugation of the feminine to masculine in the wake of a social revolution in France. For instance, he contrasts his sublime and beautiful using the concept of 'smoothness'—a feminine quality. He states:

There can be no doubt that bodies which are rough and angular, rouse and vellicate the organs feeling, causing a sense of pain, which consists in the violent tension or contraction of the muscular fibers. On the contrary, the application of smooth bodies relax; gentle stroking with a smooth hand allays violent pains and cramps, and relaxes the suffering parts from their unnatural tension. (Burke, *Enquiry* 151 and 152)

The rough, angular bodies of this excerpt can only represent male bodies, as they are associated with the impression of pain, a cause of the sublime. While the smooth and gentle stroking hand that relaxes is clearly feminine. The image of the beautiful soothing the sublime seems to speak on Burke's ideal of the place of female manners. An idea of the social placement of the female as subordinate to, pandering to, and under the care of the male—the stronger gender, apparently both in physique and intelligence. This notion reflects itself in English social politics of the early Romantic period—a masculine Romantic period wherein social conservatives such as pamphleteer John Bowles argued that nothing 'was so destructive to the "social machine" as female modesty sacrificed' to a Gallicisation of British classes (Meyers 200). Burke's writing typifies the idea of a 'proper lady' in the beautiful—'a feminine ideal which promotes the spiritual over the physical and that substitutes selflessness for selfishness [...] a stereotype but one that came to seem increasingly natural' (Fay 194). One of the ways in which this stereotype of male Romanticism became naturalized, or assumed, in British culture was through its prevalence in William Wordsworth's poetry.

As the linguistic representation of the self was important to both masculine and feminine Romanticism, it's no surprise that critics recognize William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as one of the 'most influential literary autobiographies ever written' (Mellor 145). Wordsworth's *The Prelude* represents the masculine idea of a unified self, characterized through memory and the idea of the human experience shaped by self-growth. What makes Wordsworth's poetic autobiography significant in the discussion of a gendered Romanticism, is the way his 'memory' interacts with the feminine. His poetry relocates

‘attributes which Burke had associated with aristocratic power—not the least chivalry and feminine beauty’ (Fulford 177). However, Wordsworth’s poetry appears not as concerned with class as Burke’s writing; he ‘dominated and enthralled’ a wider audience than Burke had sought to address— appealing to Britain’s middle-class (Fulford 177). Thus, he places Burke’s gender politics in the English landscape, creating a social outcome of Romanticism that acts increasingly conservative. His poetry accomplishes this by accepting and discussing the importance of femininity, while subverting the feminine by removing its autonomy of speech. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s concept of nature showcases this removal of female voice.

The thirteenth book of *The Prelude* includes the well-known famous passage where Wordsworth, ‘as chanced, the foremost of the Band’ experiences a beautiful phenomenon of nature atop a mountain peak in Wales. He says:

I look’d about and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which, meek and silent, rested at my feet. [...]
The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight,
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodges

The soul, the imagination of the whole. (Wordsworth 460, lines 39-43 and 60-65)
Unmistakably, Wordsworth has gendered nature in this passage as feminine. The attitude of Wordsworth’s language reads far too submissively and weakly to represent a male figure— see the ‘sea of mist’ that rests ‘meek and silent’ at his feet, and note also that he has removed the voice of nature, making it ‘silent’ and later making a ‘homeless voice’ (Wordsworth 460, lines 42, 43, and 64). Other aspects of his landscape are thus feminized as well. In line sixty-one of Book Thirteenth, Wordsworth speaks of the scene as one that ‘was shaped for admiration and delight’—a sentiment masculine Romantic society placed upon the feminine role in social spheres (460). Women were encouraged to cultivate attitudes, arts, and other accomplishments which would serve to delight male company. Later feminine Romantic writers, like Wollstonecraft, would seek to address this ‘current “frenzy of accomplishments”’ women had to participate in, through their poetic license, all of which ‘geared merely to seduce success’ in a marriage market (Myers 202). The characterizing of nature as feminine may not appear overtly marginalizing; however, it becomes more so through the rest of *The Prelude*’s Book Thirteenth.

Following the description of the mountaintop scene, Wordsworth includes a moment of meditation he experienced which further subverts the feminine. This subversion becomes apparent when one considers Wordsworth’s use of language in regard to

nature. He writes of nature in terms that, according to masculine Romanticism, the female cannot occupy:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of the mighty mind, [...] One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstance most awful and sublime:
That domination which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things,
So moulds them, and endures, abstracts, combines,
Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence
Doth make one object so impress itself
Upon all others, and pervades them so,
That even the grossest minds must see and hear,
And cannot chuse but feel. The power which these
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express
Resemblance—in the fullness of its strength
Made visible—a genuine counterpart
And brother of the glorious faculty

Which higher minds bear with them as their own. (Wordsworth 461-462, lines 67-90) The image of the 'mighty mind' Wordsworth perceives may appear to refer to nature; however, when one takes a closer reading of the line, it seems to insinuate Wordsworth as that mind (461, line 70). Earlier in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth, in 'a moment of surpassing confidence,' constructs for himself the persona of masculine Romanticism—'an autonomous poetic self that can stand alone, [...] face to face with Nature' (Mellor 148). This persona, achieved only through transcendence from the body to a pure mind or consciousness, is what Wordsworth describes as nature in the above lines from *The Prelude's* Book Thirteenth. However, though he acknowledges the 'awful and sublime [...] domination' of nature, calling nature a 'she,' Wordsworth cannot leave her as female (462, lines 80 and 81). The very characteristic of the awful or the sublime, according to Burke, is male. The language Wordsworth uses to describe nature acts are associated with the male—words like domination, exerts, mould, endures, power, and thrusts. None of these identifiers would describe for Burke, or other students of masculine Romanticism, the beautiful, the 'proper lady'—whom, one will remember, Burke depicted as smooth, soft, and sweet. Thus, when Nature shows power, she becomes masculine—Wordsworth turns nature from a 'she,' into 'a genuine counterpart/ And brother of the glorious faculty/ Which higher minds bear with them as their own' (462, lines 89 and 90). Since Wordsworth already identified himself in *The Prelude* as one of the 'greats,' a creative genius who could stand with the 'poet-prophets of the past,' one can reasonably conclude that the masculine brother borne up with 'higher minds' would represent Wordsworth himself (Mellor 148 and Wordsworth 462, line 90). Thus,

Wordsworth's female Nature no longer appears like a silent figure, she becomes absent altogether. Anne Mellor provides a wonderful articulation of this expulsion: 'To sustain such a divine intellect, unspeaking female earth must first be silenced [...] By the end of *The Prelude*, female Nature is not only a thousand times less beautiful than the mind of man but has even lost her gendered Otherness' (Mellor 149). This loss of female alterity in Wordsworth's poetry further solidifies his position as a masculine Romantic poet.

Samuel Coleridge, another canonised poet of Romanticism called Wordsworth 'a poet without femininity, one who was all man' and he proves that by subverting the female out of nature—a space categorized as feminine. (Fulford 178). By removing the female from nature, Wordsworth follows Burke—echoing a writing style which absented the female from her domestic work sphere, seen in *The Enquiry* when Burke describes the beauty of a 'gentle stroking' hand or a bed 'smoothly laid,' while neglecting to identify the person behind either action (151 and 152). This type of neglect of the feminine or female increased in commonality and acceptance in the masculine Romantic tradition, and so, 'late-eighteenth-century feminism thus "died a swift and natural death, not to be revived again until the twentieth century"' (Lawrence Stone qtd. in Myers 201).

Today one may recognize this form of Romantic sexism as acutely underhanded, as it excluded women from their traditional gender roles, as well as appropriating any positive female characteristics for the genius of male authorship. However, Burke's gendering of the sublime and beautiful along with his political commentary of Revolutionary France and authors', like Wordsworth's, participation in marginalizing the feminine all worked to create what appeared a natural repression of feminism. This repression of female alterity into female manners transformed the culture/society and political agenda of Britain. The value of the female gender was forced to rest upon her 'female manners' with no merit given for her creative, intelligent abilities. For these reasons, it becomes important to discuss the distinction between masculine Romanticism and feminine Romanticism, as well as codified masculine Romanticism's role in the subversion of the female.

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Dylan Clark graduated in 2016 from Wayland Baptist University with a BA in English and a specialization in Professional Writing. He works as an administrative assistant in the Amarillo Public Library system and writes when he can on the side. After struggling for two years with severe alcoholism himself, Dylan's inspiration for *Bottled Thunder* sprouted from the knowledge that alcoholism has hereditary and genetic roots. This story was as much of an exploration of self as it was an exploration of character and situation.

BOTTLED THUNDER

DYLAN CLARK

I loved the rain once. Before tears replaced the puddles, and the thunder woke the monster sleeping inside of Dad.

When I was seven, still living with Dad, we spent summers enjoying the frequent storms together. He didn't teach any summer classes, so we had all day and night together. With no mother around to warn otherwise, he let me play in the rain, bouncing in the puddles, laughing and screaming with childhood mirth. It wasn't like he was absent, though. He wasn't that kind of dad. When I would splash in the rain, you can bet I aimed the puddle-water at his rain boots, trying to make him as wet as possible. His laughter rang out alongside mine, adding deep baritones to the high notes of my childish chuckles.

When the thunder raged overhead, threatening to rip open the sky, my father roared back. His yell held gravel in it—the kind of yell I imagined the lumberjack from my bedtime stories having. Dad stood in our country driveway, face up to the storm, screaming. With him by my side, nothing could scare me. I hollered with him, closing my eyes and throwing my head back. Together, we dared the sky to break open. Together, we dared the thunder to do its worst.

After the storm ended, or after I tugged the hem of his shirt and asked if we could go inside, Dad would scoop me up, and we would leave behind the storm on our own terms. Towels and logs for a fire awaited our return indoors. Looking back, I can't believe we used the fireplace in the summer. Leave it to my lumberjack character of a dad to think of doing such an absurd thing.

But God, were those fires great. We would step timidly across the old floorboards, dripping rainwater with every step. He would wrap the warm towel around me and kiss the top of my head before igniting the logs. The fire crackled to life, and he joined me in front of it.

We sat side by side, a dad and his son, enduring the storm together.

“I love you, son,” he would whisper, just audible over the crackle of the fire. Though he whispered, I could always hear his smile.

Sometimes, I would sit and stare, transfixed, as the deep scarlet streaks of his soaked hair transformed to a vibrant orange as it dried, mirroring the flames in front of us. Other times, I simply leaned against him, reminding myself that I always have shelter from the storms around me. During these times, Dad would wrap an arm around me, pulling me close.

We could hear the thunder in the distance. I looked at Dad, and he looked at me. Then, our eyes returned to the fireplace. I often lost myself as I stared at the flames lapping at the logs, devouring their very life-source with reckless abandon. Something about the way the fire consumed the logs terrified me, and I would creep closer to Dad as the evening went on. He always held me tight as the firelight faded, its life-source dwindling. Maybe he knew the storm would end soon. Or maybe he knew worse would come, and he wanted to hold me safe while he could.

Ignore what people say about him. They didn’t know him during these quiet times—just in the times that followed. He had a parasite inside of him. It wasn’t his fault.

Maybe all those days in the rain soaked through his clothes, through his skin, staining something deep inside of him with the fierce waters of a relentless storm. Or maybe he knew he had the parasite all along, and he was enjoying his time with me while he could. But soon, the storms worsened, and they released a monster before I turned ten.

It all started with the fire soon after I turned eight. One day in June, after our time out in the storm, I went to take my place in front of the hearth. Dad had disappeared somewhere behind me, somewhere in the darkness of the house. The storm raged overhead, creating a sharp *pitter-patter* on our roof. Thunder boomed. My hands fidgeted; I needed Dad next to me. I needed to know we were safe.

Dad called out to me, “I’ll be there in just a moment. I need to grab something.” I couldn’t hear his smile in those words. His voice was coarse and—

And from behind me, from in the darkness, I heard the refrigerator open and close. A few moments later, I saw Dad’s silhouette, a black mass superimposed on the darkness of the den, move to the fireplace and start the fire. The orange and yellow flames flickered to life, casting their consuming light on a green bottle in Dad’s hand. The light reflected and refracted, creating surreal shades of emerald that crawled along the floor and walls, along my body, along my soul. When Dad sat down next to me, the bottle rested between us. His hand stayed wrapped around it, caressing it in the firelight. When he lifted it to his mouth, a new sound joined the *pitter-patter* and the crackling fire—the sound of liquid passing from the bottle’s mouth to Dad’s lips.

Something in me stirred that night, and I remember wondering *Did Dad laugh today?* I could remember hushed whispers frantically shoved into the phone's receiver when he didn't think I could hear. I could remember the dark look in Dad's eyes when he put on his rain boots after ending the phone call. But I couldn't remember his laugh that day.

The rain pelted our roof. The green shades crawled along the walls. That night, I dreamt that Dad was stuck in a giant bottle, and I watched from the outside, seeing an image of him distorted by the green glass. Fear gripped my heart, and I began to cry. I banged on the glass as the bottle filled with rainwater, and Dad's image became more distorted as I looked at him through tear-filled eyes and that terrible green glass. He struggled to stay afloat as I called out to him, begging him to fight against the storm. I saw him open his mouth, and thunder erupted from his throat.

I woke with a start to find Dad holding me in his arms. His voice appeared as a ghost of a whisper, softer than the linen sheets in my bed. "I'm here. You were shouting. I'm here. You were shouting." Dad kept repeating those words as he wrapped his arms closer around me. He sounded worried and—

And when I realized Dad wasn't stuck in an ominous, green bottle, I whispered back, "The thunder. . ."

He pulled me closer. "The thunder," he agreed.

Neither of us slept that night. Both of us sat in silence, too scared to confront the storms raging in our heads, the thunder booming in our lungs.

As June turned to July, we continued playing in the rain. I would splash him, and he would splash me. One day, I turned to get a running start for a jump in the puddle at the end of the driveway. Dad loved this puddle because of its depth, and thus its ability to make the greatest splashes. I jumped, and as soon as my feet left the ground I knew it would be tremendous. I knew I would be covered in the dirty puddle-water. I knew Dad would laugh and smile as he stood there looking at me.

I knew.

So, when I made the greatest splash of my life, I turned, dripping wet and smiling and giggling, and Dad had his back to me as he went inside. He returned a few moments later, standing on the porch as a smile crept across his face. "Look at you!" He called out. "You're soaked!" I tried to smile back as I raised my tiny hands in triumph. But my eyes landed on the green bottle in Dad's hands, looking like a king taking his throne, or like a parasite claiming its host.

The thunder boomed overhead, and the rain began to pour. My hands fell to my sides, clenched in fear. Tears mixed with raindrops in the smeared rivulets on my face. I stared at Dad from across the driveway. His lumberjack scream lied dead in his throat,

drowned under the contents of the green bottle. When I looked into his eyes, I saw the same emotions I was feeling.

He looked helpless and—

And he looked back at me with those emotional eyes, those same haunting eyes I would see in the mirror years later. His hand tightened around the bottle. His other hand twitched. Dad began to raise it, and something caused him to stop, his hand dropping uselessly to his side. I couldn't help thinking of the way he held me when I awoke from my nightmare. His arms felt strong and safe then. But now, they looked weak and useless, drained of their ability to protect and save. Looking back, I wonder if he was reaching out for me, a silent plea to his innocent kid to help fight against the monster wreaking havoc inside of him.

That summer was the last regular summer I had with Dad; it was the eye of the storm. I remember the rains began to dwindle. Without the sharp *pitter-patter* on our roof, I could hear the frantic whispers easier as the mysterious phone calls continued. I remember Dad spent a lot more time with me, even when the summer had ended; he didn't go to work anymore. I remember the nightmare with the green bottle continued through the following months.

Sometimes, I was in the bottle, trying not to drown in the rainwater as I looked out at Dad, still distorted through the green glass. He would reach for me, but his hands always stopped before they reached the edge of the bottle as if he hit a force-field preventing him from making contact. Sometimes he was the one trapped, and I remained locked out, pressing my hand to the glass, willing him to survive.

One time, there was something else in the glass, a *thing* writhing and twisting. Between the distortion of the glass and the *thing's* convulsions, I couldn't identify it. I saw it open its mouth, and thunder bellowed from its lungs. I stood in horror as the air reverberated. The bottle shook, then a web of cracks shot across the green glass. I woke as the bottle shattered, just before seeing the *thing's* true form. Dad wasn't there to hold me that night; I cried silently under my covers, scared to death of something my nine year-old mind didn't understand.

Sometimes, I thought I could see that *thing* squirming and wiggling in the dark pupils of Dad's eyes. On those days, he didn't act like himself. More green bottles weighed down the trash. He spent a lot of time on the phone those days. I'd hear bits of conversation as I did my chores.

“You left him so why—”

“—doing just fine without you!”

“Why are you turning up now?”

Dad lost his lumberjack charm during these conversations. I could hear thunder in his lungs, and I wondered about the storm raging inside of him. His fists would clench and unclench. He paced the house as the conversation lengthened. Eventually, he'd open the refrigerator, retrieve a green bottle, and return to his office. When I could hear him, he sounded angry and—

And when I went to bed, I could hear him pacing, the old floorboards groaning under his heavy feet. I'd hear the refrigerator open frequently. By the end of the year, I feared the soft, slithering noise of the refrigerator door more than the almighty thunder. The morning after these restless nights, no matter how late I slept in, I'd find him asleep on the couch, one arm hanging off, a bottle still safe in his hand.

His hands. . . They were nothing like his voice, nothing like the commanding hands of the lumberjack from my bedtime stories. They were huge, but they held the gentle confidence of an instrumentalist, of a father. And, when I first found him asleep, holding that bottle, I remember missing the touch of his hands. After the green bottles became a part of our house, he quit holding me.

Please, ignore what people say about him. He was a good father. He had a parasite living inside of him. Blame the monster for making him forget how to love his son, for making him forget how to love himself.

I didn't understand why I was taken away unexpectedly one day. It had been months since I had seen Dad leave for work. We had started using candles for light, and we bathed using water from the well in the backyard. The green bottles littered our house. I'm not sure when, but at some point, I had become too scared to touch the cursed green glass that sheltered demons and drowned my father's screams.

Maybe I stopped touching them when the *thing* had escaped from the bottle in my nightmare. Or maybe it happened when I looked into Dad's eyes and no longer saw him there.

But I couldn't bear the thought of touching those bottles, and Dad never said anything when I stopped throwing them out. Maybe he was scared of them, too.

The day I was taken away, the sky glowered as dark, angry clouds choked off the sun. Lightning seared overhead in webbing arcs. I wasn't scared, though, because the thunder remained silent. "Static storms," Dad had called them in the previous years. Before the green bottles took him from me, we would build blanket forts during these storms, and I would stare wide-eyed and open-mouthed as sparks jumped between the fabrics of the blankets. But today, I sat next to Dad on the front porch, and he sat next to a bottle, which he lifted and guzzled absently.

A car pulled up, which didn't happen at our country house.

“Dad. . .” I whispered. I looked at him, and it felt like the green bottle had captured him entirely.

Someone came out of the car. Her hair writhed in the wind, the dark strands a direct reflection of the stormy sky above.

“Dad.” I tugged on his shirtsleeve. The contact shocked me under the static sky. He lowered the bottle to the porch, but his eyes stared into nothingness, and the strange woman took a step away from her car.

I remember wanting to touch him again as lightning flashed above.

I remember the person walked up the driveway, calling Dad and I by name, her voice searing my heart with same intense heat of the embers dying in the fireplace.

I remember hands on me that weren’t Dad’s, and the sky ripped open.

I remember being guided to a car that wasn’t Dad’s as the rain pounded the broken pavement.

The car’s windows were tinted green like that terrible bottle. I stared at Dad on the porch through my falling tears and the all-consuming green glass. I pounded on the window.

I screamed. Thunder bellowed.

Dad let go of the bottle. He stood, stumbled, recovered. He ran, reaching out for me. He looked lost and—

Scared.

Someone spoke from the front seat. I remember hearing the words “Mom” and “safe” and “better”. I remember hearing my name. I remember thunder drowning out my screams. I remember the *pitter-patter* of the rain on the windshield as the car drove away.

I loved the rain once. When thunder wasn’t the death throes of a lumberjack who lost his voice, and the rain didn’t mask the tears of a boy who lost his fathers in more ways than one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DAVID GOFF

David Goff is a member of Alumni Epsilon.

PULL

DAVID GOFF

I lay open on the ground
and run my fingers through the grass
like the hair of a lover,
smooth against my fingertips.

Under the wide sky I breathe
cold air, wind against my bare arms
holding me here and now,
a reminder.
That gravity pulls all together
and the light of endless stars still
reaches me,
my eyes glowing with their presence
even past their deaths.
That now and always I am
Here.

After time my shiver calms.
I turn, my forehead pressed
against chill earth
in Gratitude.

I remember.

SINGULARITY

DAVID GOFF

Black stars stir
behind my eyes,
circling in symphony
Unmoving.

Quiet wind passes
secret through leaves,
unseen except by force
pushing and waning.

Something grows within me.
What it is I don't know,
can't know.
No thought, no feeling
encapsulates its divergent
delicate meaning.
There in my mind it stays,
until the day it will evaporate,
rising through dimensions
secret to all but the highest shapes
to rest there
forever
in still darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DANA ECKSTEIN BERKOWITZ

Dana Eckstein Berkowitz graduated from University of Hartford in 2013 with Bachelors of Arts in English and from Rutgers University in 2017 with a Masters of Library and Information Science. She currently works as a Library Services Assistant at the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library at Yale University. She loves annual participation in Sigma Tau Delta Conference. This poem was inspired by a drive to PA.

THE BETSY ROSS BRIDGE DANA ECKSTEIN BERKOWITZ

We wished to honor an amazing Woman,
a Woman who graced our country,
leading with strength, guiding with femininity.
While our Men were out waging War,
blasting things apart with cannons and knives,
she mended the country wielding a needle and thread.

She blessed us with stars and stripes.
She left us with flowing fabric.
In a time of Destruction and the torn relationships,
she weaved together, built, and nurtured us.
Her name symbolizes maidenly nationalism.
We wished to honor this Woman.

So we built a Bridge and put it in her name,
a Bridge of concrete, asphalt, of ground stone,
forcefully melted down to pavement with brutal heat.
A Bridge of metal constructed in rectangular angles.
It is pointed and graceless, a treacherously sharp thing,
Emotionless, exhaustively traveled, non-frivolous.

We wished to honor this Woman so
we named in her honor this thing
that represents the harshness that she corrected.
We put it in her name the kind of rigidity
that she so nimbly made flow.
We memorialized her with such strength
That would never bow like her gentle fabrics.

We honored this Woman with a construction
of what she was not.
May every person passing over it remember
what she was.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: REBECCA FERLOTTI

Rebecca Ferlotti is a freelance writer based out of Cleveland, OH. She attended John Carroll University for both her BA in Creative Writing and her MA in Communication Management. She has presented at the Sigma Tau Delta conference for the past 7 years and gave a speech on how to tell a story at Engage! Cleveland's Y(our) Platform event during Young Professionals Week 2015. When she's not writing poetry, she's traveling the world, trying to get to 30 countries before she turns 30.

IN 10 YEARS, REBECCA FERLOTTI

your memories of swinging your 60s skirt
and your days of drippy popsicles
and sticky hands
will have passed.

They'll say you're not smart enough
to go to college,
so you'll remind them
that you know the ABCs in English.

Maybe
you'll look back on November 2012
in Manaus,
when you threw yellow frisbees
at people's faces,
and you'll remember the woman
from Ohio
who called you a macaca
when you did Spiderman tricks
in your mom's car.

**MAKING LOVE AT A SIMON ARMITAGE READING
(OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT)**

REBECCA FERLOTTI

Armitage said cider was the drink of his youth
and I wonder if we'll say the same
of Natty Light
years from now.

We're all bound to end up like this –
drunk in a Sandusky bar
like the hot dog vendor who offered to
buy me a drink.

I can see the words hanging in the air
and I want to grab at them,
but
I don't.

In the laundry room,
a freshman says,
"Long day?"
I say nothing
and fling someone's boxers
into the dryer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CANDY PAULA

Candy P. Higgins-Di Meo, known artistically as Candy Paula, currently works as a Library Page with the City of Torrance, CA at the Katy Geissert Civic Center Library and enjoys being a performing folk guitarist and singer, a professional fine arts artist (acrylics), modern dancer, and a published poet. Candy joined Sigma Tau Delta in 1996 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In 2008, Candy obtained a BA from California State University, Dominguez Hills as an English Major with a Literature emphasis. Candy was published as a child poet in “Sparks with Skipping Stones” and was President of the Junior Poets of Indiana. More recently, Candy published a poetry chapbook “Stars of Light” in 2005.

ONE-NESS TRANSCENDS

CANDY PAULA

DEDICATED TO: THE INSPIRATION

Beloved:
In the Middle
Where we met
There is no beginning
In the circle
Of humanity
There is no ending
One-ness transcends

More than what
Eyes perceive
More than what
Lips confess
More than what
Hearts imagine
One-ness transcends

Look for no
Beginnings
Look for no
Endings
Look for no
Distractions
Look not much
Further
One-ness transcends

Nurturing time
Sharing time

Embracing time
Now is the time
One-ness transcends

Beloved:
The Beginning
An Almighty plan
Was inherited
The Ending

Is already promised
“at that appointed day”
The Middle
DESTINY awaits
Our special journey
One-ness transcends

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DANI HOWELL

Dani Howell received her MA in English with a specialization in literary and textual studies from Bowling Green State University in 2016. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality studies in North American literature and popular culture. She's currently working as a copywriter in Austin, TX.

SHAME, STIGMA, AND SEXUALITY: SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE DANI HOWELL

Michael Warner writes “the world has much to learn from the disreputable queers who have the most experience in the politics of shame,” and as a disreputable queer, Molly Bolt—the protagonist of *Rubyfruit Jungle*—certainly has much to teach readers (VIII). When Rita Mae Brown published *Rubyfruit Jungle* in 1973, the novel’s positive depiction of queer female sexuality was unfounded as literature at the time focused on lesbian death tropes. The text is considered a fairly straightforward, albeit radical, coming-of-age and coming-out bildungsroman.¹ Bonnie Zimmerman contends the novel falls “under the general rubric of developmental literature, or the coming out novel” (245). This theme is common throughout scholarship on the book. Paulina Palmer, for example, describes it as lesbian feminist fiction that concentrates “on the theme of Coming Out” (44).

Reading Brown’s novel in this manner, however, oversimplifies sexuality in the narrative. If one assumes the novel focuses on coming out as a lesbian, the reader will likely presume sex and sexuality are inextricably linked, which—as I will explain—is not how the novel depicts sexuality. I argue instead that the characters’ desire to achieve sexual autonomy drives their actions and sexualities. This idea complicates viewing sexuality as a predetermined set of labels like lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Furthermore, the novel suggests that to achieve sexual autonomy, one must overcome the shame surrounding socially stigmatized sexual activities. Sex acts are not problematic; society’s condemnation of them is. Condemnation associates these supposed unnatural desires with feelings of shame, thus creating a social ideology that impedes sexual liberation. Even though Molly identifies as a lesbian toward the novel’s end, she expands her sexual horizons with both genders: her sexual identity does not solely define her actions. As I will argue, while Molly identifies as a lesbian, the reader cannot assume she wants to have sex solely with women because *Rubyfruit Jungle* presents sexuality independently from gender. Instead of labeling one’s sexuality, the novel focuses on the importance of freedom to explore various sexual opportunities.

In his book, *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner presents his theory of sexual autonomy, which requires “more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them” (7). Therefore, to achieve this autonomy, one must have opportunities to explore potential desires. This theory is

difficult to implement, however, because “almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life,” and as compensation, most “succumb to the temptation to control *someone else’s* sex life” (1). This dilemma leads to one of Warner’s central questions: “Shouldn’t it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy in a way consistent with everyone else’s sexual autonomy?” (1). These ideas are present throughout *Rubyfruit Jungle*. While Molly knows she is more attracted to women than men, she attempts to achieve sexual autonomy by sleeping with as many people as possible. Since each sexual experience can change a person’s perspective on their desires, Molly intends to use her encounters to explore sexuality. In doing so, she has sex with a range of people and helps those around her engage in sexual behaviors that differ from what they would typically pursue on their own. While Molly does occasionally succumb to the overwhelming pressure to control others’ sex lives, which I will discuss later, she tries to be open minded and help others achieve autonomy—a goal the sexual hierarchy often obstructs.

This hierarchy categorizes certain sexual acts and preferences as good/normal or bad/unnatural—designations that impede sexual liberation. If a person’s desired practices fall “on the wrong side of the hierarchy,” he or she faces sexual shame and may be stigmatized (Warner 26). The hierarchy is problematic for the characters because they’re not only trying to determine their sexuality but find opportunities to discover personal desires. Shame associated with sex on the improper side of the hierarchy hinders the characters’ journeys of sexual discovery, forcing some to deny their desires to appease society.

It’s also crucial to understand the distinction between gender and sexuality. Past readings of *Rubyfruit Jungle* describe it as a story about a girl who realizes she’s a lesbian. This assumption suggests gender and sexuality are inseparably linked; this connection, however, cannot always be presumed. In Eve Sedgwick’s book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, she argues gender and sexual orientation must be seen as distinct entities but not in a manner privileging one over the other (34). The distinction is important because many dimensions of sexual desire and choice have no connection to gender (relationships between different generations, number of people, etc.). According to Sedgwick, while modern society views sexual orientation according to a “binarized calculus of *homo-* or *heterosexuality*,” this view only developed in the last century (31). She contends the biggest difference between gender and sexual orientation is that latter is more easily a deconstructive object with greater potential for “rearrangement, ambiguity, and representational doubleness” (34). This distinction illustrates how sexual orientation is not a stable concept determined by markers that imply sexual preference. Sedgwick’s distinction opens up Molly Bolt’s story to be interpreted as far more than a simple queer bildungsroman.

Separating gender and sexuality in this manner significantly increases one’s sexual opportunities. This access to new pleasures allows Molly to explore and come closer to sexual autonomy. To achieve this autonomy, Michael Warner stresses that a person must have the opportunity and ability to figure out one’s preferences. It is not about specifically labeling a sexual identity as gay, straight, or bisexual, but about having the chance to explore possibilities—whether they fall on the acceptable side of the hierarchy

(heterosexual, vanilla, etc.) or the unacceptable side (homosexual, sadomasochistic, etc.) (25-26). As I will illustrate, the characters in *Rubyfruit Jungle* try to overcome these predetermined sexual boundaries by engaging in a variety of sexual activities—often in practices falling on the “unnatural” shame inducing side of the hierarchy. The characters engage in these acts not because they identify with a specific label but because they are discovering what type of sex they find most fulfilling. As Carol Ward states in her book *Rita Mae Brown*: “The sexual liaisons . . . are meant as part of Molly’s education of the world of both” genders (47-48). By refusing to limit experiences to one gender, Molly gets closer to autonomy and avoids being labeled, which is crucial as she “does not want to be defined by any label or [stereotype] . . . [she] detests the artificial roles that separate people” (Ward 50). Molly attempts to avoid artificial roles and their resulting shame. She pushes herself to explore new sexualities and refuses to let society label her in an attempt to obstruct her sexual progress. Her experiences with men and women illustrate attempts to resist the temptation to draw an inflexible connection between gender and sexual orientation. Doing so limits sexual possibilities and increases acts that fall on the immoral side of the sexual hierarchy, hindering progress toward autonomy.

Many characters throughout *Rubyfruit Jungle* have sex in hopes of finding their true desires. The relationship between Molly and her (non-biological) cousin Leroy is one of the first instances where characters try achieving this autonomy. Leroy tells Molly about a man he met, Craig, while at Jack’s Gulf Station. Craig makes advances toward Leroy, and Leroy decides he wants new experiences, so he goes along with Craig’s desires. Leroy tells Molly when they went out: “Craig put his hand on my crotch. I was scared s***less but it felt good. He gives me this blow job and it felt great. [. . . Now I’m] Really scared. Maybe I’m a queer,” but he’s also worried he’ll face dangerous repercussions if this encounter is discovered (Brown 65). Following the blowjob courtesy of Craig, Leroy realizes he enjoys relations with men; however, he’s afraid of these feelings because they fall on the wrong side of the hierarchy. He is torn between what is socially acceptable and pursuing sexual autonomy. Leroy fears facing shame if society discovers his dalliance with Craig; therefore, he can’t pursue his desire. Molly, however, looks past the socially acceptable/unacceptable sexual dichotomy, and encourages Leroy’s relationship. She believes Leroy should do what he desires, and so long as no one finds out, no harm can come from exploration. That said, she warns him to keep his affairs with Craig secret. While she sees nothing wrong with his actions, she realizes most of society will find them problematic. When gender and sexuality are inextricably linked, heterosexuality is presumed and valued.

Nevertheless, while Leroy enjoys oral sex from Craig, Brown makes it clear he’s not necessarily content labeling his sexuality. He understands one must have “access to pleasures and possibilities” to discover what one truly desires, so he decides to have sex with Molly (Warner 7). Molly is also trying to understand her desires but does so in a more open manner. Leroy calls Molly queer while he is trying to define his own sexuality, so she tells him: “F*** off. Why have you got to label everything?” (Brown 69) She visibly rejects the idea of limiting sexuality based on predetermined labels. The two sleep together so both can have sex with someone of the opposite gender. While Leroy has previously had sex with a woman, he states he found no pleasure in it because she

was a prostitute. However, he enjoys having sex with Molly. His sexual pleasures demonstrate that experiences rather than predetermined identity shape his sexuality. Leroy interprets his feelings based on the connection of gender and sexuality. Such an interpretation, however, only complicates his ability to understand his desires. Molly, though, appears more willing to separate gender and sexuality. She realizes she may be queer but refuses to base her “judgment on one little f*** with old Leroy. [They] got to do it a lot more and maybe [she’ll] do around twenty or thirty men and twenty or thirty women” before deciding her preference (Brown 70). While Molly identifies as a lesbian by the novel’s conclusion, Brown incorporates her sexual adventures with both genders in each section, revealing that Molly does not allow her gender identity to predetermine her sexuality (Ward 47). It’s important for Molly to have sex with men and women to know what she desires to continue her journey toward autonomy.³ She is often unafraid of the abnormal side of the sexual hierarchy, so shame does not prevent her from experimenting with various types of sex. As a result, she comes closer to achieving autonomy.

Molly and Polina’s relationship also illustrates the sexual hierarchy obstructing sexual autonomy. The women’s desires fall on the improper side of the hierarchy mixing cross-generational, same sex, and role-play. While Polina originally spurns Molly’s advances – she’s uncomfortable having sex with a woman – it is Molly who realizes *she* is about to have a new sexual experience. Once Molly convinces Polina to sleep with her, Polina reveals that Molly must pretend to be a man for her to enjoy sex. At first, Molly objects to role-playing but gives into Polina’s wishes. She’s willing to challenge her preconceived notion that gender and sexuality are inextricably linked. While Molly dislikes Polina’s style of intercourse, she goes along with it to base her judgment on experience instead of prejudice. In her encounter with Polina, Molly learns, to borrow Michael Warner’s words, that while “it will never be everyone’s taste [. . .] it might be anyone’s” (Warner 38). The women’s contrasting sexual interests demonstrate that while one person’s desires may seem strange, one should not set sexual expectations for another: everyone can have different tastes. Molly’s willingness to engage in Polina’s fantasy illustrates the importance of remaining open to different possibilities, for she never knows what may interest her partner. No matter how unusual the desire seems, she tries to avoid judging and defining Polina by her desires. Molly trusts experience rather than allow shame to shadow to interfere, so we see this relationship get her closer to autonomy.

Shame is a main factor keeping people from sexual freedom. The fear of sexual shame obstructs the uninhibited access to pleasures needed to pursue desires. Society categorizes people based on “attributes felt to be ordinary and natural” which transform “into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands,” and people are consequently punished for transgressing these social demands (Goffman 2). Shame then results from socially unaccepted sexualities. Society established that heterosexuality is “ordinary and natural,” and those deviating are shamed for not meeting social demands. People want to avoid the damage or shame and stigma, and are therefore less likely to pursue sexual encounters that could have social repercussions, hindering the likelihood of sexual autonomy.

The novel's characters struggle with the fear of shame and stigma throughout. The shame associated with those who identify as (or society identifies as) queer can be so overwhelming that people deny their desires to escape societal stigma. If people refuse to fit into the normate society punishes them.⁴ These consequences are particularly evident in Molly's high school relationship with Carolyn. Molly and Carolyn are both popular cheerleaders who date stars of their high school football team. After spending time together, the two develop feelings for one another and enter into a sexual relationship. When their friend, Connie, finds out about the girls' relationship, Carolyn freaks out. She worries people will think she's a lesbian. Because of the shame associated with the word lesbian, Carolyn rejects the label. When Connie confronts Molly about her relationship with Carolyn, she demands to know if Molly is queer. At this point, Molly is also uncomfortable labeling her sexuality. She tells Connie: "So now I wear this label 'Queer' emblazoned across my chest. Or I could always carve a scarlet 'L' on my forehead. Why does everyone have to put you in a box and nail the lid on it? I don't know what I am—polymorphous and perverse. S***. . . I'm me. That's all I am and all I want to be" (Brown 107). Neither character wants to be stereotyped based on their sexuality, which keeps them apart. They fear their social identities will be linked to their sexuality. Since these identities do not conform to normative society's "righteous" demands, this connection would make them outcasts (Goffman 2). As Warner notes, "It's futile to deny the ordinary power of sexual shame," so it's of little surprise Molly is still subject to shame, even though her sexual beliefs are liberal (3). Even for Molly, viewing sexuality as a static binary (homosexual v. heterosexual) makes it difficult to not privilege one side of the dichotomy. While there are characters, like Molly, throughout *Rubyfruit Jungle* who overcome the shame of their socially unacceptable desires, there are others who illustrate the consequences of falling victim to shame.

The novel presents what happens to those who succumb to an unfulfilling heteronormative lifestyle: they become unhappy and beaten down. This fact becomes apparent when Molly visits her first lover, Leota, on a trip home to Pennsylvania. Molly is shocked when, instead of the lively girl she knew, she finds "Leota—same cat eyes, same languid body, but oh god, she looked forty-five years old and she had two brats hanging on her like possums. [Molly] looked twenty-four. She saw herself in my reflection and there was a flicker of pain in her eyes" because she realizes how she looks (Brown 216). When Molly asks if Leota ever thinks about the night they spent together, Leota is horrified. She's ashamed of her past behavior. Leota purposefully represses her sexual deviances and is miserable as a result (as her haggard appearance reveals). She gave into society's expectations and suffers, both physically and emotionally. It's no coincidence the characters choosing to live heteronormative lives are the same ones who seem dissatisfied with their lives. Leota should be happy since her life is socially acceptable, yet she is miserable. The characters who break free of social norms, however, appear content. As Leota illustrates, the normate's idea of an acceptable life, where one's desires fall on the proper side of the sexual hierarchy, is not an ideal for which one should strive.

At the novel's conclusion, Molly states: "Damn, I wished the world would let me be myself. But I knew better on all counts," and this was likely true in the 1970s when *Rubyfruit Jungle* was published (Brown 246). The social climate was repressive to anyone not fitting perfectly into heteronormative society, so while Molly is sexually progressive, she realizes her attempts to achieve autonomy will be rejected by society at large. If read simply as a queer bildungsroman, then Molly, while sexually fulfilled, still lives in a society where she is forced to be closeted. This view, however, limits possible interpretations of sexuality in the text; therefore, we must use theories like those of Sedgwick and Warner to open up texts in ways that may not have been considered, or even possible, in the 1970s. Little has been written about this novel in the past two decades; however, now that understandings of sexuality have evolved, *Rubyfruit Jungle* can be reclaimed as a radical depiction of sexuality, more fitting in the present day than when the story takes place. Now that we have a new lens through which to view Brown's novel, we need to reevaluate our interpretation of it and similar queer texts. Doing so will open up a new conversation regarding sexuality in both literature and society.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Kawanda's article, "Liberating Laughter: Comedic Form in Some Lesbian Novels," argues that Molly's story takes the form of a bildungsroman because it concludes with her developing a stronger sense of identity and affirmation, rather than ending in resignation (254).
- 2 I want to stress that I'm focusing on one having the opportunities to pursue their potentially desired sexual options, free from social pressure. There is no universal way to explore sexuality. Some people may desire possibilities; others may know what they want
- 3 Again, this is not a universalizing view of sexuality. Instead, Molly is exploring her individual sexuality. Her story is not a roadmap for queer relationships, but an examination of one queer women attempting to achieve her own version of sexual autonomy.
- 4 Lennard Davis state that the "concept of a norm as implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (29). The normate, therefore, is the majority of the population who share the same ideas, in this case regarding sexual expectations.

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THE HETERONORMATIVE CONSERVATIVE IDEAL: DISMANTLING NORMATIVE CONCEPTIONS THROUGH THE LINE OF BEAUTY

DANI HOWELL

Nicholas Guest, the protagonist in *The Line of Beauty*, is a queer, (seemingly) liberal, humanities Ph.D. student, and yet he spends most of the novel living and associating with members of the conservative Tory party. The novel was written in 2004, but takes place during various periods throughout the '80s. While Nick is openly gay, the family with whom he lives, the Feddens, prefer he not flaunt his sexuality, as it does not align with their political and moral beliefs. The conservative party, of which Gerald and Rachel Fedden are members, champions a fully heteronormative lifestyle; therefore, Nick's sexual habits and queer way of life stand at odds with the conservative lifestyle.

David Halperin defines heteronormativity as “a system of norms connected with a particular form of life, a form of life that comprises a number of interrelated elements, all of them fused into a single style of social existence,” and this set of norms defines “a set of ideals to which people aspire and against which they measure the value of their own and other people's lives” (450). He goes on to explain that heteronormativity “requires a stable domestic life indivisibly shared with one person of more or less the same age, but of a different gender and a different sex” (450). A heteronormative relationship should have many qualities, including but not limited to: intimacy, love, mutual support; a single relationship should have all of these together (450). Keeping Halperin's discussion of heteronormativity in mind, readers of this novel will see a contradiction between the values the Tory's advocate and their actual behaviors.

As I will explain, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* portrays both queer and straight relationships, and while many of the relationships appear normative to the public eye, none actually fulfill this heteronormative ideal. The characters engage in a range of non-normative behaviors, whether it is a queer relationship, drug fueled sex romp, or extra-marital affair with younger women. The conservative, neoliberal society depicted in *The Line of Beauty* condemns homosexuality as an inappropriate and shameful replacement for heterosexuality. However, Hollinghurst shows that these conservatives do not live according to the heteronormative standards they champion. By showing how both queer and straight characters deviate from heteronormativity, Hollinghurst uses his novel to complicate the idea of the heteronormative life the British conservative party treasured.

Hollinghurst works to dismantle a sexual hierarchy that favors hetero-sexuality and -normativity over other sexualities and ways of life. Michael Warner discusses these hierarchies, writing:

Again and again, we have seen that people want to put sex in its place, both for themselves and for others. And the consequence is not only that they create contradictions for themselves, but also they create damaging hierarchies of shame and elaborate mechanisms to enforce those hierarchies. (195)i

The Line of Beauty calls attention to these contradictions that arise from people trying to control others. Neither the conservative nor liberal characters live up to these heralded standards; since there is no legitimate hierarchy between heteronormative and queer, Hollinghurst suggests queer relationships should not be accompanied with the shame the society tries to force on Nick.

With Nick Guest, Hollinghurst crafts a representation a non-normative way of life. While Nick lives with the conservative Fedden family, he is often at odds with them. Nick contrasts the Feddens in many ways: he has a lower class than they do; he cannot afford expensive art, but can appreciate and understand the art the Feddens own (art the Feddens don't know how to understand/appreciate); and he is a liberal humanities doctorate student, whereas the Feddens occupy an important position in the Tory party.

Perhaps, though, Nick is most at odds with their emphasis on family values. Throughout the novel, but especially in the last two sections, Nick is involved in sexual activities on the supposed improper side of Warner's sexual hierarchy. His non-normative behavior is on display when he and Wani go to the lake in search of a third sexual partner. Nick follows Ricky, the man he and Wani decide to invite to a threesome, into the public bathroom. Nick inquires if Ricky wants to join them at Wani's home to have "a bit of fun" (Hollinghurst 168). When the three men arrive at Wani's apartment, Ricky and Wani begin kissing, as Nick unhappily watches, so he takes "down the leather-bound *Poems and plays of Addison* and got out the hidden gram of coke—all that was left of last week's quarter-ounce. He knelt down by the glass coffee table to deal with it, polishing a clean spot. [. . .] He chopped and drew out the fine white fuses of pleasure and watched Ricky tug at the buckle of his lover's belt" (173). Several aspects of this scene run counter to heteronormative values. First, the people involved are all male, which, as Halperin notes, does not fit with the socially valued system of norms, so on this level the sexual encounter is queer in a literal sense. There are also multiple partners participating in this sexual encounter, and Ricky is a new acquaintance whom they picked up with the sole purpose of having sex (all of which go against the conservative values). From the part of the encounter depicted in the text, we see Wani and Ricky have taken active roles in the threesome and Nick has been assigned the passive role of voyeur. It seems Nick's role may be dictated more by Wani's proclivity for exhibitionism rather than Nick being voyeuristic, since Nick does not seem to take pleasure in watching Wani and Ricky have sex. Additionally, Nick (and likely the other men as well) is taking illegal drugs during this sexual encounter. Readers also learn that Nick and Wani often consume cocaine as there's only one gram left of the quarter-ounce they purchased the previous week.

It is important to note that Hollinghurst does not critique or condemn the queer men in *The Line of Beauty* for not meeting normative standards; instead, the novel is critical of heteronormativity. Nick has many flaws (such as his obsessions with beauty and the Feddens), but only the conservatives whom readers are encouraged to dislike criticize his queerness. Hollinghurst hasn't crafted a narrative that supports a homo-/hetero-sexual binary that privileges heteronormativity, but instead draws our attention to this binary as a way to dismantle it later.

Myron Yeager explains that Nick differs from the Feddens in sexual orientation and class, both of which set him apart from the conservative party members he encounters while living with the Feddens (310). Nick is non-normative in the sense that he doesn't occupy a typical position in the family. According to Julie Rivkin, Nick is seen as the aesthete to the rich conservatives with whom he surrounds himself, however, "the 'aesthete' is always the servant to the moneyed classes in this world" (290). So while he is allowed to live with the Feddens and use their resources, he is an outsider from their seeming heteronormativity. He takes on the role of servant, both in the artistic knowledge he offers them and in his role of caretaker for the Fedden's daughter, Catherine. As long as Nick occupies this role and does not threaten the Feddens' heteronormative way of life, the family accepts him. This fact is hinted at when Nick explains to his first lover, Leo, that the Feddens' are "absolutely fine with [his queerness]." And in his mind he heard Catherine saying, "As long as it's never mentioned," and this fact is supported when his non-normative way of life begins to affect the conservative party's view of the Feddens, and Nick is banished as a queer Other (Hollinghurst 154).

It would be easy to read the novel as setting up Nick and his non-normative way of life against the Feddens and heteronormativity; however, Hollinghurst takes a more nuanced approach than simply depicting a queer/normative binary. A cursory glance at the novel may appear to uphold this dichotomy, as Nick is queer and lives with a conservative MP and his family, Hollinghurst actually uses this opportunity to deconstruct the idea of an achievable heteronormative way of life, because, as Michael Warner argues, "to be fully normal is, strictly speaking, impossible. Everyone deviates from the norm in some way" (54).

The two characters in *The Line of Beauty* who best illustrate the novel's critique of the conservative way of life are Wani Ouradi and Gerald Fedden. Both the Ouradis and the Feddens occupy important positions in the Tory party—Wani's family is a major financial contributor to Margaret Thatcher, and Gerald is a key Tory MP. Given the political importance of both men, *The Line of Beauty* shows that these conservatives do not actually live heteronormative lives, even though their political party prizes it.

When Wani is first introduced, he appears to be the heteronormative ideal. He comes from a wealthy Lebanese family with close ties to neoliberal idol Prime Minister Thatcher. He is rich, attractive, and has just gotten engaged to Martine. It is not until the second section of the novel that readers learn Wani is far from heteronormative. In fact, besides his conservative political leanings, Wani may be further from this ideal than Nick. Because Wani has a conservative public persona, he requires Nick to keep their relationship private in fear of his queerness being revealed. Nick informs readers that everything he and Wani "did was clandestine. Nick didn't know how long it could go on—he didn't dream of it stopping, but it was silly and degrading at twenty-three to be sneaking sex like this" (Hollinghurst 190). It's clear Wani is uncomfortable with his sexuality (or at least the possibility of it being revealed to others) since Nick is forced to hide their relationship. While their sexual activity is normative in the sense that they keep their sex life private, the other aspects of their sex lives do not meet social norms.

However, no matter how much Wani attempts to hide his queerness, he shows even those who publicly appear heteronormative, may actually be hiding their non-normative aspects.

As I mentioned earlier, Wani's sexual proclivities run counter to sexual social norms. When Nick is telling Catherine about the sex he and Wani have, he informs her that Wani likes to have threesomes that consist of Wani, Nick, and a stranger they randomly pick up. Nick says that Wani "likes the danger. And he likes to submit. I don't quite understand it myself, but he likes having a witness. He likes everything that's the opposite of what he seems" (Hollinghurst 307). When Nick references what it "seems" like Wani would like, he is referring to the sexual preferences dictated by heteronormativity, since publically, Wani seems to uphold these norms. However, Wani's sexual desires are far from what normative society deems acceptable. Nick also notes throughout the last two sections of the novel that Wani refuses to state his love to Nick, which may illustrate that Wani wants to separate love and sexual relationships—an egregious offense to heteronormative standards. Wani's sexual desires seem at odds with his public persona, for he is "the son of a Lebanese immigrant multi-millionaire who has already inherited the spoils of Thatcherism" (Eastham 515). However, this goes to support the novel's critique of a conservative party that refuses to acknowledge the impossibility of implementing the heteronormative lifestyle they promote.

Throughout *The Line of Beauty*, Gerald Fedden seems to be the embodiment of conservative Tory values. He represents heteronormativity. He has the nuclear family—a wife, a son, and a daughter. He financially provides for his family. He is an MP for the conservative party. By setting Gerald up as a prime example of heteronormativity, Hollinghurst is then best able to criticize this idea when he shows that not even Gerald Fedden is able to uphold these standards. José Yebra echoes a similar sentiment when he explains: "Down from Oxford, Nick is invited by his upper class college friend, Toby Fedden, to stay with his glamorous family at Notting Hill. Thus, the hero meets his fate, a world of beauty that eventually turns out to be uglier than expected" (187). Nick has idealized what his life will be like with the Feddens, however, he eventually realizes that all is not what it seems as Gerald ends up being homophobic and dismisses Nick from his house when the press discovers Nick is gay. His reaction to Nick's 'deviant' sexuality seems especially repulsive to readers since Gerald also has sexual relations that fall on the non-normative end of Warner's sexual hierarchy.

On Gerald's trip to Nick's hometown to visit voters, Nick discovers Gerald is having an affair with his secretary, Penny. Nick follows Gerald and Penny into what he believes is a service passageway. However, the sight that greeted Nick is not what he anticipates:

The door was still settling back in lazy wafts which was why perhaps the noise of Nick pushing it open didn't alert Penny and Gerald—it was just a further rhythmic displacement of the stale air. He manages to make a kerfuffle, half turning back, trapping his leg and dropping the folder so that neither of them would know he had seen Penny's hand, like an amorous teenager's, rucked in the back pocket of Gerald's trousers.

However, he had seen it, and the shock of it, was trite but enormous. (Hollinghurst 252-253)

Since Nick always pictured Gerald as a staunch conservative, he is shocked to find Gerald engaging in a sexually charged moment that implies he strays from his conservative values. By having a sexual relationship with Penny, Gerald is going against several sexual norms, as Penny is the much younger daughter of a man that he knows, she is employed by Gerald, and he is married. Gerald has deviated from the standards he requires others to uphold. Hollinghurst reinforces the fact that there is a age gap between these two when he states that Penny's hand is "like an amorous teenager's," which is quite apropos since Penny is likely only recently out of her teenage years. What makes Gerald's actions shocking is not that he is having an affair, but that he represents a political party that prides itself on family values, which he makes clear by disparaging Nick's sexuality. Then, as a further critique of Gerald, Penny later explains that Rachel—Gerald's wife—was her father's girlfriend before Gerald 'took' her. She describes Gerald's action as "more than competitive, it was pathological—to steal the girlfriend and then f*** the daughter" (Hollinghurst 434). By describing Gerald as pathological, Penny implies that there is something inherently wrong about his sexual behavior, and given that Nick feels badly for Rachel, the reader also feels a sense that what Gerald has done is improper, which is never conveyed to the reader about Nick's queerness. Looking at Gerald's sexual activities reveals that Hollinghurst's conservative characters are not morally superior to the queer ones.

It seems that *The Line of Beauty* offers a dual critique. First, the novel challenges the idea of an enforceable and attainable heteronormative ideal. Instead, it suggests—in accordance with Michael Warner—that everyone deviates from the social and sexual norms that society values. Second, the novel critiques the conservative party that values heteronormativity, as this group wants to reify an ideal it can not even uphold. The novel's condemnation of heteronormativity is possibly most evident at the end. Barry Groom, another MP, and Gerald are discussing Nick, and Groom refers to him as a "little c***sucker" who thinks he is "so f***ing superior" (416). Since Hollinghurst's novel is directed toward a contemporary audience, this harsh and antagonistic language encourages readers to disagree with the conservative MPs and identify with Nick. The characters who most idealize (yet still do not fulfill) heteronormativity are corrupted, untrustworthy or miserable at the end, whereas reading these offensive comments about Nick, if anything, humanizes him in comparison to the abrasive Tories. As Yebra states: "The political and moral undertones behind Nick's ejection make the reader empathise with the hero and censor his aggressors" (205). Since readers empathize with Nick, they are positioned in opposition to heteronormativity and the Tories, as this conservative party treats Nick poorly throughout the narrative. The novel therefore accomplishes the feat of not only dismantling the heteronormative ideal, as no one can actually live a fully normative life, but also showing how the conservative party that so lauds this ideal is corrupted and does not see the double standard of trying to force beliefs and lifestyles on others that they themselves do not practice.

FOOTNOTES

i. Michael Warner's book, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* gives a detailed explanation of the hierarches of sex, including a chart that compares "Good, Normal, Natural" sex with "Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural" sex (25). Some examples of sexual hierarchies relevant to my essay are heterosexual/homosexual, married/unmarried, monogamous/promiscuous, in pairs/alone or in groups, same generation/cross-generation, and in private/in public (25-26).

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Beth graduated from West Chester University with a BA in English Literature and a minor in Creative Writing. Beth is not working at present; however, throughout her career, it was a joy to incorporate her love of the written word into her work. Having been asked to participate on a panel at her alma mater called “What You Can Do With an English Major” was definitely an honor! The inspiration for “Moments at Daybreak” was being separated from a beloved one through time and circumstance, and the feelings and emotions that came from it.

MOMENTS AT DAYBREAK

BETH A. KLINE

In the moment
before daybreak
I come awake
to thoughts of you.

Missing you,
wishing you would lie with me
now, and always—
no more stolen moments
with fervent longing in between.

So, in the moment
after daybreak
I lie awake
and think of you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KARA KNICKERBOCKER

Kara Knickerbocker is an internationally published writer and world traveler from Saegertown, PA and the author of *Next to Everything that is Breakable*. She earned her BA in English from Westminster College in 2012. Her poetry and essays appeared in or are forthcoming in: *Amaryllis*, *Broad River Review*, *Coldnoon*, *Moledro Magazine*, and the anthology *Voices from the Attic*, Vol. XXII, among others. Knickerbocker lives in Pittsburgh, where she works at Carnegie Mellon University, writes with the Madwomen in the Attic at Carlow University, and co-curates the MadFridays Reading Series. You can find her online at www.karaknickerbocker.com.

SIEMPRE

KARA KNICKERBOCKER

I don't know what I'll find there on the shore, amor
space for me to breathe in salt water
as sea creatures crawl from point A to B—
the only cultured dance I know.
And in it, my hips will give besos to dark haired men
who scan them under thick eyebrows
like the old Spanish arches
I will soon stand beneath.
Maybe pureness is what I am searching for
in the eyes of los niños,
or making this body my home—
all my stationery can't be sure.
I could only taste the bland rice of my life,
long for the fire of a different sun,
for comida to burn my lips
and leave my stomach never the same.
I asked mi madre if love did that.
She just smiled and shook her head,
told me la casa is where
I would unpack my bags and stay—
forever and siempre.

PICKING PENNIES

KARA KNICKERBOCKER

Heads up,
or even tails side up,
it is good luck to find a penny.
My father taught me to spot them when I was a little girl,
the ones discarded in mall parking lots
or tucked under a shelf by the checkout counter at the grocery store,
pennies sleeping on sidewalks as strangers sidestepped them,
too busy to be bothered.
Sometimes Abe Lincoln's face gleamed in the summer sun,
other times they were black with grime
next to littered pop cans and cigarette butts.
Except for their round shape, they would be almost unrecognizable.
"Ooh! Good eye!" he'd exclaim,
beaming with pride at my discovery.
He'd scoop it up with his large hands,
rub the edges smooth with his thumb
before slipping it into his pants pocket.
It would live there until we arrived home,
where he would plop it in the milk jug we kept behind our living room couch.
The clink clink of coins became the soundtrack to my childhood.
We weren't poor.
We were trusting in God,
we were saving coins from the streets,
we were gathering moments,
we were thriving on luck.
By the time I was twelve,
we cashed in those pennies for a vacation to Florida.
My brother and I helped count them out,
rolled them into brown paper sleeves,
deposited them in the Meadville bank.
Because of my father,
I knew a handful of pennies might not make me rich,
but it made cents.
Life made sense.
He explained there are two sides to every story,
that even tarnished things hold worth.
He collected copper-plated zinc faces,
and on them admired the years of his life.
He taught me to always love the neglected;
he showed me the value of a man.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ROBERTO MARTINEZ

Roberto Martinez is a playwright living in Denver, CO, where he hopes to one day finally figure out this whole adulthood thing. He can be reached at bertohasnochill@gmail.com.

LIFE LESSONS: INTRODUCTION TO LIFE

ROBERTO MARTINEZ

Setting: A classroom at the center of a university which is at the center of the country, which is inhabited by the center of the populace. Landlocked does not begin to describe the setting, although “a startling lack of fresh seafood” does.

Time: The first day of the new semester.

Characters: (1F, 1M, 1N)

JANE F, 18-25 A woman.

DICK M, 20-28 A man.

PROFESSOR RAVEN N, 45-70 Professor of 4th Wall Physics.

Lights up on a classroom. Two school desks with one office desk at the head of the classroom. A large chalkboard/white board/what have you; sits behind the desk with “INTRO TO LIFE - LIFE AS AN ADULT –LFE 1010” written on it.

JANE sits impatiently. DICK enters. JANE is not happy to see him.

JANE

Oh my gawwwwd, what are you doing here? Fantastic. Just f***ing fantastic. Since when do you care about education?

DICK

What do we have here? Could it be Captain Prissy-Pants of the U.S.S. Bitchtemkin?

JANE

I cannot begin to tell you how many things are wrong with that insult. Eisenstein is rolling in his communist grave.

DICK

E equals MC bitched.

JANE

Ei-sen-stein, not Einstein, you moron. Jesus.

DICK

Didn't believe in him. "God doesn't play dice with the universe." ...I guess that doesn't mean he didn't believe in God, but he didn't believe in randomness...I think he was Jewish?

JANE

What the hell are you talking about?

DICK

Never mind – look, it's the start of the semester and clearly we both want to be in this class. Can we put the past behind us?

PROFESSOR RAVEN bursts in.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

AHA!

DICK

(at the same time as JANE)

Jesus!

JANE

(at the same time as DICK)

Eisenstein!

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Indubitably, my young pupils, that is the point of this course!...Not Jesus or Eisenstein, you understand, but accepting present circumstances. It will account for fifteen percent of your grade. Attendance will account for ninety.

JANE

Ninety percent? But that's one hundred and five percent tot--

PROFESSOR RAVEN

-- Yes, those are numbers, but this is not a math class. Now then, I'm your guide on this journey of dickery and f***staposition that is life. My name is Professor Sidney Raven: PHD, MD, JD, LOL, G-H-O-T-I, with advanced degrees in fourth wall physics, anterior umbilicus cogitation, and basket weaving. Now, pretend I'm not here again.

(They continue as if Professor Raven was never there.)

DICK

Like I was saying, can we just put the past behind us and act like adults?

JANE

Maybe. If you apologize.

DICK

I have nothing to apologize for.

JANE

Nothing to apologize for? You cheated on me!

DICK

Not on purpose.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

See Dick lie.

JANE

Oh your penis just accidentally fell into my best friend's mouth?

DICK

I never said I wanted a relationship.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Lie, Dick, lie!

JANE

You told me I made the sun rise and set for you!

PROFESSOR RAVEN

See Jane exaggerate.

JANE

You said, and I quote, "You shine like the moon in autumn. There's no bounds to your splendiferous multitudinal luminiferous elegance. I will always love you."

PROFESSOR RAVEN

See Jane fail to perceive misuse and abuse of a thesaurus.

JANE

And you f***ed her in my room!

DICK

Hey, at least someone put out in there.

JANE

I would have put out!

PROFESSOR RAVEN

See Jane lie.

DICK

You weren't really interested in me. I was your pet ego boost.

JANE

You were more to me than...I just, I don't know how to -- It wasn't like that. At least I didn't cheat on you with the biggest slut this side of campus.

DICK

That would be hot.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Now now, let's be above slut-shaming. You can find a better insult than that.

JANE

At least I didn't cheat on you with someone who wears a fanny pack!

DICK

That would be hot!

(A beat)

She gave me crabs, y'know.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Let's try that again. Less candid.

DICK

She wasn't as nice as I thought.

PROFESSOR

One more time. More accuracy, please, this isn't a history course where we can be all willy-nilly with the truth.

DICK

She didn't give me what I was looking for.

JANE

What was that?

DICK

Oh no, no no, no no no, no. Not again. Right here, this isn't going to work. I talk to you and you get me all exposed, I pour my guts out to you trying to get you to give me some kind of connection back, but you don't give me anything. That's why it wasn't a real relationship; I was tossing emotion coins into a bottomless wishing well, not a partner!

JANE

Oh really? **You** wouldn't stop touching my boobs, or my butt, or anything that wobbled. That's all I was to you! You didn't want an emotional connection, you wanted a

docking slot for your dirty USB! And before you even start I know that's a s***ty analogy, but emotion coins into a wishing well, really? *Really?* Or, or, you'd try to barter emotion coins for boob- touching, which incidentally made me feel like an emotional whore!

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Which, incidentally, is an under-appreciated profession. Not nearly as popular as the conventional type of prostitute, but more fulfilling.

DICK

You didn't want sex, but admit it, you didn't want a real relationship either.

JANE

Maybe...not. I was experimenting.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Oh please, try again!

JANE

I wanted to see what would happen if I dated someone new.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

For the love of Euripides -- prove you're a vertebrate, woman!

JANE

I wanted to make my ex jealous and you gave me validation. And that makes me sound like a f***ing parking lot. But then I realized, "hey, this guy actually gives me things I want, like he shares his feelings without me having to pry his mouth open with a crowbar." I was just too fragile to show my emotions at the time. But you know what? I'm f***ing glad I didn't. I thought you were actually a decent human being, and then it turns out you're just a cheating piece of s***.

DICK

You are a piece of work.

JANE

Your dad is a piece! Of work...damn it, that makes me sound creepy.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

I hope to someday live in an America where either parent can be likened to a sexual object with equal pejorative effectiveness.

JANE

Anyway, you're not so special yourself. Dick.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Right, now that that you've laid everything out on the table let's try again.

DICK
You smell funny.

JANE
Do not.

PROFESSOR RAVEN
I see maturity is going to be an issue here. Let's go again, this time as if you were at least eight years old, shall we?

JANE
(At the same time as Dick)
You have cooties.

DICK
Nuh-uh! You do!

JANE
Not thanks to you, fanny-pack-f****er!

PROFESSOR RAVEN
Better. Perhaps we could go as old as fourteen now?

DICK
Prudey-princess co**tease.

JANE
Whoreslutface.

PROFESSOR RAVEN
Splendid! Let's go for twenty.

JANE
If you really respected me you'd just f****ing apologize.

DICK
If I had anything to apologize for!

PROFESSOR RAVEN
Hmmm. Regression. Ah perhaps it was the time interval. Let's try twenty-two.

JANE flips her desk over and turns her back to DICK. DICK fumes and beats his chest like an angry ape.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

I'm beginning to see a pattern in the 20s. Alright, we'll try something different: just admit what you feel.

DICK

I'm hurt.

JANE

I'm hurt.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

There we go! Doesn't that feel good? There is a certain amount of power in honesty, you see. Exposing that soft underbelly is what separates you from animals. And children between the ages of six and thirty six. And used car salesmen.

JANE

I should have been more open, honest, and decent.

DICK

I don't even know if I know how to be honest or decent in the first place.

JANE

You could be a decent guy. If you didn't use girls for their bodies.

DICK

You could be a decent chick if you didn't use guys to feel better about yourself.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Synergy! You got emotional dysfunction in my emotional dysfunction! Together they taste —

JANE

I am so not ready to date anyone.

DICK

Me neither.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Yes, good, but before you get too far ahead of the rest of the class —

JANE

That is so...sexy.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

-- What? Wait --

DICK

You think so? 'Cause you're looking really good today, sugar-shorts.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

Are you serious?

JANE

Wanna get a coffee after class?

DICK

If by "coffee" you mean find some dirty closet in the building, that would be hawwwwwwt.

JANE

And if by "dirty closet" you mean "deeply committed relationship..." Hang on, I need to convince myself you're totally honest long-term boyfriend material. *[A tiny, miniscule beat]* Okay, done. Yay!

JANE and DICK stare at each other. There are fireworks going off.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

You're both coming dangerously close to failing this class.

DICK and JANE begin making out on the instructor's desk at the head of the classroom.

PROFESSOR RAVEN

(cont., matter of fact)

Right. Class what can we learn here? Nothing from this train wreck, that's for certain. Therefore I'm going to go bleach my eyes, drink until this makes sense, and pray to the high heavens that these two never successfully pass their genetic code onto any other unsuspecting victims. In fact, free condoms all semester!

PROFESSOR RAVEN exits. Lights down.

LIFE LESSONS: MATING RITUALS
ROBERTO MARTINEZ

SETTING

Time: The present, provided all the animal examples of mating rituals haven't gone extinct. I know, I know, total bring-down, right? But that's what you get for destroying the EPA and doubling down on fossil-fuels. Oh yeah, I just went political, got a problem with it? Meet me in the parking lot after the show, y'jerk.

Place: A lecture hall.

CHARACTERS (1 F, 1 M, 1 N)

ALAN, m, early 20s – A student.

KRIS, f, early 20s – A student.

PROF. RAVEN, n, 40s-70s – Professor of applied fourth wall physics and magic.

Lights up on a lecture hall, the audience serving as a class. PROFESSOR RAVEN stands in front of a lectern.

PROF. RAVEN

Good day, I hope you're all rested. A few weeks ago, during our first lesson, we dealt with the topic of love. It seems that it did not resolve to your satisfaction. To review: our example students decided (against all good and common sense,) to pursue romance with one another despite the obvious pain that they would cause each other. Somehow the subject matter seemed to eclipse the lesson entirely. Nearly all the questions I received during the follow-up lesson were dedicated to your own sexual pursuits! This is what happens when you let body parts without neurons do the thinking for you. Therefore I'm going to remedy this error on my part by using two students with absolutely no chemistry to help you horny-drunken-heathen-monkeys (which is to say 20-somethings) understand the finer points of sex and what it can do to your underdeveloped psyches.

Now let's meet our subjects. I've invited some graduate students from the anthropology department to help me illustrate the most effective mating strategies from the past few million years. If you ask me, humanity has gone about this business in an entirely inefficient manner, so we'll be getting back to basics. With that in mind, please welcome Kristina Leakey and Alan Goodall.

ALAN and KRIS come on stage. ALAN is wearing a hoodie, loose turtle neck, or some other garment that will allow him to duck his head out of sight. Kris wears a similar garment which is oversized or stretchy to the point that Alan will be able to crawl inside it with her later.

PROF. RAVEN (CON'T)

We will begin with the "blank scene" of an average mating initiation. For the purposes of this scenario, the male and female have come into contact through use of ostentatious visual displays of sexual prowess, which is also known as "Tinder." Note

that the female has been on three dates of titanic-scale failure this week while looking for someone to leave the dating scene with and that the male is so inexperienced that in order to make contact he has ingested some liquid courage in the form of four wine coolers. As with all human contact in the modern era, they begin with texting:

ALAN

Hey there, Kristina.

KRIS

Oh, call me Kris, please! Hey, Alan, winky face.

PROF. RAVEN

Now I will translate for those of you who are not socially inclined.

ALAN

So uh, what kind of music are you into? I'm kind of a prog-rock, soul, and jazz kind of guy. Three saxophone emojis and a cat accidentally.

PROF. RAVEN

Do you enjoy my interests?

KRIS

I'm totally into prog-rock and jazz, but I prefer rap to soul. My heart belongs to anything with a banjo in it. Three musical note emojis and an eggplant on purpose.

PROF. RAVEN

I enjoy some of your interests. I am encouraged and will share one of my own interests.

ALAN

Banjos? That's pretty cool. Y'know, I bought an original Les Paul guitar the other day on Ebay for a steal at five grand. Smug winky face with eyebrow.

PROF. RAVEN

I'm going to talk about how much money I spend on recreational items as I'm terrified of what you might actually think of me beyond material goods. That and I've heard from friends this is the surest way to the bedroom.

KRIS

Wow, that's really impressive. I've been shopping for nothing but lingerie lately. Winky face with the tongue sticking out.

PROF. RAVEN

Despite your misstep I'm going to entice you brazenly because you're sort-of-cute and after this week I need a victory and some stress relief in order to continue.

ALAN

I hope your new lingerie matches better than the outfit in your first profile pic. Praying hands.

PROF. RAVEN

I feel a little awkward but I'm still going to attempt to use some kind of bulls*** called "negging" that I learned from a pick-up artist website. And I'm doing it wrong.

KRIS

(Angry)

Oh you're so funny! Crying while laughing face.

PROF. RAVEN

I'm way too smart for that, but I really, really need this.

PROF RAVEN (CON'T)

Right, let's shoot this pony before it suffers any more. I'm going to reset the scene by having it take place between two flatworms. Flatworms do not have to worry about gender-dynamics clouded by millennia of sexism because they only have one sex, meaning that both individuals in a sexual pairing are capable of being impregnated and giving birth. In a sense it is a same-sex relationship, albeit one which requires its own set of rules which are quite a bit more complicated than human homosexual relationships. When flatworms of the same species meet, their first urge is to mate. However, the flatworm in the wild, like a leather bar on a Saturday night, sees some of the most aggressive mating habits in the animal kingdom.

ALAN

Hey there.

KRIS

Hiya. Do you like anonymous sex?

ALAN

Do I?!

Alan and Kris extend their arms and meet them as if they were blades.

PROF. RAVEN

Flat worms fight when they mate. Given that either individual can become pregnant, neither one particularly wants to. The flatworm's penii (and some species do have multiple penii), are also their chief hunting instrument. The last thing to go through many a small invertebrate's mind before it dies is a flatworm's wing-wong. It brings an entirely new meaning to the colloquialisms "f***ed in the head" and "f*** my life."

ALAN

Now wait a minute here, Sunshine, I'm a top.

KRIS

So am I. Only one way to settle it then. En garde! They fight. Which is an entirely unhelpful stage direction, but I'm sure you'll do fine with it. Just imagine dueling with a pair of giant wangs.

PROF. RAVEN

The "members" of the species, pardon the pun, duel for the right to pass on their genes without doing any further work. The losing party will have to deal with the consequences of using precious nutritional resources in creating the next generation. The winner will go on to continue gallivanting around the ocean floor sticking its penii in whatever it pleases.

Alan is struck in the side.

ALAN

Ah damn it.

KRIS

A prick, a palpable prick! Ha, the scarlet-pimp-her-well strikes again! You're pregnant, you're pregnant, na na na na na na.

ALAN

I never should have used my penis as a sword. Why wasn't there an after-school special about this?

PROF. RAVEN

I hope you understand the moral of this story, which is obviously "never bring a penis to a gunfight." Now we'll examine the praying mantis in a laboratory setting. The environment for romance is of unique and often unexamined import as it determines almost the entirety of an individual's potential mates. The male is apprehensive to begin mating, as he can tell the female is agitated; though he will most likely give into his more base urges in order to spread his genetic information.

ALAN

(Struggling with himself to approach)

H-hi.

KRIS

(Licking her lips)

HeeeEEEeyyyy. I've never seen you around here before. Wanna become my bestest boyfriend ever and stay with me for the rest of your life?

PROF. RAVEN

Contrary to popular belief, the praying mantis female does not typically eat the male in the wild – this only occurs in times of great stress—

KRIS

Stress? I'm not stressed, what would I have to be stressed about? I'm just caught inside invisible walls with horrific giant eyeballs looking at me all f***ing day and getting poked and prodded with weird metal tools and wormy plastic-covered hands! I'm peachy keen!

I'm just **hungry**, goddamn it.

PROF RAVEN (CONT)

-- or when prey is not abundant. The male is weighing his urge to flee against his need to mate. Note the way his hips appear to be leading him forward while his head is turning to examine escape routes. Certainly, there are other, less aggressive females out there, but what are his chances of finding one when he's stuck in a glass cage with her?

ALAN

Hey, that's nice and everything, but, l-look at the w-weather, it might rain, I should g-g-go!

Alan humps the air and fails to exit.

KRIS

You think too much. Be my boyfriend and we'll talk about it. You'll be a good listener, won't you? You have really cute ears, I could just nibble on them forever. Well, I try to nibble, but usually I just end up eating really big bites and then before I know it, boom, straight to my thorax.

PROF. RAVEN

The male, sensing more danger, attempts to deploy natural defenses to dissuade the female.

ALAN

I have a fanny pack fetish, I don't floss, and my favorite band is Nickelback!

KRIS

Ew. Still, I'm operating solely off looks here, my delectable little chimichanga. Come closer.

ALAN

Miss Dahmer, I think you're trying to seduce me.

KRIS

I promise I won't bite. Okay, I'm fibbing.

KRIS swipes her hand over ALAN's head. ALAN tucks his head under his jacket/shirt/hoodie.

PROF. RAVEN

With the obstacle of the brain out of the way, the male freely copulates with the female.

ALAN

MMPH! MMPH! MMPH!

“Headless” Alan “mates” with Kris while Kris eats. This should look as bizarre as possible and not erotic in the least. They stop as soon as Professor Raven speaks.

PROF. RAVEN

Can anyone guess what the moral of this story is? Yes, that’s correct, fanny packs are no obstacle when you want to get some, player. And now a reverse of the relationship where the male definitely gets the better end of the stick: the angler fish. The angler fish deals with a limited ability to meet potential mates, though in a situation quite the opposite of the captive mantis. They swim through vast open waters where the likelihood of finding another member of the same species is a rare occurrence. Note: This is a particularly advanced mating technique given that we’re finally dealing with vertebrates.

ALAN pulls his head back out of his shirt and huddles down on his feet, covering as much of his legs with his shirt/hoodie/etc. and waddles over to Kris

ALAN

Hey, babe. You lookin’ good. You wan’ some f***?

KRIS

Hey, uh, I’m not really looking for a relationship.

ALAN

That’s okay, I’m not either! Just one little nibble.

KRIS

No thanks.

ALAN

Hey come on now, this’ll just be a no-strings-attached kind of affair.

PROF. RAVEN

The male angler fish is essentially useless in the species. Barely able to fend for itself, several times smaller than the female, ill-equipped and unskilled in hunting, the male will literally die if he does not find a female. Essentially the male of the angler fish species is like one of those guys you see on Cops who, despite having a mullet and no job, still manages to have 10 children in a trailer and a wife who works.

KRIS

I don't have time for sex, I've got big plans and a long way to swim before I succeed. Go find someone else, huh?

ALAN

I have the fish equivalent of a rusty Chevette with an eight-track player that's got Free Bird stuck in it. Tell me that isn't appealing.

PROF. RAVEN

The female angler fish, through no fault of her own, is producing huge amounts of pheromones that make her a beacon to all parasitic males.

Alan sniffs Kris' knees

KRIS

Stop that.

ALAN

Sorry, baby, you just smell prettier than the armpits of an angel.

KRIS

Look, buddy, I'm just not interested, okay, so bug o--

PROF. RAVEN

The male angler fish, in order to mate in the future, bites the female.

KRIS

OW! F***nugget, what was that?

ALAN

Mmmph.

PROF. RAVEN

Slowly, the male integrates himself into the female to the point where it is impossible to distinguish one from another. To remove him would cause serious harm to her.

Alan crawls into Kris's hoodie/shirt/thing.

KRIS

Well...I guess this isn't so bad.

PROF. RAVEN

In some species, there may be as many as eight males embedded within one female.

KRIS

NOPE!

KRIS shoves ALAN out of her shirt as hard as she can.

PROF. RAVEN

And the moral of this story? That's correct, eight is enough. Now, what information have we learned from this? Please give your answers in the form of finishing your spectacularly awful flirting and in an academic format.

ALAN

Mating rituals are for losers, communists, and assholes. Here's the deal: I wish to give you my genetic information through rigorous application of friction followed by a little crying. You 'bout it?

KRIS

Sure. I too share your distaste for silly displays. I wish to trick my body into thinking it has fulfilled its biological imperative through wily use of prophylactics.

ALAN

All things considered I'd prefer to continue sharing genetic information with as many partners as possible without serious commitment. Sharing my information all over them, from the windows to the walls.

KRIS

...okay, I was going to try and keep it academic for the bit, but, uh, ew?

ALAN

Sorry. Wanna settle down?

KRIS

Apology accepted. Y'know, I was considering leaving the dating scene, but that part with the gross fish has proven to me that settling down is something I want to avoid for a long time. Besides that, you just said you don't want to commit.

Kris exits

ALAN

Aw come on! I'm new at this, I don't know what I want!

PROF. RAVEN

EXACTLY! Humanity can learn a lot from the animal kingdom. Namely that you can have lots of romantic learning experiences, both sexual and otherwise, without damaging someone else by getting into a relationship they're not ready or equipped for.

Kris holds a lacy bra out from off-stage and waggles it at Alan. Alan excitedly follows after the bait, taking off his shirt

PROF RAVEN (CONT)

It could also learn how utterly ridiculous it looks wearing nothing but a pair of socks. Seriously, have you ever tried to watch yourselves mating? It's like watching a pair of factory-defect water-balloons awkwardly bounce against each other until they start leaking. Ahem. In any case, the moral of the story is this: If you're a flatworm, the peen is mightier than the sword. Get it? Peen-is? Ha ha? Not fans of levity, I see. Ah well. Second, if you're a praying mantis, wear a helmet. And finally, if you're an anger fish, stop being an angler fish for the love of Darwin.

Prof. Raven begins exiting, then stops.

PROF. RAVEN (CONT)

Oh, also, Tinder is awful and you may wish to set yourself on fire instead of using it to save some time. Or get yourself laid the proper way by writing some goddamned poetry, or playing an instrument, or drawing a picture like you're supposed to, you literally lazy f***s. *(While walking away)* For chrissakes.

Lights down.

About the Author: Megan McCue

Megan McCue is a member of Alumni Epsilon.

STACCATO

MEGAN MCCUE

“What’s it like inside your head?”

I don’t stop what I’m doing, but my grip on the pen gets little stronger. I don’t appreciate the question, and he should know that better than anyone. But I don’t look up. I can’t, anyway, because I need to concentrate.

“Loud,” I say, because it’s the simplest answer. My handwriting stays as neat and precise as ever.

He makes a noise, indicating that he’s heard me and acknowledging my response. That should be enough. Of course, it never is with him.

“Does it ever get quieter?”

I purse my lips, and my pen stutters on the paper. But even that only lasts a second, and then I’m back to writing again like nothing happened. “Sometimes,” I answer, crossing the “T” harder than I intended. “Depends on what I’m doing. What’s happening.”

“So it never goes away completely?”

When I exhale, it’s careful and controlled through my nostrils. A stranger wouldn’t notice anything off about my behavior. I’ve spent too many years cultivating a proper poker face, and it’ll take more than a few intrusive questions from Tim to ruffle my feathers. My handwriting is getting a bit sloppy, though.

“Occasionally,” I say, forming the syllables carefully. “If I concentrate or get distracted enough, I can block everything out.”

“Sounds painful.”

When I press the pen down for the period, it could potentially be described as a jab. The motions are getting quicker as they get sloppier, but I’m having difficulty loosening my grip. Despite this, my expression stays carefully neutral.

“It’s fine,” I answer. The letters on the page loop taller and wider, but they group tighter and tighter. “I’m fine.”

“Never would have suggested otherwise, dollface.”

My back teeth are grinding, but my lips are still at rest. After a moment, I even release my clenched jaw, though it takes more concentration than I’d like to admit. I start fresh on a new page, but it mocks me, the perfect blankness causing me to temporarily forget what I’d put down on the past page.

I nearly rip the paper in my haste to flip back over to the last, and then I’m cursing myself because that movement was too forceful, too strong, too telling. When I turn back to the blank page, I’m controlled again, careful. Always careful.

“You ignorin’ me now, doll?”

The new sentence springs forth easily, but my writing is still too messy. “I’m not ignoring you,” I reply, letting my eyes follow the easy strokes from letter to letter and blocking all else out. “I’m merely trying to concentrate.”

He laughs. He’s loud, big, distracting. “You’re always trying to concentrate these days.”

“Things change,” I say. I sound much more relaxed out loud than I’m feeling in my head. That’s the key, however. It doesn’t matter how I feel on the inside as long as my outside is perfect. “My life has changed. I need to concentrate properly.”

He’s silent. One heartbeat. Two. Three. Four—

“I’m hurt, dollface. Truly. I’m not worth concentrating?”

“No.” The word is ripped out of me, more growl than spoken word. Almost as soon as it gets past my lips I’m wishing I could take it back, undo the noise. It’s more reaction that he deserves—than I deserve. To try and win back some of my composure, I breathe carefully again—a soft inhale through my mouth, and a slow, steady exhale through my nose.

“My priorities have... shifted,” I explain. I’m more than halfway down the page, but I’m not actually sure I can remember a single thing I’ve written down thus far. “That’s not an indictment against you. It’s just... changed.”

“It doesn’t have to change.”

His quick response catches me off-guard. My pen nearly skips off the paper, but I catch it at the last second. Unfortunately, the damage is done, and the ink is quite literally on the page. The jagged line on the right-hand column mocks me, stark and ugly against all of the loops and curves.

“It might not have had to change,” I reply, writing out each word slowly. I can’t afford another f***-up at this point. “But it did change, and there’s no going back now.”

“I don’t think I agree with that estimation.”

“Tough s***,” I snap back. It’s a little too quick and more honest than I would like it to be, but it feels good letting something out. Just peeling back the corner a fraction. I’ve already finished the page, though, and I know I’ll be out of fresh paper soon. There’s only so much available these days. I should learn to be more careful with it, more sparing.

He’s chuckling, but the sound is low enough I can almost ignore it. Almost.

“Look’it you, doll. You’re getting some of that spark back.”

There’s no hesitation with this new page, and there’s no hesitation in my voice as I form the next words. “I’m not getting anything back.”

“You and I are gonna have to agree to disagree on that one, doll.”

“Don’t call me doll,” I hiss, looking up for the first time.

But no. Nonononono. That was wrong. I don’t look up—I never look up. That’s wrong.

Because when I look up, I see her, standing in the doorway. Staring at me. I know that stare, what that expression means. “Is everything alright, Ivy?” she asks. But her words are not controlled. Nonono. They’re concerned, and alarmed, and just a little bit frustrated. Mother has a terrible poker face.

“Yeah, doll. Is everything alright?”

I’m already looking up, but this time I don’t look over. I can’t. Nothing good comes from looking over.

“Everything is fine,” I say. My words are carefully enunciated once more, careful and controlled, and calm. Nothing to see here folks, don’t look behind the curtain please.

“It’s not nice to fib to your momma, you know.”

And don’t look over in the left corner, for that matter.

My mother’s eyes sweep across the room, but they don’t settle on anything—anyone. All the while, I can feel the grip on my pen getting tighter, tighter. This is why I can’t have pencils anymore. Kept breaking them.

“Alright,” she says, finally, seemingly satisfied that all is fine in the room with the girl that cannot be trusted to be fine. “If you need anything, I’ll be in the kitchen. Just call for

me.”

I nod, once, slowly, carefully. “I will,” I lie. We both know it’s a lie. I won’t ever call, because nothing good comes from calls. That might mean that things are no longer careful and controlled and fine, and I’ve worked too hard for things to not be fine.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, Momma. I got your girl if anything goes wrong.”

She walks away then and I’m grateful for it, so grateful. Because now her back is turned, and she’s across the hallway, and down the stairs, and too far gone to see all my cracks, all the little fissures that are rapidly becoming exposed in the daylight. Press too hard and I’ll be forced to shatter, into a million-billion sharp little pieces.

I’m still writing. I don’t think I ever actually stopped, now that I think about it. I’m running out of blank space on the paper again, and I think I only have a few clean pages left. What to do, what to do.

Tim’s making a noise again, all huffy and aggravated. “You know, doll, it was very rude of your momma to ignore me like that.”

I want to look up again, but it’s useless. I’m running out of ink, anyway. Pretty soon all of these scribbled upon pages on my feet will go where they belong, in the incinerator, and I can start anew tomorrow. Always tomorrow. There’s always tomorrow.

“Doll?”

This time, I don’t respond. I won’t. There’s no use anyway. I just keep writing. Over and over and over again, until only the pages remain. Maybe I can sink right into the pages if I write hard enough...

“Doll!”

Always so loud. Doesn’t like to be ignored, but that’s what has to be done. Mother can’t see me looking up again. Can’t see me looking at nothing but a blank wall. Must always be calm, controlled, and quiet.

I don’t look up. Can’t look up. Gotta keep concentrating.

About the Author: Hank Morgan

Hank Morgan graduated from Emmanuel College in 2012 with a double major in Secondary Education and English. He has continued to advance in this field by teaching in the Miami area and Brooklyn.

PULLED TOES

HANK MORGAN

Bounced Curls, twirled tightly around one finger
Alabaster legs, raised high under frilled skirts, eyes linger
Limbs broke, strained from dance, pulled by fine thread
Light steps, between shore and surf, covered red
Entranced, struck out for a foreigner
Rebuked, she struck out for a foreign land
Ill timed sickness devoured soulful meals
No more childish spinning on pretty heels
Against mud, she found drowned company
Soleless sandals, drifted to the top froth

Now she twirls with Neptune's tide
Often shaking soft under strong current

Moving slowly when tide permits
Often wishing for life above
Regrets are not permitted
Every day drowned

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ANDREW RYAN

Andrew Ryan graduated from The College of New Jersey in May 2016 with a BA in English and minors in Creative Writing and Philosophy. He works for a nonprofit science publisher and writes creatively in his spare time. He has attended three Sigma Tau Delta conventions and hopes to attend more as a member of the Alumni Epsilon Chapter.

INSECURE LODGINGS

ANDREW RYAN

It is 2:13 a.m. now and I am perched precariously atop the rocking chair in my dimly lit hotel room, dressed in my nightclothes and armed with a rolled up copy of today's newspaper. I would sleep but I am nearly certain I saw a brownish-yellow daddy long-legs spider skitter into the thin space behind the hotel wall unit, which houses a heavy, static-prone television set.

I do not fear spiders—large ones or hairy ones or ones with frail, spindly legs. But I cannot find peace of mind resigning myself to sleep in any room harboring an interloper with ambiguous intent. I cannot shake the premonition that if I were to ignore the spider's presence and allow myself to drift to sleep, the daddy long-legs might emerge from hiding at some point in the night, surmount my slumbering body and—as I have a tendency to snore—crawl down the narrow cavern of my throat.

I have heard that spiders have a propensity to do that. I have also heard that they do not. It is a pity that truth cannot be as firm and tangible as the rolled up newspaper I clutch in my right hand. I am disinclined to discover the real truth lying down (so to speak).

In any event, nothing would deter the daddy long-legs from venturing down my throat while I slept. It certainly has the ability to do so. It might even carry out its invasion without my knowing. Perhaps it would remain there, tickling my trachea whenever I coughed or swallowed, unable to escape and unwilling to face digestion—its bleak demise.

I postulate how, if that were to happen, the spider would lose its existential agency; it would exist wherever I wanted it to instead of the shadowy recesses of my hotel room. Maybe I would go jogging in the park or go see a show. The spider would have to accompany me regardless of its desires. What choice would it have? I would be its world, the limits of its fragile existence.

Briefly I consider that it would not have any more or less free will than I, perched precariously atop my hotel room's rocking chair at 2:24 a.m., awaiting the inevitable or chance scenario in which my adversary emerges and I strike. Maybe our entire universe is nothing but a specimen lodged in the trachea of some greater being which defines its limits. Perhaps all the chaos of our cosmos is naught but the rumblings of a larynx.

Riddled with fatigue, I contemplate letting the creature live—letting it continue its existence in this defined space I reserved for myself. Maybe that is what I am meant to do. After all, if I am determined to smash this arachnid from existence, the moment is dragging its heels.

It is 2:31 a.m. now and I am wondering if I merely imagined the existence of the daddy long-legs—if my eyes were merely playing tricks on me in the faint hotel light. Or maybe the spider stopped being real once I stopped thinking about it. Maybe everything did.

I am perched precariously atop the rocking chair in my dimly lit hotel room, dressed in my nightclothes and armed with a rolled up copy of today's newspaper when the lanky thing darts out into the light in the center of the room. I wonder if it sees me. I wonder what it knows of fear, of rumblings, of things it cannot control. My fingers tighten around the newspaper, my feet leave the rocking chair, and I—

THE ALGORITHM

ANDREW RYAN

The Entertainment Complex sprawls fifty acres of Middle America, a colossal black rattlesnake coiled upon the dirt, bursting with light and sound. Composing each of its three levels: a preponderance of rooms—suites, clubrooms, alcoves—each one committed to providing a specialized brand of entertainment to such consistently pleasurable effect that no attendee could possibly depart the Complex entirely sourpussed.

“Honest to God, I’m telling you,” Hudson says. “It’s painless, really. Just wedge that puppy up there. And—” He flicks his hand and makes a whoosh sound. “Clear you right out.”

“Well I’ll be,” Audrey says.

“Ain’t that right, hun?” Hudson asks his wife.

Kat smiles, picking sadly at her veal cutlet.

“She helps me,” Hudson whispers to us.

The club darkens momentarily. Then it floods with neon strobe lighting. A screen behind the stage flashes the words “PRESS SYNC” to a slow electronic drum beat.

“It’s starting,” I say, patting Audrey’s knee.

“I can see that, Declan,” Audrey says, digging through her purse. “Like duh.”

We’re a strained and desperate people. Still, we manage to squeeze the Complex into our weekly routine squarely between our Saturday shifts and our scheduled Sex Time (Sat. 10:00-10:45 p.m.), when Grayson’s grandmother keeps him a little later than usual to catch the weekly installment of *Bitch, You Stole My Wi-Fi*.

We switch rooms every weekend to keep things stimulating. Too much of the same, you drive yourself wacko. Last weekend we heard stand-up comedy at Laughability. The weekend prior we saw a play at DramAntics. Each of them rendered us sufficiently contented. Tonight we met up with Hudson and Kat and settled upon *The Algorhythm*, a trendy, tightly packed dine-and-dance club and an old favorite—one of the founding successes of the Complex.

We open the Complex app on our phones and press “SYNC.” Everyone in the club does the same. The screen behind the stage shows a progress bar, which fills gradually. We wait as the algorithm works its magic, extracting, compiling, and analyzing the listening histories of each individual present, determining the necessary instruments, and producing original sheet music for a computer-generated 30 minute song statistically catered to the collective taste of the room.

The progress bar fills and is replaced with a large, green check mark. Workers in black jumpers carry out the large equipment: a synthesizer, a drum kit, a microphone. In moments, the band saunters out from backstage, one carrying a guitar, another a bass, the last out a banjo.

“Bumpkin bastards,” Hudson says, glancing around the room.

Once they’re all set, the singer asks if we’re ready, and we tell him that we’re ready and start scooting out from behind our tables, moseying on over to the dance floor. But we’re not loud enough so again he asks if we’re ready, and we tell him once again that we are, in fact, ready. So he steps on a foot pedal center stage which causes small monitors to descend from the ceiling and hang there, suspended from metal poles, one in front of each band member. The crowd cheers their descent.

“Man alive, I’m juiced up!” Audrey says.

“Woo,” Kat says.

The players’ eyes lock onto their screens. Once the sheet music starts scrolling, they’re off. The synth gets things going, laying down a trippy tune. The drums kick in with a crash and the bassist holds things down with a persistent, almost intoxicating rhythm that goes like:

*buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH*

The guitarist moves through the same progression of shimmery chord after shimmery chord and the banjo player plucks a cyclic little diddly while the vocalist repeats, over and over, the only lyrics to the song:

I wanna feel your love!

The result: kind of like if Hip-Hop and Classic Rock copulated, both of them knowing it was a klutzy sort of one-time deal, feelings notwithstanding, but it ended up resulting in a kid, so now they do their best to make things work for him on the weekends. But now they feel forced together by circumstance, depriving their sex life of its inherent pizzazz, so now they let Country watch and maybe add a finger or two into the mix now and again.

It works, somehow, and no one seems displeased. Hudson sashays out into the middle of the dance floor, raising the roof. Audrey follows close behind, shrugging her shoulders to the beat. Kat bobs rhythmically on the outer edge of the crowd. The floor is all sweat and body.

I extricate myself to get a drink, more of a people watcher than a bona fide party guy. I watch the mass of crowd bounce. I see Audrey in the center, twirling around, teeth flashing. Hudson pelvic thrusting this way and that. I watch the band members, analyze their blank facial expressions—the singer shouting “I wanna feel your love!” every five seconds, the guitarist playing the same chords, the bassist with his buh duh Duh DUH—and I wonder where their minds drift while they’re stuck doing the same thing over and over for so long a time.

Because when I get to doing the same thing for too long—say, making copies at the office—my muscles take over and my mind fires up. I get to thinking things—big, heavy things I don’t ordinarily have time to think about. Like would I actually be happier doing B than A? Like am I being a class act dad to Grayson? Like how Audrey’s face enlivens whenever she listens to, talks to, or (as I can now see) grinds upon Hudson. How it makes me feel like Audrey might rather spend Sex Time (Sat. 10:00-10:45p.m.) with Hudson and his robust stache.

Kat looks lonely. I buy her a margarita and return to the dance floor.

She thanks me and we just sort of hover there, listening silently, a safe distance away from flailing limbs and errant sweat molecules. After a few minutes, Hudson and Audrey disentangle themselves from the mass. Hudson puts a hand on my shoulder, wiping his brow. Communicating over the noise requires shouting.

“Tell you one thing, kiddo,” he says. “She’s a wild one.”

“I’m raring to go,” Audrey says.

“So where’s the little whippersnapper tonight?” Hudson asks, doing a little shuffle.

“With his G-ma,” Audrey says, pumping her fist.

“Watching Bitch, You Stole My Wi-Fi,” I say.

Hudson stops dancing, his vibe ruined. He shakes his head, disapprovingly.

“You’re one s***ty parent, Declan,” he says, before breaking into a snorkel.

“You’re an ass and a half,” I say. He doesn’t hear me clearly over the music.

“You wanna feel my ass?” he asks, confused.

“Yeah,” I say.

Kat heard what I really said, though, and hits me with a low-five. She even does me one better by fake-tripping and spilling the rest of her margarita down the front of Hudson's shirt.

"Oops," Kat says. "Sorry, hun."

"Oh no," Audrey says.

"Oh no," I say.

"I'm soiled," Hudson says, and he is, soaked all the way from chest line to crotch.

"Dec, you have a spare shirt in the car, don't you?" Audrey asks.

I tell her that I don't. She doesn't believe me.

"I'm gonna check. Be back in a jiff!" she says.

And she's gone.

We three stand awkwardly. The music plays on, but the crowd is starting to thin.

"You two, uh," Hudson says, "enjoying the show?"

"So great," Kat says loudly.

Then something happens with the bassist. His face contorts and he blinks madly, stiffening, as if waking from a dream. His eyes flit about the room. He starts to sweat profusely. He rolls his neck. All of a sudden, he stops playing *buh duh Duh DUH* and starts playing something new, something original and freewheeling that goes a bit like:

buh duh duh duh buh duh duh duh Duh duh Duh duh

I trace the bassist's defiant glare to a second floor VIP Lounge, where a silhouetted figure now stands. Even now there is a play upon his lips that could pass for a smile, and I wonder if he discovered, in some dark recess of The Algorhythm, a foot tapping, a modest headbob.

Within mere seconds, the bassist starts shaking wildly, jaw hanging open in paralysis.

"Aw sheesh," Hudson says.

Kat covers her eyes.

A jet of blood spews out from his mouth toward the microphone stand. The vocalist wipes a little bit from his lower lip. The band plays on, true professionals. Finally, the

bassist crumples to the stage, blood leaking out of his orifices and onto the stage. Complex security guards climb up to the stage, waggle him free of his bass, and carry him off. However, solemn, noble, whatever, death can be so unseemly.

It's never pleasant—the turning off—but it happens. I'm old enough to remember the days when, if a fellow did something you didn't like, you told him so or else let him know with a good one-two to the jimmy. But the Complex insists upon the highest entertainment standards. It can't have any bungler with a fresh idea souring its clients' experiences. So when an entertainer breaks procedure, it turns them off.

I'm looking for Audrey when an announcer's voice blares through a loudspeaker.

"Oh-ho-ho, that wasn't pretty," the voice says. "But between you and me..." The voice lowers to a whisper "I never liked him anyway."

The crowd laughs.

"So now," the voice continues, "it's time to select our next player! Keep your phones handy! *You* could be our next star!"

The screen behind the stage reads "RANDOM SELECTION IN PROGRESS." The band continues playing without bass as a spotlight drags across a crowd of people holding up their phones, bouncing with excitement.

I wanna feel your love!

I'm about to leave to go look for Audrey when my phone vibrates and begins beeping loudly. I remove it from my pocket and the words "YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED" scroll across the screen.

"Hey, way to go, Declan!" Hudson says, pointing to me and making a big commotion.

The spotlight finds its way to me.

"No, wait," I say, trying to push through the crowd. "Where's Audrey?"

My name reads across the screen on the stage.

The crowd starts shouting.

"DECLAN! DECLAN! DECLAN!"

Complex security grabs me by the arms.

"AUDREY!" I shout. But I don't see her anywhere.

“Declan,” Kat says.

Security drags me backstage, where they inject a StageRight chip into my neck, which they tell me will kill the nerves and teach me everything I need to know.

I’m shaking as they push me out onto the stage, disinfect the bloody bass, and hand it to me. And I’m thinking, this is it for me. I’m thinking, I’ll be like the last guy soon. Where, pray tell, should I point my blood-spewing mouth?

But then something amazing happens. I stop caring. About this—about anything other than this song. About Hudson’s arm around Audrey, Hudson wearing my favorite shirt. Hell, he looks damn good in it; he can keep it. All that matters now is this rhythm, a rhythm that—now come to think of it—I’ve known my entire life. And it goes like:

buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH
buh duh Duh DUH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kathleen Smith

Kathleen Smith graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Radford University in VA. She has eighteen years of experience teaching English to grades three through twelve. Additionally, she has taught eleven college courses. Kathleen has been writing poetry all her life. Her first publication was in *Rectangle* while an undergraduate. She was also published in *Wildwood*.

LABYRINTH

KATHLEEN SMITH

Many days I have journeyed through the labyrinth,
Placing always
One foot before the other
Methodically, determinedly,
Around the winding paths of forests cool and deep--
Where light is dim no shadows fall--
Across the sere sand of desert years where
Parched and fevered,
Fending off the glaring sun by day
And clinging like a moth to my dreams by night
I muttered my words
Into deaf ears
Expecting reverberations from the canyons of the universe,
Yet only echoes of my whispered lament stirred
And clung to me like a chronic ailment.

Once, I rambled through a greening glade,
Moss-fresh air filling my lungs with pneumonic sharpness,
A painful gasping joy that passed like lust
In a hummingbird's flutter,
And I marched fettered for a season after
To a dream that had died in my arms.
My footsteps wore a path around the grave site into a dusty ritual.
Yet even grief grows old and passes with the years into its
Own quiet grave, a hazy memory,
And I moved on without
Quite knowing how or when,
The machinations of the mind a wily creature.

I sought the world again flamboyantly,
Breaking the horns of the Minotaur,
And those were the days of the hunter,
Of running wild through the world,
Powerful, austere,
Leaping the labyrinthine walls,

Blood-intent, scent of desire driven,
Demented and flushed with the thrill of the chase.

Once more the journey ended
Abruptly, succinctly,
A curtain falling on another act
And I found myself standing alone in the mezzanine
Applauding an empty stage with the light slyly fading.

Outside, blinking in daylight,
Surprise mingling with suspicion to find
The afternoon not night but warm and golden still,
I paused in the leaf-glorious glow of summer,
Inhaling with wonder that had waned long ago in the turnings of the road,
The path behind me.
And a shadow of self like Dorothy Oz,
Red shoes kicking up clumps of earth.
As I ran, walked, danced, plodded,
Clod of a dreamer,
Scarecrow of hope,
Ghost of myself,
And all along the path was mine--
I'd arrived before leaving
And the journey
Is home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jessica Thelen

Jessica Thelen is currently a Visiting Lecturer at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA. She holds a BA in English Literature with a minor in Philosophy from Westfield State University and an MA in English Literature from Clark University. She teaches both literature and composition courses, focusing on race, ethnicity, and identity. She began pursuing a Ph.D. in English in Fall 2018.

“I KNOW YOU ONLY GIVE THIS TO FAMILY”: THE SEARCH FOR LOST PARENTS IN AIMEE PHAN’S “WE SHOULD NEVER MEET” AND “VISITORS”

JESSICA THELEN

In Aimee Phan’s collection of short stories, *We Should Never Meet: Stories*, one of the themes that pervades the stories is the desire for a family, and, in particular, the longing for one’s parents. In order to combat the psychological trauma caused by the absence of parents, two Vietnamese orphans: Kim in “*We Should Never Meet*” and Vinh, in “*Visitors*”, search for suitable surrogate parents. They feel resentment and anger towards their parents for, in their perspective, abandoning them. However, despite this anger, they still seek the care and approval of the adult Vietnamese refugees in their community. However, their desires for surrogate parents are at odds with their feelings of resentment. Kim is angry at her parents for giving her up for adoption, and Vinh is angry at the Americans for, in his perspective, forcing his parents to ship him off to the United States as a refugee. They are also bitter about the American foster care system: neither Kim nor Vinh were adopted by their foster families. This series of perceived abandonments perpetuate Kim and Vinh’s feelings of victimization. In “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse,” Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that minority groups sometimes take comfort in their victimization: “It makes sense, then, for minorities to lick their wounds together, although they may develop a taste for those wounds” (Nguyen 11). Kim and Vinh have grown so accustomed to feeling unwanted by the adults in their lives that when one shows them affection, their suspicions prevent them from truly connecting with them. In order to accept these surrogate parental figures, Kim and Vinh must first learn to cope with, and accept, their identities as refugees.

In “*We Should Never Meet*,” Kim encounters her possible surrogate mother when she attempts to shoplift from a store in Orange County’s Little Saigon. Instead of yelling at Kim, the Vietnamese shopkeeper calmly tells her to leave (Phan 31). Kim expects to be treated with hostility, but instead she is treated with a stern tenderness: “There was a sternness in the woman’s face, but also compassion—something new. Kim was used to insults and threats whenever she was caught stealing...But this woman only nodded at her” (31). This reaction strikes Kim as odd, and she leaves the store feeling confused (Phan 31). Later that night, at the apartment she shares with Vinh and members of his gang Brookhurst 354, she has trouble sleeping—her thoughts wander to her parents. She asks Vinh: “Do you ever think about them?...Your parents. Where they are...don’t you

ever wonder?” (35). Even though Vinh denies this, Kim knows that Vinh must be at least a little bit curious: they do not know if their parents are alive or dead, whether they are in the United States or Vietnam, or what they are like (36). Vinh asserts that they are twenty years old, and they do not need their parents. Vinh is so used to the idea of not having parents that he cannot accept that he once had them: “‘My parents are dead,’ Vinh said. It was a pronouncement he truly believed” (36). Unlike Kim, Vinh cannot bear to think about his past life in Vietnam—it is too painful, even if he refuses to admit that he experiences this pain.

The problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and recalling the survivors of war is a problem that is “endemic to refugees” (Nguyen 8). He states that the “separation from family and homeland is a universal experience. When...war causes separation, the imperative to remember becomes more than simply nostalgic. It becomes ‘a political and ethical act involving choice’” (Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, quoted by Nguyen 8). Even though Kim and Vinh have no “idea if their parents were alive or not” (Phan 36), the desire to know and to remember, is a choice that each makes: Kim chooses to confront these desires, while Vinh represses them. These decisions influence how they interact with Vietnamese adults. Kim chooses to confront the shopkeeper who caught her attempting to shoplift, not out of anger or resentment, but out of curiosity (36-37).

One day while Kim is at work, she encounters the shopkeeper: Kim “memorized everything she could [about her]: long black hair in a simple ponytail that ran down her back, her face free of makeup so you could see the wrinkles around her eyes...” (37-38). Kim notices that she is a middle-aged woman, whose accent “sounded regionally southern and heavy, so she must have arrived in the states not too long ago” (36-37). This accent marks her as a refugee: the aforementioned traits establish her as a possible surrogate mother. Instead of an annoyed shopkeeper, Kim now sees an older Vietnamese woman who is giving her a chance instead of automatically dismissing her as a biracial juvenile delinquent (21). Once Kim returns to the woman’s shop, she wonders why she allowed her to come back into the shop after she was caught stealing. When the woman asks her why she wanted to come to the shop again, Kim remains silent: “It sat there, lodged in Kim’s throat, too afraid to be said, convinced it was too soon” (39); she is too afraid to tell the shopkeeper that she feels connected to her.

Even though Kim experiences a blossoming connection with the shopkeeper, she is afraid of being rejected by yet another adult figure in her life. In her nervousness, she begins to look around the store: “Kim’s gaze retreated back to the jewelry, the jade bracelets...shining brilliantly...” (39). These bracelets are gifts given among female family members: many Vietnamese women wear them, including the shopkeeper (39). These bracelets are significant, since mothers often give them to their daughters: “Mai had gotten one from her foster mother for her sixteenth birthday” (39). Unlike the shopkeeper, and unlike Mai, Kim has never had any older female figure in her life long enough to give her a jade bracelet. The possibility of this woman becoming a surrogate mother is strengthened when she recognizes that Kim is Vietnamese: “Hardly anyone could tell unless they were looking for it. But this woman knew right away, spoke to her

in the native language the very first time” (39). The shopkeeper’s recognition of Kim as Vietnamese validates her identity and strengthens their bond.

This bond is further strengthened when Kim begins to help out at the gift shop, cleaning and polishing jewelry. The shopkeeper notices that Kim has gotten attached to a particular pale green jade bracelet and offers it to her. At first Kim refuses, asserting that she is unable to afford it (43-44). However, the shopkeeper insists: “Take it...as a gift from me...Think of it as an early birthday present, okay?” (44). Kim is shocked, since she does not recall telling her that her birthday is coming up (44). The woman seems to know so much about Kim, and gives her a bracelet that mothers give to their daughters, strengthening Kim’s perception of the shopkeeper as a surrogate mother. When Kim is in desperate need of money, she goes to the shopkeeper for help; Kim is convinced she will help her: “knowing this woman cared about her welfare, wouldn’t turn her back on her” (49). However, this perception is shattered when the shopkeeper refuses to do so.

Once the shopkeeper learns that Kim needs four hundred dollars, she refuses; she cannot give out that kind of money to someone who is “practically a stranger” (49). Kim asserts that she is not a stranger since the woman gave her the jade bracelet: “I know you only give this to family. Mothers to daughters, I know.’ But the woman shook her head, her face located somewhere between confusion and disgust” (49). Kim was convinced that the shopkeeper saw her as a daughter, and would not fail to help her. However, the shopkeeper asserts that it is incredibly inappropriate for Kim to ask a woman she just met for such a large sum of money (49). The woman tells Kim that she gave her the bracelet out of pity: “I felt sorry for you....you kept staring at it so pitifully” (50). This denial of motherly help and affection perpetuates Kim’s perception of herself as a victim; she then begins to see this woman as a stranger, as yet another adult who is nothing like her and does not care about her: “Once familiar the woman became a stranger again. Her features were not so similar to Kim’s, her face, body language not so loving. She’d been wrong. Kim hated being wrong” (50). Kim was mistaken: she thought she could trust this woman, and through this trust, build a stable, mother-daughter relationship with her. This perceived mistreatment provides Kim with the motivation and opportunity to get revenge on not only the shopkeeper, but on all of the adults who, she believes, have wronged her.

Once Kim returns to their apartment, she tells Vinh that the shopkeeper mistreated and insulted her: “Thief...she always thought that. I was nothing more to her” (51). Since she no longer sees any similarities between them, Kim transforms the shopkeeper into yet another adult who has hurt and alienated her. In order to exact revenge, she gives Vinh the address of the woman’s store, and tells him the location of the safe (51). She realizes that she was foolish to yearn for her parents, and that this hope of finding a surrogate mother, has led her to reject those who truly understand her: “Trying to find something else, she’d rejected what she did have. She should have known no one would ever know her like Vinh” (52). Now Kim, just like Vinh and his gang Brookhurst 354, feels that the only way to get revenge on the adults who have rejected them is to commit crimes against their own community. Perceiving oneself as merely a victim “simplifies power, providing an excuse from the obligations of ethical behavior in relation to both political

and other acts....and the more personal, intimate acts that take place in memory, family, and community” (Nguyen 10). Instead of seeing this woman as like themselves, a victim of the Vietnam War and the racist practices of the United States, Vinh, Brookhurst 354, and Kim see her as complicit in their own victimization, and commit these crimes because they feel that they have no other choice, that this is the only way to achieve any agency (Phan 52).

Memories of the Vietnam War are lodged uncomfortably in the Asian American imagination, just as they are in the white American imagination: “In the same way that Americans are often at odds over how to remember the war, so do Asian Americans sometimes find themselves opposing each other” (Nguyen 13). This opposition, as well as the failed search for the surrogate parental figure, is emphasized in “*Visitors*.” Here, Vinh befriends an older Vietnamese refugee named Bac Nguyen (Phan 91). While he is walking Bac home and helping him carry his groceries, the Vietnam War inevitably comes up in their conversation (91-93). Even though he has no idea what happened to his parents, Vinh continues to assert that his parents are dead (93). Bac confesses that his wife and son were killed during the war as well (94). This shared loss establishes a connection between them. However, Bac and Vinh’s perceptions of the war differ drastically: “‘They’ve taken so much from us,’ the boy [Vinh] said. “‘Yes, the Communists were heartless’” (94). However, Vinh was not talking about the Communists, he was “talking about the Americans” (94). Here, their opposing perspectives are established: each labels a different group as the enemy. Once Vinh and Bac are inside Bac’s house, they continue the conversation: Vinh asserts that it is all very simple—the Americans destroyed their land, killed their people, and left. In order to ease their collective sense of guilt, they took in some of the Vietnamese orphans (96). Bac, who lived through the war, now realizes that “only with time, experience, and loss could a person realize that there isn’t simply one bad guy or one good guy—that in war, there are many sides at fault” (96). Vinh, however, is too angry and resentful to realize this: he only sees the Vietnamese as “suffering victims” (Nguyen 15). Even though their opinions differ, Bac and Vinh connect over their respective desires for surrogate son and father figures, respectively.

This mutual desire is emphasized when Bac asks Vinh how serious he is about his girlfriend: “‘I’m going to marry her.’ The jut of his chin...just like his son Anh when he told Bac Nguyen he was enlisting in the South Vietnamese army. Full of confidence, denial of any fear” (99). These similarities touch Bac, and just as the shopkeeper gives Kim a bracelet, Bac gives Vinh a necklace—that belonged to his late wife—to give his girlfriend, Kim (98-99). Vinh is touched by the gift, evidenced by his shocked expression and inability to speak (99). The father-son dynamic is underscored when they part ways: Vinh thanks Bac and shakes his hand; “his grip on Bac Nguyen tightened slightly...Bac Nguyen squeezed his hand back. ‘Your parents would have been proud of you’” (100). Vinh, more than Kim, resents and blames adults, especially Vietnamese adults, for his abandonment and mistreatment. Opening himself up to Bac is a big step for Vinh. After Vinh opens up, Bac does not turn him away: instead, he accepts him with open arms, and presents him with a family heirloom; he considers Vinh his surrogate son, even though they just met (99).

Like Kim's relationship with the shopkeeper, Vinh's relationship with Bac becomes complicated. Once Vinh returns to his apartment and tells his gang that he has found the perfect house for them to rob that night, he is overcome with guilt: "He abruptly stopped, putting his hand on the kitchen counter...Vinh felt nauseous, a sour bile on the roof of his mouth" (102). The gang, unaware of Vinh's conflicting emotions, grows excited at the prospect of the robbery. Vinh tries to make excuses as to why they should not rob Bac's house, but grows angry at himself; "He couldn't understand why he was stalling on this one. Senile old man" (102). Here, Vinh is attempting to dismiss his hesitation as momentary weakness. Instead of confronting his feelings, he grows defensive: "The old man was so damn sweet, throwing Vinh off guard with the necklace, that he had let himself get weak" (105). These feelings are completely unfamiliar and set him on edge. Later that night, when they go to Bac's house, Vinh is still struggling with his emotions.

However, he compensates for these feelings by convincing himself that he and his gang are doing the right thing by robbing their own people (107). He believes that many of the Vietnamese immigrants have fallen prey to the American Dream: "Didn't they realize they'd always be under the thumb of this government?...They were fools to believe they could actually live among the Americans and become one of them. They never could. They would never be allowed" (108). Robbing members of his own community is Vinh's way of educating them; once they have been robbed, he believes that they will realize that America is no better than Vietnam—that they will never be considered true Americans, only outsiders, perpetual foreigners who have been taken in out of guilt and pity (107-108).

Robbing members of his own community is also Vinh's way of inflicting pain on the Vietnamese adults he believes have wronged him, especially his parents. By stealing, he asserts that he is resisting "being victimized by an oppressive power" (Nguyen 15). When the gang is almost finished robbing Bac's house, Bac wakes up, bewildered (Phan 109-110). He confronts Vinh, but does not immediately recognize him: "What are you doing, child?" (110). As they attempt to flee, one of Vinh's gang members calls out his name (109). Once Bac hears Vinh's name, he knows that the Vinh who is robbing him is the same Vinh he met earlier that day: "Vinh?...is that you?" (110). Once Vinh hears Bac calling his name, he freezes: "The voice was soft and frail, but in the cold night air, soared furiously through Vinh's ears, down his throat, nearly strangling his heart" (110). He feels guilty, ashamed, angry, and betrayed. The final act of perceived betrayal occurs when Bac walks up to him, "his arms outstretched like he wanted to embrace" (111), and asks: "Why are you doing this? What would your parents say?" (111). Here, Bac revokes his parental feelings and shames Vinh by implying that his parents would be disappointed in him. Once Vinh hears this, he begins to ruthlessly beat Bac up, kicking him in the face, arms, legs, and stomach (111). Vinh's failure to appreciate "traumas other than [his] own" (Sontag, quoted by Nguyen 33), prevents him from connecting with a possible surrogate father, perpetuating his own, as well as others, victimization.

In order for Kim and Vinh to accept their respective surrogate parental figures, they need to let go of their attachments to victimization, and accept their status as refugees.

Breaking this cycle of self-perpetuated victimization means recognizing their agency: even though they are refugees, they still have power. Stepping out of their self-perpetuated victimhood will enable them to accept themselves and the other Vietnamese people in their community. Once Kim and Vinh accept themselves and the Vietnamese adults they have victimized, they, as well as the community, will begin to heal from the wounds left by the Vietnam War.

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“YOU THINK SHE LIKE YOUR FUNNY FACE?”: COMBATING STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY IN CHANG-RAE LEE’S *NATIVE SPEAKER*

JESSICA THELEN

The representations of Asian and Asian American masculinity have mainly been constructed by white patriarchal society. The stereotypical notions of the Asian and Asian American man as both emasculated and hypermasculine have existed since the mid-1800s, when Asian immigrants, primarily those of Chinese descent, began to arrive in the United States; these immigrants were seen as a reliable source of cheap labor, particularly during the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad (Takaki 197). Despite their economic utility, many whites perceived these immigrants as racially and socially threatening (Takaki 192-193). In order to continue to subjugate Asian immigrants, various stereotypes of Asian and Asian American men were created and perpetuated. These stereotypes, such as those of the Yellow Peril and the effeminate foreigner were enforced and strengthened by the United States’ culture, society, and government. In “Asian American Masculinity: A Review of the Literature,” Yen Ling Shek outlines the historical nature of these stereotypes, how these stereotypes have negatively affected Asian immigrants and Asian American men, and how these stereotypes can be combated by creating new, positive images of Asian American masculinity (386), as, I assert, Chang-rae Lee does with Korean American spy Henry Park and Korean immigrant politician John Kwang in his debut novel *Native Speaker*.

I propose that *Native Speaker* can be read as a case study with which to examine how fictional texts can be used to combat the image of the effeminate, desexualized Asian/Asian American man, particularly in terms of his characterizations of Henry Park and John Kwang. By portraying Park as sexually desirable, and Kwang as politically masculine and sexually desirable, Lee begins to challenge the aforementioned stereotypes while continuing to highlight the problems such men encounter in their efforts to construct their identities in a white-dominated society.

The stereotypes of the Asian American man as the Yellow Peril, the model minority, and the desexualized perpetual foreigner continue to shape the dominant images and beliefs about Asian American men in today’s contemporary society in the United States (Shek 379). The large influx of Asian immigrants during the mid-1800s, particularly Chinese and Japanese, as well as Filipino and Korean, caused white workers to fear for their economic security (Takaki 195), inspiring the image of the Yellow Peril: “a threatening and insidious force to be reckoned with” (Shek 380). Not only were white workers, especially white immigrant workers, and white society at large, fearful of Eastern economic dominance, they were afraid of the destabilization of white supremacy; Asian immigrants were seen as reproductive threats, lustful degenerates who would seduce white women (Takaki 205). In order to prevent miscegenation, sexual relations between whites and non-whites, from taking place: “popular images of Asian men as sexually deviant, asexual, effeminate, or luring white woman to their opium dens were created” (Shek 381). These racist images served to perpetuate the fear of Asian immigrants, and,

thus, aided in the continual subjugation of these men. Asian men were also emasculated by being forced to do so-called women's work, jobs normally reserved for women, such as laundry, housekeeping, restaurant work, and sewing (Shek 381, paraphrasing Takaki). These stereotypes continue to influence how Asian and Asian American men are viewed by white, American, patriarchal culture, as well as how these men construct their own masculine, racial, and sexual identities.

With *Native Speaker*, Lee combats the stereotype of the effeminate Asian/Asian American man due with his portrayal of John Kwang, a confident, suave, economically and politically powerful, handsome, and intelligent Korean man. Through the first person narrative perspective of Henry Park, we learn that Kwang is an elegant speaker, a well-liked politician, and a "self-made millionaire" (Lee 23): "The pundits spoke of his integrity, his intelligence...He looked impressive on television. Handsome, irreproachable. Silver around the edges. A little unbeatable" (23). Park is impressed with Kwang: he is not only a great speaker and well educated, but he is a popular, visible politician whose party is pressuring him to run for mayor. Kwang is politically masculine: he is respected and listened to; people support Kwang in his social and political endeavors. Jack, Park's friend and coworker, describes Kwang as a "media darling" and states that "he is untouchable right now" (37). However, Jack's description of Kwang is problematic, since he argues that one of the reasons Kwang is so successful is due to his physical characteristics: in particular, his facial expressions, which Jack describes as being "all wisdom and sincerity" (37), hallmarks of the model minority.

The model minority is another pervasive stereotypical construction of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. The model minority myth arose following the influx of Asian immigrants who entered the United States after the 1965 Immigration Act (Shek 381). This act "encouraged the influx of professionals from Asian countries, a population very different from the low-wage laborers during the 1800s" (Shek 381). These young professionals were seen as products of a Confucian work ethic, which enabled them to economically succeed in the United States (381). In *Native Speaker*, even though Jack identifies Kwang as a representative of the model minority, other characters perceive Kwang in ways that both combat and perpetuate different stereotypes, such as the stereotype of the effeminate, desexualized Asian/Asian American man.

Janice Pawlowsky, head of Kwang's Public Relations team, asserts that Kwang is a very powerful man and that people truly respect him: "John's a genuine peacemaker. He does good work and influential people trust him. I think the electorate is really beginning to understand that about him" (Lee 94-95). The constituents, as well as those with a great deal of economic, social, and political power, trust and respect him. Many people believe that he is the kind of leader New York City needs. Not only is Kwang well-liked and respected, he is able to connect with and communicate with people from various economic and social positions: Korean green grocers, African American reverends, and white politicians, an incredibly valuable skill for any successful politician. By portraying a Korean man in a seat of political power, Lee combats the stereotypical representations of Asian immigrants and what these immigrants are believed to be capable of. In her essay "Citizen Kwang: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and the Politics of Consent," Betsy

Huang explores Lee's portrayal of an Asian immigrant politician, and how Kwang's inclusion in the dominant culture can be read as a type of abjection. Huang argues that even though Kwang speaks the language of "cultural consent," the expectations the United States has of immigrant and ethnic subjects to eschew interests that conflict with those of the dominant culture, that his "eventual failure to rise higher on the political ladder suggests that consent may be...a set of limitations cloaked in the rhetoric of possibilities" (247). However, by portraying an Asian man in a position of political power, Lee challenges the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner: Kwang is treated as a citizen whose opinions and ideas should not only be listened to, but taken seriously. As Janice states; "Everyone seems to love him. He can draw hordes, you know. He has that gift. Not all politicians do. Most have to learn to do it" (Lee 93). Kwang is characterized as a natural leader of the people, someone people can turn to in times of crisis and trust that he is going to take their interests into consideration.

Instead of being seen as the Yellow Peril, Kwang is well-liked and respected. As Huang argues, Lee characterizes Kwang as politically masculine, as embodying the oratorical talent that is characteristic of American male politicians, a talent that is: "one of the most important skills a politician must possess. Kwang's outspokenness and eloquence, the defining factors of his political success, reflect Lee's recognition of the importance of speech" (249). The "importance of speech" (Huang 249), the "assertion of voice" (249) is the "most fundamental means by which citizens and subjects claim and express their membership in American society" (249). I agree with Huang's assertion that vocalization is one of the normative characteristics of the American citizen, and that Lee portrays Kwang as a man who belongs in America: a man who, if given the opportunity, can greatly benefit society.

Not only does Lee, with his characterization of John Kwang, combat the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner, he also challenges the stereotype of the desexualized Asian/Asian American man. Janice asserts Kwang's political masculinity as well as his sexual desirability: "I love him...we all love him. He's genuinely kind. You know he's sexy" (94). Park is amused; he cannot quite believe that Janice, a white woman, could find a Korean man—an Asian immigrant—attractive. Janice replies that one of the physical qualities that makes Kwang so attractive is his skin: "It's his skin...just his skin...there's such a beautiful glow to it...it looks soft: like a woman's skin" (94). Even though Janice, like Jack, perceives Kwang as more than a mere representation of stereotypical Asian/Asian American masculinity, they still attribute some stereotypical qualities to him. Janice describes Kwang's skin as "like a woman's," (94) perpetuating the notion of Asian men as delicate and feminine; she attempts to justify her claims to Park by telling him that she has only ever dated Asian men: "All my three boyfriends in college. Actually, they were, in a row, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean" (Lee 94). However, by reading this effeminate description of Kwang's body as inherently negative, we run the risk of continuing to strengthen the patriarchal, misogynistic ideology of femininity as distinct and separate from, and inherently inferior, compared to masculinity. Shek highlights the problematic nature of seeing Asian and Asian American men as emasculated, since hegemonic masculinity is characterized by patriarchy, the fear of feminization, and homophobia (384, Chan 156). By characterizing Asian and Asian American men as effeminate, Chan

emphasizes that Asian American men are given “a false choice: either we emulate White American notions of masculinity or accept the fact that we are not men” (Shek 384, quoting Chan 156). Even though Janice describes what makes Kwang attractive as feminine and exotic, she still perceives him as sexually attractive—she does not see these qualities as negative or anti-masculine. By pairing male sexual attractiveness with characteristics typically attributed to femininity, Lee begins to challenge heteronormative masculinity by suggesting that masculinity, and, in particular, male sex appeal, does not have to conform to patriarchal, sexist, homophobic notions of such concepts.

In *Native Speaker*, Lee indeed begins to assert a new kind of masculinity that combines both feminine and masculine characteristics. I agree with Shek’s claim that Asian American masculinity has been subordinated within the framework of hegemonic masculinity (383). In this framework, whites often perceive Asian American men as effeminate and asexual, while at the same time patriarchal and domineering (Shek 384):

These contradictory and competing images of Asian American men serve not only to uphold the cultural and institutional racism in society but also to confuse the development of Asian American men to the point where their self-images are in reaction to those popular images as opposed to being internally defined. (Shek 384, summarizing J.W. Chan; Espiritu; Liu, 2000, 2002).

Henry Park’s Korean immigrant father appears to have internalized these contradictory notions, and perpetuates these notions in his interactions with his son. In eighth grade, Henry Park takes a white girl to the Spring Dance. His father argues that such a girl could never find him attractive due to his foreign physical appearance, equating this appearance with the stereotypes of the desexualized Asian/Asian American man: “‘What you think she like?’ he asked, or more accurately said, shaking his head to tell me I was a fool” (Lee 73). Henry angrily insists that the girl genuinely likes him, and wonders why it is so hard for his father to believe that a white girl could find him physically attractive. In response, his father laughs: “‘You think she like your funny face? Funny eyes? You think she dream you at night?’” (73). Henry’s father is reacting to and perpetuating the racist and white supremacist notions that white girls do not and/or cannot find Asian or American men attractive: that because of their appearance, they cannot be seen as handsome or sexually desirable.

Henry’s father also argues that, because of their different racial and cultural backgrounds, that Henry and the white girl are too different, and that a relationship between them would never work (74): “‘This American girl, she nobody for you. She don’t know nothing about you. You Korean man. So so different’” (74). Here, he is reiterating the notion of Asian immigrants/Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, people who will never be considered as part of the cultural, social, and political fabric of the United States; they will only be seen as the model minority, the obedient laborer who never complains. In “Negotiating New Asian-American Masculinities: Attitudes and Gender Expectations”, Peter Chua and Diane C. Fujino, using empirical data collected from a study focusing on heterosexual Chinese, Japanese and white Americans’

perceptions of Asian American masculinity, argue that Asian American masculinity has been socially constructed around the model minority myth, as opposed to heteronormative and hegemonic masculine ideology. Thus, Chua and Fujino state that Asian Americans are perceived as “highly self-reliant, economically successful, and politically non-resisting...in this sense, Asian American masculinity is about being a good family man who...does not ask for governmental assistance” (392). Henry’s father’s response in learning that Henry is taking a white girl to the dance emphasizes the conflict Asian immigrants and Asian American men find themselves in: they are part of a privileged group in terms of their gender, yet they are subjugated due to their race, preventing them from fully emulating white masculinity (Chua & Fujino 393). However, by portraying Henry as sexually attractive to white women, Lee undercuts the belief that white women cannot find Asian men attractive due to their appearance and culture.

As Chua and Fujino assert: “Redefining, renegotiating, and reconstructing Asian American masculinity is a complex process, which has involved both resisting male dominance and privilege as well as using patriarchy to buttress a somewhat fragile and certainly racialized masculinity” (393). With his novel *Native Speaker*, Chang-rae Lee challenges the stereotypes of the effeminate, desexualized Asian and Asian American man by portraying John Kwang as politically masculine, and by characterizing both Kwang and Henry Park as sexually attractive. Fictional narratives can serve as a way to confront and challenge stereotypes about Asian/Asian American masculinity and sexuality by reconfiguring these stereotypes, and, in doing so, creating new images of Asian masculinity. Lee not only reconfigures these stereotypes, but he does so in a way that does not dismiss the problems Asian and Asian American men face in constructing their racial, sexual, and masculine identities in a white dominated society. Positive fictional representations of Asian and Asian American men can impact the way such men perceive themselves, as well as the ways they are portrayed in United States popular culture. In order for true change to occur, we not only have to confront and make people aware of such stereotypes, but create new, positive representations of Asian and Asian American masculinity.

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Rose Zaloom graduated as the valedictorian from Utica College in 2016, where she earned a BA in English with minors in Theatre and Creative Writing. Currently, Rose is a second-year Ph.D. student at the University of Rochester and specializes in English Renaissance Drama. Her work has been published in *Ampersand: Utica College's Literary Journal* and *The Spectator: Utica College's Alumni Newsletter*. She has forthcoming poetry in *ELKE: A Little Journal* and looks forward to presenting at the 2017 NYCEA conference. Rose enjoys playing trombone, tennis, and giving belly rubs to her two cats.

ON READING AN AMERICAN-TO-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

ROSE ZALOOM

Allah is God like cat is gato
Schuhe are chaussures, letto- yatak.

And to disagree is ignorance,
Not opinion, a right, or patriotism.
Characters signify always, but
People give meaning to thoughts
ideas, laws. Refusing translation
will affect other parts of speeches-
means shining sea and freedom are
faded swamp and prison

I read the dictionary and know
Allah is God
cat is gato
love is love.

TO THE FELLA SITTING IN FRONT OF ME PLAYING TENOR SAX
ROSE ZALOOM

I want to run my fingers through your hair:
A lush forest unexplored and unmapped
I discover, memorize, inhabit.
I imagine you post-shampoo, no tangles or tears.
My hands caress your floppy curls, weaving
Along your thick, black mane- gentler than
The widest comb. I grasp the follicles:
Strong and silk. What conditioner
Saturates your strands? My guess: "Sexy 'n'
Soft." Ringlets spiral out and around, framing
Your forehead with parts smoother than rivers.
In waves I drown, sucked and spun around
Gel whirlpools. I don't bother to swim
Against the curly current. Rinse. Repeat.

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