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# Editor's Note

The Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur goes as such:

*The Minotaur is a half man-half bull creature and offspring of King Minos of Crete's wife Pasiphae and a bull from Zeus. King Minos housed the creature in a labyrinth at the Palace of Knossos to skirt embarrassment, and anyone who entered the labyrinth could expect to never escape. Each year, seven men and women were sacrificed to the Minotaur, and Theseus, the son of Aegeus, chose to be one of these men.*

*Despite Theseus' intent to kill the Minotaur, King Minos was concerned that he would never leave the labyrinth. Princess Ariadne, one of King Minos' children, was in love with Theseus and gave him a bundle of thread before he embarked on his journey to unwind on his way through so that he could trail his way out upon succeeding in his battle against the Minotaur.*

This piece of mythology has lent itself to descriptions of the process of artistic endeavor, from the labyrinth's relation to the unanticipated hindrances on the artist's path to the reliance on Ariadne's thread for the confidence to explore uninhibitedly.

In following this thought, Ariadne's thread is a balance between the ability to enter into a field of choices while also maintaining safety. It is a medium in which to understand and experience first-hand that there is risk in choice, but also that the thread can act as a trusted mechanism to perceive and respond to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

*thread* Literary Inquiry is a collection of what USF undergraduate writers emerged with.

Isabelle

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1. For interpretations related to the creative process, see:

Allison Stieger. "Myth and Creativity: Ariadne's Thread and a Path Through the Labyrinth." *The Creativity Post*. The Creativity Post, 16 June 2014. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.

"Cracking the Creative Labyrinth." Ogilvydo: Where Creativity Means Business. Ogilvydo, n.d. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.

# Gold Stars and Red Glitter

Carmella Garcia

The Lewis family was a happy family. They lived in a simple house, on a street lined with large oak trees that cast cooling shadows over the front lawn, in the beautiful town of Westville. One Sunday morning, the sound of breakfast food frying mingled with the groans of Ben and Carl, who were expressing their annoyance that they had been woken up while the sun was too bright. Mr. Lewis, after hanging the very important and required board around his neck for the first and last time, made his way to the twin's room. He hesitantly asked them to get ready and felt a rush of relief when the little boys sighed and said okay. He then happily asked the twins if they needed help getting their sneakers on and, after receiving his first gold star of the day from Carl, who desperately needed his help, he quickly went downstairs to join his wife in the kitchen. She was waiting for him with coffee, poured into his favorite red mug, blended with just the right amount of cream and sugar.

Mr. Lewis fell in love with his wife the moment he first saw her, in the seventh grade, dancing around the playground to music only she could hear. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He went up to her, tapped her on the shoulder, and asked her to marry him - he didn't want any other boy to have the chance to ask first. She had giggled a bit before saying yes and motioned for him to take her hand. They danced together for the rest of their lunch period. He went home that day to his chosen parent, his mother, and told her that he had found his wife. His mother had laughed and held him close as she whispered that she was happy for her little boy. The wedding was five years later and the twins were born soon after, at exactly 6:14pm. He sometimes wished that they could go back to the time before they had children, if only for a little while, so that he could relax and not have to dedicate every second to spoiling the boys rotten. He wished that he didn't have to worry about making sure the boys loved him the most.

They did love him more than his wife, of this he was certain, and a large part of him wanted to make sure that she knew it. During breakfast he made sure that he sat in the chair closest to the window so that his first star would catch the light and subtly taunt Mrs. Lewis. It was the only way that he could brag without upsetting the children. However, she just smiled sweetly at the man she loved and continued to make her boys their breakfast. The twins appeared just as the last

bit of bacon was skillfully crisped and their mother quickly served them while placing a light peck to each of their temples. She got a gold star from each of them - and a glare from her husband.

Usually, Mr. Lewis, like every other man left in town, could be found every Sunday, between church and dinner, painstakingly cutting his lawn so that the grass was exactly two inches high. However, that Sunday, that very, very special Sunday, he and Mrs. Lewis decided to skip church and take their beloved boys to Main Street as a special treat. It was their sixth birthday and they both knew that the day had to be perfect. Each parent did things, like getting Ben ice cream and buying Carl toys, to earn those coveted little stars and by the end of the day they had lost track of who had more. So many stars were given out that it was hard to tell, on the boards that hung around Mr. and Mrs. Lewis' necks, where one star ended and the other began. Mr. Lewis really didn't mind because he knew the boys loved him the most.

That night, at exactly 6:14pm Mr. Lewis found out, much to his horror, that he was wrong, so very wrong. Mrs. Lewis, with her sweet smiles and tender heart, had gotten the most stars and no matter how much her husband pleaded with Ben and Carl, they wouldn't change their minds. Mr. Lewis' ignored protests were cut short by a loud popping sound, which was immediately followed by the excited laughter of his children. Glowing red glitter floated around the once immaculate living room. It went everywhere and what was once Mr. Lewis' favorite chair was quickly covered with his beautiful remains. As the glitter began to settle the twins joyously scooped up handfuls and threw it in the air, letting it fall on them as they giggled. Mrs. Lewis smiled lovingly at her children and motioned for them each to take a hand. They formed a circle and together the three of them twirled around the room, kicking up the glitter as they danced. The Lewis family was a happy family.

# Subsistence

Damian Dimock

A satellite is caught on my tongue  
as it floats by,

Locked grooves, skip—skip—skipping  
back into atmospheres,

Attracted to my cigarette tar  
and toothpaste shampoo,

melted and forged into scrap  
for our junkyard guts,

In the bathtub, where I sit  
in a black tie and bubbles,

and bubbles,

I drown Birthday's balloons.  
Pinning it on the donkey

Pop! Goes the piñata, and out come  
a dozen unborn braves.

That hen ain't no chicken  
swimming with sharks,

You can't sell her eggs,  
don't even try to give them away.

Mama'll knit you a sweater  
with that big blue ox's axe,

Before you can collect all those clouds,  
anyway. Don't wait up.

Quit while ahead, just try  
and blow out these candles.

# Cosmic Humor

David Sanchez

Let's face it, the Spheres are laughing at our puny expense. But sometimes, every once in a while, they let you in on their joke. For instance, the first time I heard "California Gurls" by Katy Perry I was in my buddy's car and we were speeding past the worst car accident I had ever seen. I'm not talking about the classic Beach Boy's summer anthem "California Girls," I'm talking about the bullshit auto-tune pop abomination that is Katy Perry's "California Gurls" (that's gurls with a "u" not an "i,"). The one with Snoop Dogg laying down a half-assed verse about two minutes in and Ms. Perry singing about "melting your popsicle." I'm not talking about your average fender bender on the side of the road either; I'm talking about a three car life-ending high speed collision.

There were five of us packed into the car with all of the windows down and we screamed along to the lyrics, laughing and having an all-around jamboree of a time. By the time we got halfway through the first chorus, I had learned the simple lyrics and joined in belting out, "CA-LI-FOR-NIA GURLS, WE'RE UNFORGETTABLE. DAI-SY DUKES, BIKINIS ON TOP!" We were dancing in our respective seats like fools, and in the middle of some sort of a seated gyration I looked out the passenger window and saw three completely totaled cars and three ambulances with their lights spinning. It was a somber scene: smashed front ends, glass and fenders all over the road, white sheets over bodies and gurneys. I gawked at the wreckage and everyone was silent for a second before we realized that Katy Perry was still going on about the pleasures of being a trollop on the West Coast. I'm a little bit ashamed to say that I laughed. I laughed hard for about ten minutes. I'm not trying to take away from the tragedy of losing a loved one and this accident was horrific, but when it was set to the fast tempo and meaningless lyrics of that song, the contradiction was too goddamned absurd to not laugh at.

Dreadful things like death, poverty, disease, loss, and heartbreak are going on around us at all times, and yet somehow Katy Perry exists, and Miley Cyrus, and a whole slew of vapid musicians, television shows, social networks. And that, to me, is just plain laughable. It just doesn't make sense. I love this wild world, and I especially love those moments of juxtaposition where you get a glimpse into the whole scope of life—where you can see death and hear Katy Perry all at the same time. And this "California Gurls" thing is not an isolated incident; I've had many moments like that in my life. My friends and I have been calling this phenomenon "cosmic humor." It's almost like a spiritual awakening;

it's stepping back, taking a broader look at the world than you usually would and laughing your fucking head off at how absurd it is. It's zooming out on life, widening the lens to see everything, looking at the world from outer space. When this happens, when I'm not zoomed in on the little tragedies, I am shocked by how the world looks; I don't see it as inherently good or evil but just plain funny.

Another time, I was at the public library and I was absolutely immersed in the book *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. This was a point in my life where I was taking everything, including myself, far too seriously. The term 'overthinking' comes to mind. I was searching for meaning, validation, some sort of greater purpose. I was examining my life and determined it wasn't where I wanted it to be, my job was a dead end, and I was living without passion. I wanted to live authentically, but I didn't know how. It had been a month since I was released from the psych ward after an intentional overdose. I was extremely zoomed in on my own personal bullshit, selfishly engrossed in the car accident that was my life, making futile plans, and trying to embrace the sorrow of the world. Or whatever the fuck. I had been sitting there reading the book for hours. I decided to check it out, along with a copy of *Fear and Trembling* by Soren Kierkegaard. I thought I could maybe find the answers I was looking for by zooming in further, delving into long books by dudes with long names.

As I was driving home, deep in contemplation about human nature and the predicament of the modern man, the song "Bawitdaba" by Kid Rock came on the radio. Now here is a song that is really inane. I mean, half of the words in it are nonsensical. What the hell does "Bawitdaba da bang a dang diggy diggy diggy said the boogy said up jump the boogy" mean anyways? No one knows. My guess is Kid Rock doesn't even know. But after spending hours at the library poring over some of the densest texts there, I just started to scream all of the lyrics in my car with the windows down. And when I say all of the lyrics I mean *all* of the lyrics, I know every single word and non-word in that song, not just the chorus. I couldn't tell you how, I just do. And lo and behold, I felt the humor of the cosmos. It isn't a thought in these moments, it's a feeling. I didn't look down at the books I had just checked out from the library as I listened to Detroit's third best white rapper spout gibberish on the radio in a song that was only moderately popular 12 years ago and think to myself, "Oh gee, this is quite a funny parallel. The world is so neat in its balance." I looked down at the books and actually felt lighter; a smile spread across my face reflexively. Once again, I lost my shit. I laughed for the rest of the drive home. I laughed until my ribs hurt and my cheeks were tired. At one point I was even stopped at a red light next to a car full of co-eds. I didn't play it cool; I couldn't have even if I wanted to. The thought didn't cross my mind. I just kept laugh-screaming along to that

ridiculous song like a crazy person.

I think, as people, we run around trying to arrange everything in our lives to suit us, trying to protect ourselves from getting hurt. We want to have just the right clothes, just the right girlfriend or boyfriend, the right job. But at any moment, through no fault of your own, you can wreck your car and end it all. That is just a fact: everyone dies and it usually isn't expected. It's like the old comedy bit where a guy is waiting anxiously in line to get an ice cream cone, and when he finally gets it he takes one lick and the scoop falls right off the cone onto the ground. That is some tried and true funny shit. I don't know why it's funny, something to do with irony maybe, or the frailty of life, or the utter vanity of human schemes. It's almost impossible to dissect it without ruining the humor of it, but when that scoop of ice cream plops on the dirty ass ground you just smile. It happens without your consent.

It wasn't until months after my improv "Bawitdaba" karaoke session that I heard a quote by William James. He said, "Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing." I liked that. And I don't like it when people say that laughter is a defense against the pain of the world, or that it's some kind of therapeutic tool. It's divine; it's all encompassing. It just happens when I zoom out. Have you ever tried to hold back laughter? It doesn't work. It makes it stronger. It's a force of nature. There is something about laughing *in the wrong place at the wrong time* that makes it so much funnier. And when I see the doom and gloom in perfect harmony with the stupidity, when I see death to the soundtrack of Katy Perry, or when Kid Rock jerks me out of my egotistical, existential contemplations, I have no choice but to laugh like a fucking maniac until it hurts. It sucks to be on the outside of an inside joke, so I love it when the heavens give me that zoom-out scope that lets me see the punch line of the slapstick bit that is life. Nothing feels better than taking part in that celestial laughter.

# Squall

Samuel Ellis

My parents had been divorced for nearly five years the day my father decided that he and I should go fishing off the coast in his buddy's boat. He had recently taken to trying to create father-son memories straight out of a 1950's family values sitcom, and they almost always interfered with my plans.

Instead, I was witnessing the Tampa Bay waters boil. Two hours in, I had retreated under the awning of the center console, content to observe my father trying to keep up with his friend. Garfield, who despite sharing a name with a depressed, overweight, orange cat, was energetic, lanky, blond, and human. He was wearing one of those Guy Harvey shirts and looked completely at home on the undulating waves, while my dad, who's known for his motion sickness, was an interesting shade somewhere between algae and sunburn.

Garfield helped my dad bait a hook, and I couldn't help smirking through my sweat as I watched him dodge my dad's undisciplined cast. Once the line was in the water, Garfield patted my father's shoulder, making me wonder who was really creating memories. Having caught nothing all day, I was surprised when the line instantly tightened.

"Looks like we got something," Garfield exclaimed.

My dad looked nervous. "Now what?"

I leaned forward as Garfield explained and mimicked how to wind the reel and draw back the pole, careful not to create too much tension on the thin filament. A splash sent a spray of silver freckles across the water, and after a brief struggle, my father began to reel the catch into the boat.

"Looks like a Spanish mackerel," Garfield explained as the spotted fish flopped on the deck. My father bent down over it. "But be careful when you have it; he has really sharp—"

My dad inhaled as the mackerel slid out of his grip. He examined his hand for a moment before exhaling a breathy laugh. In the next moment, after a flex of his fingers, a scarlet slice appeared along the inside of his palm.

I jumped up from my seat. I was about to grab my father's hand when he yanked it away. "Don't touch the blood."

I stumbled back, blinking in the harsh light. The mackerel was gasping in a puddle of my father's blood. I turned to see Garfield pulling a first aid kit from beneath one of the chair cushions. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves. It was only then that he began tenderly cleansing and applying a bandage around my father's gash. When it was done, almost as if it was some kind of reflex, he lifted my father's chin and kissed his lips.

I turned quickly, hoping they wouldn't realize that I had seen. Now that I was facing the bow, I could see that we were headed for rougher waters.

# Mother, Divine-An Apology

Roxanne Null

I'm tying the color blue to a wish  
tree, its rope vines littered by thousands  
of polychrome bands.

Mother beside me, closed  
lids over rolling eyes.  
Taut lips framing speech.

I focus on the security  
of my knot, thinking:

As children, we'd watch her  
with greed-glossed eyes as  
she clawed the gut lining  
of her purse for loose change.

And looking now to her neglectful  
hands fumbling on a wish, I forget  
to whisper something hopeful.

But two penny wishes plopped and swayed  
to the sapphire floor of the mall fountain  
for her.

# Sneeze

David Sanchez

I watched you walk,  
your breasts like soft jeeps  
rolling over hills  
and your ass a speedboat  
gliding through chop.  
Your legs bump and flex  
with every step like a heart.  
But when you stopped,  
put your hand to your face  
and sneezed,

that's when I fell  
down an infinite flight of stairs.  
when I saw your hair explode  
into a sandstorm  
and your jugular pulse with nectar.  
when every muscle in your face  
creased like an accordion.

I saw you  
as you are, behind the walk  
and the breasts and the ass and the legs.  
Even behind the mind, because  
a sneeze is intimate, it  
stops everything, just for a moment.  
it exposes uncut, soul concentrate.  
potent and powerful

you don't see me drop  
and that's okay.  
You mount your bike.  
it's a skeleton on wheels  
and your dress a flag  
as you pump in the wind.  
You'd be beautiful  
with a compound fracture,  
even your bones glow.

# Cue the Peanuts Fanfare

Josh Palange

The sweet sound of the time clock buzzing fills the warehouse.

Essentially, we just drop everything. That's why there are pallets of lumber still sitting on the forklifts when the morning guys come into work. If they worked the graveyard shift they'd understand, but who wants to unload the ships? The new shipment comes in around nine every other night. They don't get the luxury to complain when they have the chance to go home before the sun comes up. As for the night crew, we get the luxury of revelry and the last half of the late game on Sunday night. This game especially.

Walking into Tank's and still seeing football on the TVs above the bar is almost like a godsend. Half the crew had money on New England because it was a surefire way to keep their drinks full. I, on the other hand, just like to hang out with my old school buddies. I haven't been able to see them much because of me starting work and them finishing up school. I knew they'd be here watching this game, though. It was like a tradition to watch the last division game of the regular season together. They see me walk in with a few coworkers and shout out to me. They are a little wasted. I know I'm going to have to catch up.

"Billy! Billiam. Will, my man! I totally thought you were going to bail on us tonight. You haven't been able to come out for any of the other games." His words were slurring, but the red in his cheeks and his wide smile were some things I had been missing.

I give him a hug and shake his hand. "Ben. Damn. It has been a several months. But come on, do you really think I'd miss the last division game? Get real."

A bearded behemoth chimes in from over the shoulder of Ben, "Well you've missed the first half already, jackass. Sit down and start drinking."

"Dude, what the fuck is on your face? Did you get in a fight with Chewbacca, then eat him? God damnit, Dylan." I pat Dylan's girth, and he scoffs and shoves me, then slides me a beer.

I sit down in between them and start pounding beers. From across the bar, some of my coworkers begin to yell at the TV because they are close to losing money on the game. Ben and Dylan glance over at them, then back to me.

"So, man, how are you liking the new job?" Ben asks.

I clear my throat and down half my beer. "Well, it's work. And the pay is gradually increasing. And it helps that it's family you know?"

"That's good to hear. Your father-in-law hooked you up. That's a good

gig once you start climbing those steps up man. I'm still scared if I'm ever going to land a job with my useless major. You already have work, so that's a leg up."

I know that was Ben trying to be sympathetic yet supportive. He can tell that's not where I want to be. Or what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Dylan is brave enough to speak up. "How's Kelsey, man? Haven't seen her for a while, either."

Ben threw a look at him and his eyes began to shake as if forcing him to change the subject.

"She's great buddy. Really healthy. Thanks for asking. She's still in school; I'm surprised you haven't seen her around. She mentioned she caught a glimpse of you the other day walking through campus. She didn't mention that shit on your face though."

I fake a smile and down the other half of my beer, gesturing to Jim, the bartender, for another.

"How's school going though, Dylan? Both of you guys have to be almost done."

Ben spoke first, "Actually, I finished in the summer."

"Ah shit, dude. I'm sorry, I would have gone to your ceremony. Fuck."

"Will, seriously, I pretty much just picked it up and left. Wasn't a big deal. I was just happy to be out of there finally."

"But still man, sorry. Dylan, don't tell me you graduated too and I missed it."

Dylan saw my concern and could luckily save the situation of me being a shitty friend. "Actually, I graduate this semester. In a few days, in fact. Just had finals last week. And of course you can come to the ceremony, man. Wouldn't want it any other way. Kelsey can come too. Get the gang back together."

We keep drinking the rest of the night, singing bar songs like we had back when we hung out every day in this same bar. Clinking bottles, glasses, tapping shots to the bar top, and making fun of my coworkers as they all fork over money to each other after the game ended. This night is exactly something I've been yearning for. Besides, you know, seeing everyone else moving forward with their life, this is a great night.

§

Jim is the best dude in town with the best bar in town. Mainly because it opens early. Or doesn't close. Whichever. The lime green bar stools spin and the sun is nowhere to be seen. This bar is the king of dives, with its piss- and vomit-stained floors and stench of the same. But it has hooch, so fine by me.

I'm the only one left besides two or three of my coworkers passed out in the booths near the back of the bar. Jim fills up my glass with some of the darkest top-shelf whiskey. If you are going to drink in the morning, at least drink the fancy stuff. Jim watches me down the glass. A small droplet rolls off my lip as I breathe out the fumes of my burning insides and with it, a sigh.

"Lady troubles again?" Jim asks.

"That was a little cliché, Jim, but yes. I mean, it's not just her though. Yeah we are having some problems, fighting a lot. Especially about our apartment. It's too small and I know that. It smells like dog, and we don't even have a dog. It was the right size before, things change though, I guess. But, without her really working, I have to take more shifts, so we can save up for a bigger place. I'm having a hard time balancing everything. And I hadn't seen my buds in a while, and they're ready to move forward with their lives and shit. I don't blame her for getting pissed, but at the same time, lay the fuck off, right Jim? Nothing seems good enough."

I'm still feeling the effects of drinking through the night with Ben and Dylan, who are long gone by now.

Jim pours me one more glass of Jameson . "Well do you think it's a good idea to be drinking my bar dry right now on a Monday morning then if nothing is really good enough?"

"Oh come on, Jim, you know I work overnights with Kelsey's dad's business. Can't blame a guy for wanting a drink after taking lumber from one pile and moving it to another pile." I shoot back the drink. "And the Pats were playing last night."

"Guess I can't. Speaking of your girl, doesn't she get home early today?"

"What time is it anyway, Jim?"

"A little after noon."

"Shit," I place a fifty on the counter, snatch some pretzels from the small wooden bowl that doesn't match the décor of this shithole , and head out. "Thanks Jim."

§

Luckily Kelsey doesn't get home till about two-ish so I have time . She has class every Monday morning then comes home for lunch before going back to class in the evening. I'm not really sure how I forgot that? I know I'll probably have chores laid out, too. The apartment has been trashed lately since we are

barely home to keep it looking nice. There isn't much space for the dirty laundry and dish smell to dissipate. So, it isn't all my fault. It lingers. We have only one bedroom, one bathroom, but the living room is definitely livable, and the kitchen is decently sized. It's only the two of us right now anyway.

Opening the fridge when I get home, I see a small yellow Post-it on my Yuengling cans. Never desecrate the sanctity that is the best amber beer ever made. Just don't. I read it though,

*Put dishes in the dishwasher . And please put together that new dresser my mom bought us. Love you.*

I close the fridge a little too hard and Kelsey's cute little magnets flop off to the floor.

Only a small, pink bow-shaped magnet that reads "Congrats!" stays connected to the fridge. The magnet was covering a black and white smudged-looking photo. I sigh while looking at it,

*It's getting really close, isn't it?*

I pop open a beer and down it while picking up the shit that slipped off fridge before arranging the dishes in the washer.

My vision is a little blurry, but I can still operate a dishwasher and build a little dresser. Grabbing another beer, I walk to the bedroom passing the wall of missed opportunities, also known as where my degree would hang if I ever had the chance to finish school. I only had a semester left. Listening to Ben and Dylan last night killed me. I wish they knew what sacrifices I had to make to make things work out. I'll go back someday.

I kick off my shoes, and instantly step on a screw driver and some bolts that were all over the floor next to a bunch of random pieces of wood with pink and yellow ducks all over them that came from an Ikea box. Whatever Kelsey bought was never going to be built if it came from that store. I bite my lip, finish my beer and flop on the bed for a minute to examine the damage of my sole. My eyes start to shut a bit, but I see Kelsey and me in a picture frame from a party at her parent's lake house on the nightstand. She was glowing, and we both were smiling.

§

I hear water rushing from the kitchen and it jostles me awake. I roll off the bed and see Kelsey hunched over the sink washing the dishes.

"Hey, hun, I say as I kiss her head and touch her shoulder. Her arm sort of twitches under my grasp. I let go and lean against the counter next to her.

"Hi, babe. How was work? Long night?"

“It was alright, work was work. Your dad has me working a lot lately.”

There was silence as she kept scrubbing the caked-on food off the dishes.

“I think we need a new washer hun. I ran the washer when I got home.

Here, let me finish up,” I say.

She lets go of the dish and walks off to the bedroom. Through the running water I hear her catch her breath. I turn the water off and hear her crying.

“Kelsey? What’s going on, are you okay ?

“Do you even care?” *Cue the Peanuts Fanfare*, “You do everything half way, goddamn it, Will!” *Band horns up*. “Just wake up, Will!”

“What the hell, Kelsey! What are you talking about?”

I follow her to the bedroom and I see her standing over the dresser parts and my shoulders slouch.

“Hun, that won’t take too long. It’s not a big deal.”

“That’s not the point Will. The dishes aren’t even put away like I asked! They are stinking up the whole living room now! I laid out the parts of the dresser so you would do it when you got home. But you just walked past them. I came home and you were asleep.”

“What do you mean? I did the dishes. The washer just sucks. I’ll clean them. Just go sit down and relax, please.”

“You are never fully here, Will. I don’t know how much more I can take of this shit. Seriously.” She stormed past me and into the living room.

I wish she was in my head. My blank face is definitely not giving her bitching justice. She wants the rise, the explosion. In my head though, there’s some good stuff in there. Stuff like, “If the smell is that bad, fuck glass plates. Let’s go paper.” That would be fun. Well, for me at least. I’m at the point now that I’ve accepted all her intricacies and opinions, as she calls it, all her “bullshit,” as I call it, but I’ve accepted the fact that I’m not going to win, and that’s all good. But, apparently she’ll bitch about that, too. I can’t just be “good” with it. It’s probably because she likes to hear herself, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to say that. I shouldn’t even think that. She’s probably evolving, gaining some pseudo telepathy hardwired to detect smart-ass remarks. Shit, that’s probably where she keeps her ammo and heavy artillery! Because God knows her supply never runs out.

“Overstuffing the dishwasher doesn’t get shit clean, Will. And you have to remember to turn the fucking thing on. That’s just taking something dirty and moving it somewhere else to just stay dirty! What have you been doing all morning?”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I thought I turned the dial.”

“Come on, Will. It’s not that hard.”

“I worked all night Kelsey, give me a break.”

“And fucked around with Ben and Dylan too, right? Yeah, I saw Dylan on campus today. He said “Hi,” and mentioned you guys were watching the game last night. I don’t mind if you miss seeing your friends and go out. But tell me, don’t hide it. Like come on. Responsibility. We don’t really have time for this anymore, Will.”

I don’t give a shit at all. But, I don’t say that out loud. I’ll just talk to myself about it. A lot safer, takes away from prolonging something I don’t care about. Is it bad, that when I said “something” I meant “someone”...maybe? I don’t know. I’ll probably just stand up mid-rant and grab another drink. With each sip even the Peanuts fanfare will disappear. Yeah, I’ll do that. Even with my blurred vision, I hear the uplifting chorus of “I Can See Clearly Now” rise up, the Ray Charles version of course, much, much funkier.

“And where are you going?” she mouths. I’ve gotten pretty good at reading her lips considering I hate her voice. With every word her bob bobs, and the freckles under her eyes scrunch up and disappear into her reddening face. “We are not done here, Will!”

“I don’t know, Kels. I’m pretty friggin’ done. It’s honestly the same shit every day. You get to do whatever the fuck you want. See friends, stay home and relax, finish school, and I get shit for going out for the first time since your dad forced me to work for him. Fuck that, Kelsey. And for where I’m going, preferably somewhere that you aren’t and that preferably serves liquor.” I grab the plastic ring still holding two left over Yuenglings, and this puts her over the edge.

“Yeah that is exactly what happens every day! Get so trashed you wear the same clothes every day because you haven’t washed a load in weeks. Get so trashed you forget to turn the washer on after you fill it. See, I try to love you and communicate, and you just drink yourself to sleep mid-afternoon. You said you were prepared for what our relationship meant.” Her voice follows me to the door. Much like vibrating chime reverberating along the halls of my head and apartment building.

I think she says something else right after that, but the “wah wahs” kick up once again, and by this point she is just screaming down the hallway of our building. I’m probably half way from reaching the lobby when I hear something that seems to break through. It hits me strangely really hard. I assumed I didn’t give a shit.

“And this! This shit, Will, is why I’ve been thinking I don’t want you around. I’d be better off doing this on my own!”

It was one thing for me to hear it, but the whole building now knows my

girlfriend is being selfish. Well, possibly ex-girlfriend. There's no way in hell I'm sticking around now, she's had it. All of it. But the best thing about this break up is I don't even have to go back up to grab my shit, because it's all over the staircase behind me. How sweet of her to at least bring me my stuff.

A drawer from my dresser that once held my mint band tees now drapes the rails of the stairwell two flights up. One more drawer crashes behind me and snaps me back into reality.

I grab what I can off the stairs, take my newly charged resentment for Kelsey and leave the building. What I'm wondering now is how she could just go on with her life with me knowing that she didn't want anything do with me in the first place. As if I would have just been ok ay with that? Like, it was just not a big deal. Either that, or she was saving it for just this moment. Her final bullet in the chamber to take me out. Her final cannonball to rip a hole in my heart. I dropped everything to make this work.

I still hear her ranting from above. The window slides open, and for the first time I hear everything that Kelsey is saying. Not one muted trombone sound, not one mouthed word to interpret.

"You haven't been in this relationship for months, Will. I just wanted to us to be happy, I thought there would be a change after we found out. And, the stupid thing is that I'm still calling after you, and you still aren't listening, you aren't hearing me!"

I just look up at her. Not really sure what I'm feeling. A small glint of gold from the window makes me squint for a moment. I do know though that her voice is something I haven't really heard in a while. It's extremely crisp, and very soothing right now. I guess it's true that I haven't "been" in the relationship for a while. I forgot what she sounded like. More of my things fall from the open window like I'm a part of some romantic comedy. Nothing is really funny about this, though.

Kelsey stops launching my shit from the window.

"I swear to God if you leave for that bar this is the end of us, Will. I'll break our lease and I'll move out." She stares at me, waiting.

I think through the months of nagging, recollect, and wonder if the fanfare was produced subconsciously. Like, it was a defense for me not to care. She got to keep going to school, she gets everything she's ever wanted. Yeah, the shock of her not wanting me around hurts I guess, but obviously not enough to get me to run back up the stairs and argue with her, plead with her. It's just hard for me to grasp everything right now considering how blurry everything is. Except for two bright cylindrical shapes of light hanging from the plastic ring around my two fingers. Now don't try that "It's a sign from God" thing on me. It's

not that serious.

“Will! Do you have anything to say to me? An apology? A reassessment of your life? Our life, together?”

Another glint of gold hits my eye from the window as Kelsey leans out further. I notice the glint is coming from her left hand, and I remember my hand on her belly at the lake house . That same gold glint gleaming off the sun in the lens flares of the camera her parents used to capture that moment. That moment that I knew my life, our life, was about to begin. What was once only a small bump has grown into a mountain to traverse. Or so I thought. I saw the pregnancy as something I had to overcome, rather than appreciate it for the feat that it is. I stop and breathe in and let the beer ring slip from my hand. They clink as they hit the ground and roll off the curb into the cobble stone road.

“Kelsey, don’t lean so far out. And relax. Please. Getting riled up isn’t good for the baby. I’ll have this cleaned up in a bit. I’ll be right up. I’m sorry.”

# The Devourer of Souls Visits the Quicki-Mart

Alexander Higgins

It has been an eternity since I last saw the stars. They glare down at me, knowing full well that I do not deserve to walk beneath them. I defy you, glimmering judges! I am here now, and nothing you can do will prevent me from enjoying myself.

The air here is thinner than what I am used to. I can feel my lungs rising, falling. The whisper of blood as it travels through veins. All of the living bits that I have not had in millennia now work to keep me extant. It is a marvel, life, but an easily overruled one. This is *my* form now, my body. I can hear the owner's feeble pleas for control in the back of *my* mind. He was a fool to call on me.

I suppose it is a bit unfair to condemn him. All that he wanted was to change his lot in life, and that of his beloved. He spent weeks searching frantically through forbidden texts to find my Name. He managed to gather the components of the ritual in a world that has long forgotten the value of blood and incense. He stood, naked and terrified, in the cellar of his home and called across the vast darkness to a presence more ancient and powerful than anything he had ever known. His cracking voice rose in a dire incantation, a song of ceaseless, ravenous hunger. A pity he mispronounced my fortieth, (and favorite) title. "Deceiver" and "Devourer" are clearly distinct, even in Middle Egyptian. Besides, I wasn't even present for the Betrayal. Judas had enough help.

There is a street in front of me, with a single streetlight and a squat building. This town is pitifully mundane. The streets are cracked and tired; even the gnarled oak trees seem to bend under the weight of the world. It's rather quaint. The Midwest was not my first choice, but I suppose nobody in Rio could be bothered to summon me. I can see a neon sign, pulsing into the night. "Quickie-Mart" it reads. The memories of the mortal indicate that food can be found here. I need to eat. He had starved himself before the rite, in order to clear his mind. I can feel hunger as a dull ache in my lower half. An unwelcome sensation. I will have to learn of the needs of the flesh again, as my time here lasts only as long as my host does. I will not be dragged back to oblivion because I forgot to feed it.

These stick-legs are entirely too unsteady. I make it to the door of the Quickie-Mart easily enough but my balance feels *wrong*. Perhaps it is these pants

that my host had in his closet. I cannot say I approve of the tightness of them. My previous physical form was far superior to this defenseless baboon. The door yields to me, and I step inside. Ah! Too quickly. I held my eyes open and now the lights stab into them. I manage not to make a sound but my reaction is noticed by the shopkeeper. She eyes me warily at first, but her gaze softens. My host's pleas grow more insistent with the halls of my mind. This must be her, the most desired object of young Darren's affections, the one who he sacrificed everything for. She returns to her magazine.

The Quickie-Mart is sparsely populated at this time of night. A raggedy light-skinned man lingers near the beer cooler. I can see his desire from here. It spirals around his features in a green mist, whispering indulgent venom into his ear. He could sneak a few under his coat. Nobody would notice. Nobody would care. There was so much in here that they could afford to lose a can or two. He deserved it, didn't he? He had nothing else. He *needed* that fog. He needed the warmth and forgetfulness that would ease the cold and the pain. I turn from him. His weakness is amusing, but I must satisfy this groaning in my stomach.

Candy screams at me from the center aisle. Every colorful advertisement extols the virtues of one brand over the other. "Reduced Fat!" exclaims one. "New Bigger Size!" another wheedles. It is no different from the street vendors that used to sit outside the temples with their trinkets. Instead of Great Sobek's protection, these will quell hunger's raging. I pick up a small one. A "Buggy Bite." A cartoon grasshopper smiles cheekily at me from the label. Adorable, I'm sure. I remember when I, as a swarm of locusts, rose in the deep desert, our numbers blotting out the sun. I remember the shrieking of the citizens as we poured over the walls of Karnak to devour those within. It is difficult to forget your first manifestation, and Egypt's sands will always be with me.

"One-oh-six."

I am startled from my reverie. I am at the counter, now. The girl is staring at me. At her gaze, I feel a sudden churning in my stomach. My heart beats rapidly and I can feel sweat condensing on my...everywhere. The voice of my host rises from the abyss.

*Stacey. Stacey please, can't you hear me?* I attempt to brush him aside, but he stubbornly refuses to budge.

*Stacey! Please! I need you to look at me! Remember me please Stacey PLEASE!*

The girl's nametag reads Stacey Equals Parenthesis. Surnames have changed somewhat, it would seem. She could be pretty, I think, if only her eyes weren't so large. Her hair is pale and wispy, much like her everything else. Her blue uniform hangs off of her like a wash frame. At my host's thoughts, she looks

up; although I'm certain she cannot hear his bleating. We make eye contact.

In her face, I see misery. This was not the life she wanted. She was led here by failure. Some her own, some that of others. She knows my host, though. She's spoken to him several times. There is fondness there. Desire, too, not for my host, per se, but for escape. She would do anything to leave this behind.

*Please don't hurt her...* My host moans weakly. I do not intend to hurt her, I say. But I may do him a small kindness.

I smile at the girl.

"Hey, do you want to get out of here?"

*What are you doing?* Time slows for a moment as I answer him.

*I'm going to do you a favor. She's coming with us.*

*Why?*

*You gave me everything, whether you knew it or not. Look around, mortal. Your entire world runs on the fear of not having enough. They play at need, at want. They know nothing of hunger. It is time humanity remembered their place in the order of things...as prey. I think sparing her from this is...reasonable... compensation.*

Stacey Equals Parenthesis stares at me blankly.

"W...what?"

"Do. You. Want. To. Get. Out. Of. Here. For good. Forever. You'll never have to reach for another pack of cigarettes again. You'll never have to listen to Ms. Garcia's rasping or the weird passes from Mr. Rhodes *ever again*. You'll be free, Stacey. Free to do whatever you want." These are Darren's desires, not mine. I simply give them voice.

Stacey's mouth is moving, but no sounds are coming out. She's struggling to let herself say it. I lean in. I try to layer Darren's voice with my own, to soothe and compel her.

"Stacey, it's me. It's Darren. Do you want to get out of here?"

Her eyes are flicking madly around the convenience store. She looks at the guy in front of the beer cooler. She looks at the security cameras and the plexiglass, all there for her protection. She looks at the television, with its warm, flickering countenance. It's safe here. It might be a nightmare, but it's one she gets to leave voluntarily at the end of the night. But...she knows there's more than this. If she stays, this little shop will be her tomb; the neon "OPEN" sign, her epitaph. She nods her head. Slightly, at first, then more emphatically.

"Stacey, I need to hear you say it." She gazes at me. I wonder, briefly, what she sees. Does she see Darren? Straining against my hold on him?

"Yes. Yes, I want to go."

My smile widens. I hold out my hand. There is always a place in the new

world for a companion, and Stacey has a lust for change far beyond her years. She takes it, and I lead her out from behind the counter. As we move, the raggedy man by the cooler begins to stuff his coat with clinking bottles. Stacey doesn't even blink.

*Protect her, please.* I hear from him. I assure him I will. He'll be right with me the whole time, watching her. It's not quite what he wanted but we seldom do get what we want. Stacey Equals Parenthesis and I step out into the brisk night air. I inhale deeply. The peppery scent of fear and anguish rides the night wind. Perhaps a larger town? No...it must be a city. A chance to sample the local flavors, I think. Flesh steeped in such turbulent emotion is the most succulent. This will be an excellent way to break my fast.

"Are you ready?" I ask. She clenches my hand tightly.

"I think so." She takes short, gasping breaths. It's all a little much for her.

"Come on, then. We've much to do." I say. We walk together, hand in hand, down the street. The stars continue to gaze down disapprovingly at us. I still don't care.

# Mauve Stanzas on Linoleum

Hannah Lay

i. You asked me what a true love's knot is

when I was fifteen and still full  
of blush. In my mind your whole body  
fills up with light when someone in bright  
red swimming trunks throws you in  
the pool. Only in my mind do your legs  
fill with air and push you, push you far away  
to where only slices of memory, like cake, like busted  
car rims, still shine like hurricane lamps.

ii. Your mother

is pink, is in pink, in a blue wedding suit.  
She hums the palest song of weightless anchors.  
Over the sky a player has hung heavy red curtains.  
I used to know curtains like these as deep  
as one can know.

You are still crying in your sleep.

iii. Down in the diner parking lot a little  
troop of red-lipped girls  
and gangs of shaggy boys  
have made a landfill of crushed cigarettes  
no one had the heart to smoke.

At the end of all my days I go racing  
so, so fast  
on my bicycle I pedal hard enough  
that I never have to again

as though forward motion is enough.

iv. The black telephone hangs from the wall, cut  
in every way but one. Reporters and weatherwomen run  
with blue clouds of text around their heads. You would have said  
words that rummaged in trash, always finding  
meters of gold.

v. I am tying and tying and tying and  
one of these must be right.  
One of these will be right.

# Sleeping Fits

Seth Peterson

Twitch.

A signal  
that something is  
amiss.

All the  
wires fire  
at 75,000 miles per hour.

Dreams play  
in fast forward--

Top of the class sex

with

a porn star Superman

flying through a best-selling trilogy

Metropolis--  
waking you up.

Tremors.

Arms flop

like flounder suffocating  
on the shore.

Legs, tickled

by the devil,  
kick

him away but  
he knows just where to  
touch.

Head banging

the pillow.

Your body is a misbehaved toddler.

# Changing with the Times: Subversive Patriarchs in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom!

Connor Harris

William Faulkner's grand design for Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants stands as one of the most ambitious creations in the American literary canon. Over the course of his career, Faulkner pieced together a kaleidoscopic world of dysfunctional families and personal failures, tied together by history and tradition so completely that Yoknapatawpha County's eventual collapse mirrors the collapse of the American South. When considering Faulkner's construction of a doomed South, two texts become vital for a thorough understanding: *The Sound and the Fury*, the story of the Compson family's dissolution and Faulkner's most poignant exploration of sexism within the South's patriarchal system; and *Absalom, Absalom!*, the tale of Thomas Sutpen's dynasty and a meditation on race, narrative, and the composition of history. Both novels, though distinct from each other in content and form, illuminate the oppressive power systems and hierarchies that gave structure to Southern life. More specifically, the works paint detailed portraits of men embracing and interpreting what it means to be a patriarch, while also discussing the ramifications of their position within the power structure. Mr. Compson and Thomas Sutpen—the primary patriarchal figures present in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*—seemingly challenge the role of the traditional patriarch at first glance. However, both Mr. Compson and Thomas Sutpen subvert the patriarchal institution only as a means of strengthening their personal patriarchal power over those that they have subjugated (women and black Americans), subversions necessitated by the precarious cultural climate of the American South.

Initially, Mr. Compson's supposedly attitude towards both his family and female sexuality strike the reader as progressive, especially when compared to Quentin Compson's obsession with his sister's virginity. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin devotes a large portion of his monologue to remembering conversations he had with his father, and it is in these moments that Mr.

Compson voices his cynical position regarding honor and sexual purity. Mr. Compson, in a nihilistic tone, tells his distressed son that virginity “means less to women,” because “it was men [who] invented virginity not women” (Faulkner, *The Sound* 52); later, he defends Caddy’s independence when Mrs. Compson wishes for someone to spy on Caddy: “I will not have my daughter spied on by you or Quentin or anybody no matter what you think she has done” (64). In both the aforementioned quotes, Mr. Compson appears to be the most sensible person in his family—he understands that virginity is a social construct and respects his daughter’s privacy, despite reasons to believe that she may be having sex out of wedlock. Additionally, Mr. Compson challenges the notion of patriarchal ownership of a woman’s virginity by dismissing his wife’s concerns about Caddy’s illicit activities. As Stephen M. Ross and Noel Polk assert, “Mr. Compson wants [Quentin] to see [virginity] as merely a ‘state’ some are in and some are not, like death” (Ross and Polk 49). Indeed: Mr. Compson subverts the role of the father in a Southern family by stripping virginity of its moral connotations, thereby reducing virginity to something ultimately meaningless. Clearly, upon first examination, Mr. Compson shrugs off tradition by reevaluating gender roles and sexuality.

Through discussing his daughter’s virginity with Quentin, Mr. Compson still turns female sexuality into an object of knowledge between men that can then be used to garner power and control, and, in doing so, continues his rule as oppressive patriarch. While Mr. Compson undoubtedly takes a more liberal stance towards virginity than Quentin, he nonetheless continues to assess sex from a philosophical and scientific standpoint. Inherent within Mr. Compson’s attitude towards virginity is a discourse about sexuality and, although he may see virginity as a social construct, he sees sexuality as something intrinsic, something to be examined. Michel Foucault addresses this attitude in his text, *The History of Sexuality*: he claims that Western civilization “is the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession” (Foucault 58). In debating the existence of virginity, Mr. Compson and Quentin attempt to get at this truth of sex that Foucault talks of—arguing over the nature of Caddy’s sexuality allows it to become a power nexus. The scene even has the air of a confessional: an older white man listens to a young white man—a young man who is both symbolically and, in this case, literally his son—confess his transgressions, and then the older man passes along his wisdom in an attempt to soothe his son’s fears. Ironically, though, the young man does not confess his own sins—he confesses the sins of his absent sister, the already-marginalized figure

that their conversation oppresses to an even greater degree.

The important recognition that Mr. Compson's supposed liberalism only obscures the way he manipulates power hints at the hidden similarities between himself and Quentin and, more significantly, himself and Thomas Sutpen. As Eric Sundquist observes in his essay, "The Myth of *The Sound and the Fury*," "Mr. Compson's cynical disinterest in Caddy's promiscuity and Quentin's narcissistic obsession with it represent, not opposing views, but views that are complementary to the point of schizophrenia" (Sundquist 390). The supposedly progressive platitudes that Mr. Compson says so fondly form the other half of the equation that, when combined with Quentin's traditional half, allows the power structure to remain balanced. They symbolize two sides of the same oppressive patriarchy, just as a Good Cop, Bad Cop routine symbolizes both the benevolent and malevolent sides of the legal system. This scenario of white Southern men talking about the white female body leads to an interesting dilemma in which the white female body becomes a site for sexual analysis and deliberation—consequently, the white female body becomes an object, which closes it off from being a human, sexual space. Forced to redirect his sexual desire elsewhere, the patriarch experiences cognitive dissonance caused by the conflicting sexual feelings towards and analytic relationship to the white female body.

The repressed desires manifest themselves on the site of the Other, which is in this case the black male body. Once this process is complete, the patriarch understands the black man to be violent, virile, and passionate—qualities resulting from the corrupted desires that the patriarch projected. It is this series of psychological evasions that informs Thomas Sutpen's racism in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a racism that eventually leads Henry Sutpen to kill Charles Bon, one of the central moments in the story of his dynasty's dismantling. A certain anxiety about black men seems to exist within Thomas Sutpen from as early on in the text as the second paragraph: Sutpen appears in Jefferson "with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled" (Faulkner, *Absalom* 4). Assuming that Rosa Coldfield, the woman who speaks these words, does not add her own speculation to this scene, the reader confronts a startling picture—a man leading a band of beast-like men, chained together to both keep them nearby and prevent them from hurting their leader. Sutpen evidently feels powerful enough to claim ownership of other human beings, but his lack of faith in his own ability to control them indicates an underlying fear of that which he owns. Also, when Sutpen tries to convince Henry to break up the marriage, he reveals the incestuous nature of their potential union first, and when that fails he discloses the miscegenation aspect of their union, which finally persuades Henry

to murder Charles Bon. The order in which Sutpen exposes hidden information illuminates much about the Sutpen men—Thomas considers miscegenation to be worse than incest; Henry kills his brother not because of the threat of incest, but because he could not stand seeing his sister lie with a black man. Charles Bon even picks up on Henry's preference of incest to miscegenation when he declares, "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear" (285). For the Sutpen men, the black male body is entirely Other, an unknowable space upon which their own repressed sexual desires and anxieties can get redirected

Ultimately, the projection of anxieties about the white female body onto the black male body inspires the patriarch to yearn for control over the black male body, and in controlling the black male body, the patriarch vicariously controls the sexual drives he has projected. As previously mentioned, Thomas Sutpen rides into Jefferson with his slaves manacled together; for Sutpen, it is not enough to own the black male body—he additionally needs to physically control and limit its potential for action. These slaves are not merely subjugated by a system, an abstraction of power that pervades the society they live in: Sutpen also controls them on a very personal level, using iron chains that are in no way abstract. And the description of the slaves being like half-tamed beasts betrays the anxiety felt by Sutpen towards the slaves: where they have the capacity to act violently and naturally, Sutpen can only control them because his position of power demands that he maintain a certain level of composure and virtue. In this scene, the slaves become, at least in the eyes of the patriarch, everything the patriarch can never be. But in hopes of maintaining the status quo, and in hopes of reclaiming that sexuality, that freedom signified by the black male body, Sutpen restrains the slaves, thus restraining and ultimately winning control over the sexual drives he projected.

Outside of the obvious damage caused by the enslavement of a people, the total psychic control of the black male body leads to an internalization of the projected sexuality, which in turn predisposes the black male to act a certain way, almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Absalom, Absalom!* exemplifies this more than *The Sound and the Fury*, due to the *Absalom, Absalom!*'s focus on Charles Bon and Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon. A poignant example of the internalization of stereotypes occurs in the climactic scene, where Henry Sutpen confronts his half-brother, Charles Bon, with an ultimatum about marrying Judith. In response to Henry's declaration of brotherhood, Charles says "No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister" (286). This crucial line betrays the alteration of Bon's identity—he not only self-identifies with the black side of his family tree (a completely appropriate behavior), he additionally self-identifies using the word 'nigger,' which indicates a derogatory view of his

own blackness. Charles Bon allows the stereotype—forced down his throat by Southern society since birth—of the virile and violent black man to affect and ultimately shape the way he sees himself. Similarly, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon comes to hate himself only after someone exposes him to his racial history: someone “told him that he was, must be, a negro, who could neither have heard yet nor recognized the term ‘nigger,’ who even had no word for it in the tongue he knew” (161). Afterwards, either Clytie or Judith “found hidden beneath his mattress the shard of broken mirror: and who to know what hours of amazed and tearless grief he might have spent before it, examining himself” (162). Clearly, exposure to that vile racial epithet leads to the internalization of the characteristics prescribed by the patriarchs and Southern society as a whole, not the other way around. Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon exemplifies the unreality of racial stereotypes while also embodying how those very unreal stereotypes can manifest themselves in real people and actions. The racism becomes the cause, not the effect, of the characters’ actions.

Still, Thomas Sutpen, like Mr. Compson, appears at points to subvert or pull apart the constructs he employs to maintain control. The scene in which Sutpen fights his slaves best reveals this mild disruption of the status quo; occasionally, instead of throwing two of his slaves in the ring for his guests’ entertainment, Thomas Sutpen gets in the ring to fight himself, “as a grand finale or perhaps as a matter of *sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination*” (21, italics added). However, these fights, as shown by the quote, do not occur within a vacuum in which the cultural implication could go unnoticed—no; in slightly subverting that which is socially acceptable, Thomas Sutpen actually enhances his authority over those he has subjugated, just as Mr. Compson does fifty years later. The endurance of this deceitful patriarch—the man who fears what he does not understand and consequently needs to control it—gestures towards the greater instability of the South. These men need to subvert their own system because of that system’s inherent instability. But the system maintains: would Thomas Sutpen ever lose one of the fights with his slaves? Would Mr. Compson go without speaking about Caddie’s sexuality?

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# Summer Comes Too Early in the South

Briana Naseer

Time slips by slower  
in the heat; hands dragging  
their sweaty palms  
across the clock's face  
opaque with heavy wet.

Daylight kicks the dark shins  
of the afternoon thunderstorms,  
until they double over,  
made small in their lightning.

Night thoughts-  
high strung anxieties,  
white fire worry and torn-paper pride,  
bleed first into evening, then lazy midday,  
and before you can stop them  
they're whispering in your ear,  
intimate in your bed,  
stirring themselves  
into your morning coffee.

The air is hot,  
everything is so goddamn hot.

# The Pined Soul

Keri Erb

The perfume she wears is very strong. It smells sort of like the rind of a freshly peeled tangerine, like the bright orange ones that fell off of the countertop last summer — the summer before my life turned sour.

The newlyweds shut the door in front of me, the woman's fragrance still lingering in the air. Sounds of their departure echo against the walls of the empty house where I am stuck. The other men are coming tomorrow morning and there is not much time left for me.

Her scent reminds me of Pine Sol, so much like the good old days when the family was here and I supported them.

I remember Ma, that is what they called her. She often stood in the kitchen over the stove, stirring the hot iron pot as the minute hand spun around the clock that was hung above the sink. Occasionally, she'd glance at the time and take a sip of lemonade, the condensation on the glass falling in sync with the sweat on her forehead. Her face was warm, wrinkled, and full of love, but she was tough in a way that made you feel strong too.

At dusk the kids would return. A big, boisterous herd of empty bellies burst through the door, the four of them licking their lips by the kitchen.

*"What's for dinner, Ma?"*

*"What did I tell you about wearing your shoes inside? I just cleaned the floor today!"*

She shooed them away with the end of her broom while they all giggled, kicking their sneakers into one stinking mound near the doormat.

*"Go wash up, dinner's almost ready. And make sure you get all of the dirt out from under those nails!"*

After the kids cleared their plates, Ma let them color with me. They sprawled out and opened up the big carton of crayons, scattering the rainbow in every direction. They illustrated scenes from each of their imaginations until it was time for bed. When the lights went dim, I waited patiently for the next meal to hit the table.

Back then, cleaning day was my favorite day of the week. Ma always used the Pine Sol with the two oranges on the corner of the label. She scrubbed and scoured, building a frothy lather of soap as the suds fizzled and popped away one by one. She scraped along the grout with a stiff brush until her knees got sore. Then Ma grabbed the mop, swabbing every square inch so that the whole room glimmered from below, the way it always did in the TV commercials.

I had my time to shine, and I owed it all to her.

Since the family moved out last summer, I haven't been cleaned once. A handful of people have come to inspect the place, but they have only left more dirt and dust behind them. Cob-webs collect in the corners as flies mature and complete their short life cycles. I am utterly filthy and there is nothing I can do about it.

# The Jimmy-Puppet

Katlyn Kurtz

I was six when my Momma told me my best friend died. I know what Jimmy looks like, but that wasn't Jimmy in the coffin. Jimmy has blue eyes and his hair stands up on the sides. His tongue slips between his missing teeth when he smiles, and he smiles a lot. The thing in the coffin was a Jimmy-puppet. Whoever was pulling the strings wasn't doing a very good job. The puppet didn't know it needed to be smiling and trying to smooth down its hair.

Momma told me that Jimmy died in the neighborhood swimming pool because he didn't get enough air in his lungs, but that doesn't make any sense because Jimmy told me he didn't like the pool. He said little kids peed in it because they couldn't help it, and that he didn't want to swim in a bunch of pee. I told him it was because he didn't know how to swim, but he didn't answer. He just smiled and stuck his tongue out at me through the gap in his teeth. Momma said he went down the slide and hit his head so hard he passed out, so even if he had known how to swim, he still wouldn't have been able to try.

Momma said I didn't have to go to Jimmy's funeral, but that it would be the last time I'd be able to see him and say goodbye. She said I could even see his body, because it would be an open-casket funeral. She said open-casket meant they let people look at the body before they shut it up forever. I wanted to go, but not because I wanted to say goodbye. Jimmy and I never said goodbye because goodbyes are forever, so we'd always just say "see you later," or "talk to you tomorrow." I wanted to go because I never saw a dead person before, and I thought maybe they'd have to put a different dead person's body in there since Jimmy wasn't really dead.

Jimmy's mom was crying at the funeral, and when she saw me she gave me a big hug and wouldn't let me go. She got my shoulder all wet, but Momma made me wear a black shirt, so no one noticed the water. Jimmy's mom asked Momma how I was doing, and I told her I was just fine ma'am and could I see Jimmy yet. Momma grabbed my shoulder and told me to go pick a seat and to save one for her. I heard her apologize to Jimmy's mom and say that I didn't understand about death yet, and Jimmy's mom said that that was okay. I shook my head knowing I understood death just fine, and it was the grown-ups that didn't realize that Jimmy was still alive.

When I was four, I had a dog that got hit by a car, and its guts sprayed everywhere, so I knew it was dead. Jimmy's guts didn't even come out of his body, so Jimmy couldn't be dead. Plus, I never saw my dog again after it died, but

Momma said Jimmy died two nights ago, and I know she lied because I saw him last night.

The preacher man said that Jimmy was a great kid and that he always had a lot to share in Sunday school. He said Jimmy was up in heaven looking down and smiling at us right now and thinking that all the flowers were beautiful. He said a few more things, but I had been looking at the coffin, so I didn't hear, and besides I knew he wasn't telling the truth anyway. Jimmy hates Sunday school, and he and I like to tell jokes and eat the snacks. Jimmy also hates flowers. He used to like them back when we were five, but then he sniffed one and got stung on the nose by a bee and now he hates them.

When they finally let everybody see the body, and I saw it was just a Jimmy-puppet, I got bored and told Momma I wanted to go home. Momma said that would be rude to just leave and that we'd go to the cemetery first and watch Jimmy's coffin get put in the ground and then we'd go have snacks at his house. I thought it was kind of rude to make me sit and listen to the preacher as he led the people in a couple verses of some old song no one understood, but I didn't say so. Momma would have just shaken her head and told me to quiet down if I wasn't going to sing.

The hole they dug for the coffin was pretty big, and it was underneath this big tree that Jimmy would love to climb. I thought it was a waste for a Jimmy-puppet, but I didn't say that to Momma because I was thinking about snacks at that point, and I didn't really care if grown-ups thought Jimmy-puppets were a good thing to bury or not.

I got a few cookies when I got to Jimmy's house and then went up to his room to see if he was there. I took off my shoes, found him in his closet, and told him about the preacher man's lies and the Jimmy-puppet and the tree. I offered him a cookie, but he said he was full because he snuck downstairs and ate some of the cookies before people came over. I asked him what he thought of all this mess and he said he thought it was silly that grown-ups were so sad. He said his Pop sat on his bed last night and cried for a few minutes before he walked out. I heard Momma call me from downstairs, and Jimmy told me I should go because grown-ups didn't understand about death.

I found Momma and she told me we were heading home so I needed to get my shoes. I forgot I left them in Jimmy's room, so I told her I had to get them, and she decided she'd come with me. I grabbed my shoes and said "see you later, Jimmy," but he wasn't there.

Momma held my hand when we crossed the street to get back to our house and asked me if I was doing okay. She asked me if I understood Jimmy

wasn't here anymore, and I told her she was wrong because I had just talked to him. She nodded and the next day she took me to an appointment with a doctor she called a therapist.

The doctor asked me all sorts of questions, but I didn't really see the point. She asked me about my school work, and I told her that I was in first grade and knew all my times tables already. She seemed impressed and asked about my friends, and I told her that we just had a funeral for my best friend, but that the grown-ups were crazy because Jimmy has been in his room the past few days. I told her about the Jimmy-puppet and she told me she wanted to see me again in a week.

Momma asked me about the appointment, and I told her it was fine, but that it wasn't like the dentist or the doctor because she didn't tell me that I had no cavities or that I was growing just right. Momma said this was a different kind of doctor that makes sure my brain is working okay; I didn't really care. I knew my times tables, so my brain had to be okay. On the way home, I asked Momma if I could go over to Jimmy's house to play that night, and she looked at me in the mirror and told me that I couldn't.

Sometimes our parents told us we couldn't play back before all the grown-ups got sad, and we discovered a way of getting into the other's bedroom without going through the front door. So, after dinner I went out my window, climbed up the tree in Jimmy's front yard, hopped onto his windowsill, and then climbed into Jimmy's room. Jimmy was sitting on his bed, and his room was dark.

"Hey, Jimmy! Let's turn on the lights."

"Naw, Charlie, don't do that. And quiet down."

"But it's really dark in here. I can't even see you."

"That's fine, we're playing a game."

"What kind of game?"

"I dunno. I haven't thought of all the rules yet. I gotta tell you something though."

"Okay, well the first rule should be we have to hide under the bed if a car comes."

"Okay, we'll come up with rules later. You know how your mom wouldn't let you come over?" I could see Jimmy looking at me through the darkness, and I nodded my head. "Well, that's because the grown-ups don't think I'm here."

"Well, why don't you tell them? Next time we play hunter-and-prey I'm going to hide in the closet. How long have you been in there anyway?"

“I can’t tell them, Charlie. You remember the Jimmy-puppet you told me about?”

“Yeah, of course I do. The grown-ups put it in the casket for the funeral!”

“It wasn’t a puppet, Charlie.”

“What do you mean? It looked like a puppet. You know, like the ones in the toy bin in our class?”

“It wasn’t a puppet. It was me. It was real.”

I laughed at Jimmy. I didn’t understand what he meant. I also didn’t realize a car had been heading our way, and so I didn’t have time to dive beneath the bed. The car’s lights shone in the room, and I saw the Jimmy-puppet.

Its blue eyes were bulged and swollen and one of them was floating around in the socket, but the other stared straight at me. Its hair was sticking up all over the place, but it didn’t try to smooth it down. Its whole body was swollen like my ankle had been when I stepped in a hole last year and twisted it. Its tongue hung out of his mouth, but it wasn’t smiling. It was dripping wet and gasping for air.

“Charles, is there anything else you would like to tell me today?”

I looked at her, but didn’t meet her eyes. There was too much memory in the blue. She waited for me to answer, and then slowly began packing up her things. Our sessions always began and ended this way. She would wait for me to talk until I finally did, and then I’d stop, having told all of the story I could manage for that day. It’d been our weekly routine since my first visit with her ten years ago. I did have one last thing to say today though, something that had been nagging at me all day.

“Actually, there is one thing. I saw Jimmy last night. Not the Jimmy-puppet, just Jimmy. He said I pushed him down the slide.”

# Say You Were Never Seventeen at His House in 2011

After Stevie Edwards  
Katlyn Kurtz

I don't see myself at seventeen:

my face isn't clear of acne for once, I didn't wear a new blouse (not something see-through, not polka-dotted, and never buttoned).

I hadn't picked through miles of clearance aisles

for something he might have liked

to see me in. I wasn't wearing a sugar-scrub

lipstick I wish I hadn't lost. I'm not burying

my head into his shoulder. My big heart is not about

to neglect its beating. I don't text my friend, a bitch

whose name will never be on my tongue, that I think this boy,

the wrestler who practices his new moves with me

and apologizes when he pops my knee out of place,

is the one. I want to tell my old self

that I'm wrong, and not to let him take me to his room, a Chernobyl

which becomes the jail cell of nightmares. Hands pinned behind my head,

the younger me shuts her eyes for the thousandth time and screams

with her real voice like she always has when she feels out of control

and will continue to do for years after. I want to tell her

in a year she'll blame herself for trusting anyone:

God, her father when he tried to change his temper, the neighbor's dog.

I want to tell her panic attacks are scary, even

when the fear is far off. Crushed pills of needing more rest. Trusting

and more trusting, and you won't know how to transform

your personality or say no to others. I want to

tell you a silly video slammed an attack into my routine today.

The young me looked up and said, *Help me?*

I knew I wasn't really there.

# Plastic Lips

Samuel Ellis

Lily drops her dolls. She can hear her father as he welcomes her mother home. “Hey baby, how was work?”

Lily listens to the house grow silent again before picking up her dolls. She crosses over to the pastel Barbie villa against the wall. With mounting brackets on the sides keeping it upright, it is practically part of the house.

There, she gets to work. The first step is to dress Barbie in an outfit suitable for a day at work (black dress, black heels, doctor’s coat), and have her drive to the city (a stack of books) in her pink minivan. Once Barbie is out of the house, Ken is lifted off the couch. Lily makes beep noises as his plastic hand prods at the buttons on a tiny pink cell phone.

Lily drops her voice as low as she can and says, “Hey baby. Why don’t you come over?” She pauses before continuing. “Yeah, she’s gone.”

Once Ken has finished his call, Lily strips off his clothes and places him in the bedroom under the napkin sheets. Moments later, Midge is pulling up outside in her convertible wearing a white halter top paired with denim shorts, her red hair secured in a ponytail. Midge lets herself into Barbie’s house with the key Ken made for her, and tiptoes up the stairs. Once she is in the bedroom with Ken, her clothes come off too.

Midge and Ken kiss each other with plastic lips and touch each other with vinyl hands.

Lily tries to sound mature, like a grown woman, as Midge says, “Why can’t we always be like this?”

“You know why, baby.”

“How about you *take care* of her?” Midge leans in close and whispers, “How about you take care of her tonight?”

Ken is quiet for awhile, but finally he says, “Okay, baby.”

Midge gets dressed, but Ken doesn’t bother as he walks her to the door. They kiss again before Midge rolls off towards the dirty clothes hamper on the other side of the room.

Ken stumbles back to his bed, where he makes a few more calls with his phone. Lily mumbles for him, not knowing the *exact* words to say. Ken only bothers to get dressed when Barbie pulls up in her minivan. He greets her at the door and says, “Hey baby, how was work?”

# The Conversion

Constance Wayne

The spring of my senior year a group of friends and I went to a carnival at the Catholic school off the Boulevard. We got there before the sun had set and wandered the unfamiliar territory of temporary walls and games set up haphazardly in the football field. Spinning balls of lights and garish colors whisked around and drowned us as the sun set, and we slowly split into smaller groups, spending our hard-earned tickets frugally.

Four of us girls used up our tickets first, and we took to wandering the crowd, nibbling on our shared cotton candy and insulting each other. MengXin and I were behind Ally and Cameron, who were discussing horror movies that neither of us could stomach. I was explaining to MengXin “appreciation” versus “appreciative.” She’d moved here from China nine years ago, but still lacked certain knowledge of the English language that amused and annoyed the rest of us in turns.

A man wearing a clerical collar and a wide smile waved over Cameron. They both volunteered at Monroe Regional, she told us, and we all shook hands with him as we were introduced. Cameron smiled at him, but subtly turned the conversation so that he was soon saying good-bye.

We walked, and I fell once more into explaining language to MengXin. Suddenly Cameron spun towards us.

“Wait, MengXin, did you shake Father Pat’s hand?”

MengXin nodded.

Cameron grimaced convincingly.

“Meng, that means you’re Catholic now.”

I rolled my eyes at Ally. Cameron was constantly trying to trick MengXin, preying on the fact that her grasp of sarcasm was nonexistent.

MengXin’s eyebrows scrunched together. “But I can’t be Catholic. I am Buddhist. Buddha!”

Cameron shrugged. “I’m sorry. It looks like you’re Catholic now.”

MengXin clutched at her hair. “No! My father will be so angry. Bu yao! Not Catholic! I Buddha!”

Taking pity on her, and ignoring the playful look on Cameron’s face, I said, “She’s lying, Meng. You’re not Catholic. That isn’t how religion works.”

MengXin glanced back and forth between the two of us as if she couldn’t decide who was telling the truth.

Ally stepped forward and cuffed Cameron’s shoulder playfully. “Meng, trust us, you aren’t Catholic. Cam was just trying to trick you.”

We moved on, walking once more towards the Ferris wheel, English grammar floating in the air before us. Out of the corner of my eye I caught MengXin fingering the jade Buddha that hung on a red string around her neck, a frown on her face.

# Post-Somatic Crest Disorder

Katlyn Kurtz

They say you can never step foot into the same water. You know that doesn't affect the experience that water gives you. 1. You overhear your roommate scream that he's getting raped playing Call of Duty and you feel your smile disappear as you start to shake the Xanax out of its bottle. You think one will do it, but two might work more quickly and you need it quickly because it is coming. 2. It is a tiny wave miles off shore but the conditions are just right and you know that in moments it will be a tsunami and you are standing on the beach where your boyfriend buried you four years ago up to your neck. You scream for the people around you to leave and get as far away from you as possible, but the guy in the yellow speedo with the red surfboard thinks he can handle the wave. You know that if he stays he'll drown like the rest. 3. There is nothing. The birds fly off and the people disappear. The guy in the speedo decided to run for it when he saw how big the wave was getting, and you don't blame him. The Xanax is working but the pills aren't drowning everything out as it comes anyway and the waves pound against you. 4. You're trapped beneath the sand as the waves rise. The fear envelops you, even though you've felt the bitter sting of salt water against your face plenty of times before. The waves bring particles of shells that were once beautiful but have been cast off by the creature that sometime loved them and have been beaten to pieces by the unforgiving waves. You catch these shells in your hair and mouth, unable to toss them off because your hands are buried and useless, and now you understand the marred innocence of the barnacle-covered conch shell. The waves rush back down, forcing your head into the sand directly in front of you. You know that even though these waves only come a few times a week, 5. high tide comes every day.

# The Safe House

M. Reise

“You’re not doing this for me,” Andrea<sup>1</sup> says. “It’s okay to cry.”

I’m in a missionary’s backyard, burning an effigy<sup>2</sup> in a fire pit. We’re on a raised wooden deck that serves as a sacred space for community meetings and personal reflections. Surrounded by star fruit, banana, moringa, and chia trees, and a chicken coop. An oasis in a food desert.

“This is really hard for me,” I say.

“I know. It never really goes away. You might do this every week for the rest of your life.”

She told me to burn something personally meaningful to me. I don’t own much: a carload of clothes and books. I have no childhood photos or toys.

When I got my first apartment, I was a high school senior.<sup>3</sup> I moved in with my boyfriend, Henry, whom I had been dating for four years. I reminded myself that I wouldn’t return for any of my belongings and, aside from clothing, I only took those things I would be upset to never see again. I owned less when my relationship with Henry dissolved; everything was his. I donated nearly everything I had

when I moved in with Andrea at the Safe House.

The Safe House is a Christian intentional community<sup>4</sup> in central Florida. It’s a micro church<sup>5</sup> with a mission of poverty alleviation as an expression of God’s love for the poor. Andrea installs urban gardens in low-income neighborhoods, and her husband, Matt, directs a food pantry.

Together, they and a group of ten people live in a low-income neighborhood with the intention of living sustainably, and literally serving their neighbors. I stayed at the Safe House for a few months in the summer and worked with Andrea and Matt. I felt welcomed, even as an atheist.<sup>6</sup>

I have two or three pictures with Henry that I could have burned in the pit, but I would have had to search for them; I never looked at them much. For a seven-year relationship, there isn’t much proof it ever happened. What do I have from the relationship that ended two months after that one did? Nothing.

I’m thinking about this while I rip strips from a cardboard box to throw into the fire.

1. Names and details in this piece have been changed.

2. A crude model representing a particular person, created for the purpose of being destroyed therapeutically, in this case as an expression of anger.

3. I moved out because my home life was very dysfunctional.

4. A community designed to encourage social cohesion and teamwork; often with a shared political or religious vision and an alternative lifestyle.

5. A small Bible study or church service that often meets in someone’s home.

6. They do know I am an atheist. I do not become Christian at any time.

“Why are you angry?” Andrea asks. “Think about it and keep tearing.”

This paper is a list of things that keep me up at night. It is an exercise in allowing myself to feel pain instead of pushing it back down.

§

When people ask me what I do in my free time, they expect me to name a TV show or video game. Instead, I say, “I study people.”

“What do you mean?”

“I live in communes, work on farms—lately with Christian missionaries. I join subcultures trying to find the best model for encouraging pro-social behavior.”

“Oh, okay,” they say, still obviously confused.

How did I, an atheist, end up living with Christian missionaries? It started with a screaming street preacher. A girl in the crowd and I agreed that the man was hateful and ignorant—nowhere near a true expression of Christ. We met to discuss theology, and I joined her Bible study. Now she’s one of my closest friends. She plugged me in to the wider missionary network, and I’ve frequented the Safe House since then.

“But you’re an atheist?”

An explicit negative atheist or weak atheist—what most people would refer to as an agnostic. I reject belief in God without believing in its nonexistence.

The Safe House allows any person access to the community who

comes—from Christian missionaries to atheists, lip-pierced teenagers to elderly Catholic bishops. Its strength is its community.

§

We crowd in the living room of a 100-year-old house near the projects. The only air conditioning is a rotating fan in each corner of the room. The back door is open to let a breeze through, but the only thing entering is a cloud of mosquitoes. It’s not that the group can’t afford air conditioning; it’s a sign of solidarity with the poor to not have it. There emphasis is on self-denial.

Matt justifies this philosophy: “I’m lazy,” he says, “and it takes a lot to get me going. I can’t get too comfortable.” It’s the most diverse group I’ve ever seen, with great variance in age, race, physical/mental ability, and socioeconomic status. Often, some of the guests are homeless.

“Who’s cooking next week?” Matt asks.

No one answers.

“Hey, that’s fine by me. If no one signs up, we won’t eat.”

§

It’s been a few weeks since Henry left. I text a man I met when he complimented my Thundercats t-shirt.

His name is Franco.

25-year-old chemical engineer

Latino gym rat

with a mortgage

Intelligent, attractive, responsible

I tell him I watch people  
I can pick out details  
Watch him hold the door open for me  
and pay for my tea

Couldn't help myself, apologizing  
for things that don't matter  
Being clumsy  
Nervous

Third time we meet for coffee I ask,  
Is this a date?  
Because it's way too soon

I try to guard myself  
but it doesn't work

"A couple of drinks" turns into  
fresh squeezed orange juice at his house  
Two story suburban with a front yard  
Leather furniture and red walls  
Nicer than any place I've ever lived  
Plus air conditioning

He brushes the hair away from my face  
as he asks me a question  
My mind goes blank and I miss it

Sorry, I say  
I think I just giggled  
for the first time in my life

I'm never giggly or stupid  
Not that you can trust  
my estimation of myself

Why not? he asks

My researcher brain kicks in and says  
I'm necessarily subjective  
and judgments depend on culture

What is he to me?  
A reprieve  
It isn't logical

I come over a few nights in the  
same week. We don't have sex, but we  
cuddle, watch *Doctor Who*, and sleep  
in the same bed.

"What are your intentions?" he  
asks.

I don't have to play  
What am I after?

Could keep it where we are  
Tea and talking until 2AM  
He's not pushing

"I just got out of a relationship; I  
couldn't get serious with you," I say. "It  
didn't end well."

Henry told me I was lazy and selfish  
That anyone who knew me as well as he did  
would see how disagreeable I am

That I only remember the bad things  
But they're a lot more memorable  
The majority of seven years

I don't know how to grieve the loss  
Yeah, but why should I be upset?  
There it is, denial

Distract yourself until  
you can't think

Unresolved

My feelings have so often been disregarded  
I won't even talk about them

“Good,” he says, “because it  
wouldn’t be fair to ask you to jump  
into another relationship so soon.”  
So we decide to keep it casual.

Is this a distraction?

I’m enjoying myself  
Having an adventure  
finding release  
So what if I barely know him?  
He reads my comic books and bites my neck

§

I wake up at the Safe House with a  
crick in my back. I sleep on a wooden  
board because they don’t have an extra  
bed, and I don’t own a sleeping bag.  
The only way to get to sleep at night is  
to point a fan directly at my face and  
put a frozen bag of peas at the nape of  
my neck.

I sleep fewer than 4 hours.

§

I take a class Matt teaches on ur-  
ban theology. It’s on the back patio.  
“Jesus asked the disabled man, ‘Do  
you want to be well?’” he says. “We’re  
called to empower the poor. Don’t as-  
sume you know their needs better than  
they do.”

He conceptualizes the gospel as  
a healing of broken relationships be-  
tween God and man, but also between  
men.

“Grace is free. Community is  
available to you. The catch is that it will  
challenge your every preconception  
and weakness. It will be hard. And the  
community will hold you accountable

once you’re in it.”

I wonder why they want me  
But they’re living their ideals

I get defensive when I think about God

We close in out-loud prayer. I zone  
out when I hear him start to apologize  
for his sins. Instead, I pray that the  
darkness would be taken out of me,  
imagining an ice cream scoop scraping  
out the rot clinging to the inside of my  
ribcage.

I consider whether I believe God  
exists. I ask for a sign “so big even I  
can see it.”

I’m looking for a system, not a god.  
I want to submit to something higher  
than myself, but I don’t know what it  
will be. I want to do what I feel called  
to do, even if I don’t know why I feel  
that way. But I don’t want my needs for  
consistency and acceptance to force a  
square peg into a round hole.

I don’t really know why I’m doing this  
I say it’s for science,  
for the study of intentional community  
But maybe I’m just tired

I want an external standard  
because the inner voice is toxic

Maybe I just want to be around people  
who follow a consistent philosophy  
that tells them to care for me  
And I’m still afraid they won’t care

“One more thing,” he says.  
“Remember, ‘Hurt people hurt people.

Loved people love people.’ ”

§

I get a call on my lunch break.  
Henry is moving out, no warning. To  
be fair, I tried to do the same to him.  
He went abroad a few months ago,  
and, over the phone, I told him not to  
come back. He came back anyway, and  
he told me he would be homeless if I  
didn't let him stay. I let him stay, and  
then he left.

Seven years. It ended on his terms.  
I call six people, but they're all out of  
town for Mother's Day. I don't tell any  
of them that I'm upset. Next I call my  
mother, and she doesn't answer the  
phone.

Seven people too busy  
I don't want to be a burden  
Familiar feeling

It hasn't fully hit me yet  
Letting it out in short private little bursts

Here it comes

Maybe I am lazy and selfish and  
bad with people  
But I can't change the way I feel about him  
Relieved

Trying to reach out  
But I don't feel close enough to anyone  
I'm afraid I drove him away  
That this was my best shot  
That it was my fault  
and it'll happen again

“Why are you angry?” Andrea asks.

If you make fun of me for  
having a panic attack  
Say racist, sexist things  
Deal drugs  
If you get my childhood bedroom  
searched by police  
Make me lie to my parents  
Threaten suicide if I leave  
Move us into a trap house<sup>7</sup>

If you tell me to “get over” depression  
That I don't do anything for you  
That I don't care

Fuck you

How could it have been any other way?  
My family wasn't there  
Friends didn't understand

And then he tells me he understands  
me better than I understand myself  
That my pain is unfounded  
And why can't I just be normal?

Clean the trashed apartment  
Because he makes the money  
Do I want an allowance?  
Why am I so selfish?

No, I can't deal it with him  
No, I shouldn't get a job  
No, I can't handle the money  
Why am I so difficult?

But when the money dried up  
it was my parents  
my job  
my scholarships  
and my cooking  
that sustained us

Don't tell me I've never had a reason to be

7. A place where drugs are sold or where people go to do drugs.

unhappy

That I don't think about anything  
That I am naïve

I was unhappy  
and I thought about it all the time

§

“So let me get this straight. You need to relax so you're learning how, but whenever you try, you panic?” Franco asks.

“Yeah, that's about right.”

He says he can't imagine why I think so negatively of myself; why I would be so eager for punishment; why I wonder if suffering makes me a better person.

“Matt's laziness makes him successful,” he says. “You said other pastors burn out. How are you supposed to take care of other people when you won't take care of yourself?”

“I guess you're right,” I say. “What's the point of shutting off the air conditioning if it makes missionaries too uncomfortable to function? What if it just teaches them not to complain?”

§

Henry calls one day. When he left two months ago, he didn't move any of his stuff out of the apartment. When he came back with a moving truck, I was already dating Franco.

Divided  
Feeling a bit like a sack of shit

He says he knows we'll be back together  
Says the thought of being with  
someone else makes him sick

Calls me bashert<sup>8</sup>  
But I never felt it

Why do I feel guilty?  
Because I'm enjoying myself?

I'm beating myself up  
But, I have to consider my motives

“I wonder if I'm a shitty person,”  
I tell Franco the next time I'm at his house.

“You? If you're a shitty person,  
what does that make the rest of us?”

I go out to lunch with Henry  
Remind him it's just for old times' sakes  
That this is not “just a break”  
That we will not get back together

He says I'll realize it wasn't him  
That I was unhappy with  
the way my life was going

You know what? No.  
I'm sick of that  
Not lazy, not selfish  
Just tired of bullshit

I'm in bed with Franco and he starts biting my neck. I'm getting into it. I've been struggling with whether or not to have sex with him and what it would mean that I did it so soon after a seven-year relationship.

Just stop

Don't be too upset to realize that your type  
might be geeks with muscles

---

8. A Jewish term; predestined marriage partner or soul mate.

That you don't have to stop  
having sex forever  
That devotion and attraction are separate  
That you can forgive yourself

This is the conversation where I  
made up my mind:

"Usually he mocks anyone with  
religious belief, but he says we're soul  
mates," I tell Franco. "That God either  
wants us together or wants him to  
suffer."

"Oh, waah," he says. "I hate when  
people use that as an excuse."

"What do you mean?"

"He left you, right?"

"But I still feel guilty."

"Is he your daddy?"

"What?"

"Is he your daddy?"

"Well, no."

"If he ain't your daddy, and you  
don't believe in God, what's the prob-  
lem?"

"OK," I say. "Let's go." Then we  
have sex.

The thinking part of me says  
Wait, wait... What happened?  
Miles after the feeling part took over

We go again in the morning.

§

We still haven't dressed for the  
day; we're in our underwear under a  
blanket on his bed. I lay with my head  
on his shoulder and his arm wrapped  
around me.

He gets up to use the bathroom

and comes back with a concerned  
look. "You know," he says, "I usually  
have a bigger load than that. There  
wasn't much in the condom."

I sit up. "That's weird. Why do you  
think that is?"

"I don't know. I just didn't have  
as much as I normally do. It's usually  
twice that much."

My body stiffens. I'm not sure  
why.

"Maybe it broke." He sort of  
laughs when he says it, like it's a joke.

"But I know I put it on right."

"I know. I saw you."

"And there was still a lot in there."  
He's speaking quickly.

"Yeah, I know." My thoughts slow  
down.

"If it broke there wouldn't be that  
much in there."

"Yeah." I want to believe it. I'm  
quiet. I'm still processing the information.

"You know what? I'm sorry I men-  
tioned it," he says, still looking ner-  
vous. "Don't get anxious. It's nothing."

"Yeah," I say. "But can I see it?"

"What? Yeah. Yeah, I'll get it."

He brings it to me, and I hold it  
up. I don't see anything wrong with it.

"Wait, there it is. See that little tear  
in the side?"

He's looking over my shoulder. "I  
don't see anything."

"There," I whisper. I point to it.

"Right there."

"Shit. Shit, yeah, that's it... I'm sorry."

I look at my lap, breathing hard.

“Hey, I’ll take care of it,” he says.  
“Shit, I’m so sorry.”

Breathe.

“Hey, look at me. If you’re pregnant, I’ll take care of you. We can do this.”

I want to believe him. I should feel relieved that this is his first reaction; that his instinct in a stressful situation is to protect and not to yell.

But I don’t, because I can’t think.

We go to the pharmacy and I wait in the car while he buys Plan B.<sup>9</sup> Then we get coffee and go to a park.

“You know,” I tell him, “you took me to a playground.”

“Shit,” he says. “It’s one of those days.”

We laugh about it.

“Aren’t we supposed to be screaming at each other like in a Spanish soap opera?” he asks.

“Yeah, but I don’t speak Spanish.”

§

A couple of weeks later, I take a pregnancy test and it’s positive.

When people see me that day, they ask me why I look so sad. Matt notices.

“I’m really overwhelmed,” I tell him. “I can’t tell you why. I need to figure it out, and I have way too many things going on in my life right now. I might need to disappear for a bit”

“We’ll be here when you get back.”

I leave the Safe House with an overnight bag and drive to Franco’s house.

When I tell him the news, Franco tells me I can stay with him until I figure out what to do.

What surprises me most is that there’s a small part of me that is considering keeping it.

§

I just have to get through the next few days. I’ll take the pills Tuesday morning.

Not sure which emotions will come

I can’t be mad

But I am a little disappointed

It was always my choice—I was the first one to mention abortion—but I had trouble deciding. We discussed it for days before I came to the conclusion. I wasn’t sure. I was surprised that even a part of me considered keeping it. I knew that he would stay with me and support me if I had it, but I knew he didn’t want to.

I understand, I do

But that’s the rational part,  
not the emotional one

I am glad he goes to the office with me while I make the appointment—glad not to be alone in a room full of somber faces. We hold hands and talk about where to eat dinner.

I tell him, “We’re past casual. You know that, right?”

§

It’s one pill in the office and four

---

9. According to the McKinley Health Center at the University of Illinois, Plan B is 95% effective when taken within 24 hours.

dissolved in my cheek the next day at his house. That's all it takes to induce the miscarriage—and seven hours of pain. I lay in the bathtub, bleeding heavily.

He comes home from work after it's finished, and I've just taken a shower. He doesn't even see me sweat.

He tells me I look paler than he's ever seen another person look.

I realize I had a 48-hour window to take the second set of pills and if I had waited, he could have been with me during the miscarriage. I didn't call anyone or tell anyone what was going on that day.

Reverted to the old way  
Just realized I wanted  
someone to hold my hand

I could have taken more of the pain pills  
I could have called someone  
I could have waited a day  
and he would have been there

But it didn't occur to me  
Felt like something I needed to do myself

See, it's a reflex  
Too scared to reach out  
Too scared of dependence

He's done more than expected  
for a two-month relationship  
For someone who doesn't love me  
or even know me

Air conditioning and a bed  
and a safe medical procedure

I overwhelm him

It's hard for me to ask  
for my emotional needs to be met  
He doesn't owe me anything

I'll move out soon  
And we'll slow down

A little disappointed in myself

When push comes to shove,  
I can't allow myself  
to be vulnerable  
Not really

Forgive yourself for not being better  
For reverting back out of fear  
Forgive a coward for  
learning how to love

When we say goodbye, I tell him,  
"I know it's weird, but of all the people  
this could have happened with, I'm  
glad it was you."

"I'm glad it was you too," he says.

Franco and I still see each other  
occasionally, but I spend most of my  
time at the Safe House from then on.  
We decide to keep some distance and  
stop dating with the intention of  
picking up in a month or two.

§

I return to the community before  
I tell anyone what happened. Andrea  
learns first. We sit at a bar, and she  
holds my hand and cries when I tell  
her. Then I cry.

"I'm so sorry. Not that you did  
that, but that you had to make that  
decision," she says. "I don't know what  
I would have done."

Each subsequent person I tell

has a similar reaction. None of them condemn me. They are visibly relieved when I tell them that none of the others have either.

Every week, someone I know gets pregnant or engaged.

“I can’t imagine how much you’ve lost,” someone else says.

§

I start to reflect more on the nature of spirituality.

I sneak into the back yard at midnight  
Say out loud, OK, you have my attention  
Ask, Why do you want to see me in pain?

Continue for an hour and a half  
I don’t believe in you, but  
Save me, anyway

Give me strength and courage  
Take my anger

Is it possible to receive purpose  
from something without believing in  
it?

I’ve prayed for years  
I believe in belief,  
introspection, growth

Just because I realize something is  
irrational, doesn’t mean I’m immune

I’m feeling what I want to feel

At some point, I tell Matt. Again, I  
am not condemned.

“I’m stuck on it,” I say. “We used  
a condom and Plan B. It was the first  
night we had sex and the only time

he ever didn’t pull out. When I got  
the pills, the doctor put a condom  
and Plan B in the bag, as if that would  
have prevented it. If there’s a God, I’m  
pissed. The message was, ‘You think  
you know statistics? Fuck you.’”

“Sometimes the shitty things,” he  
says, “are actually the best things for  
us. I know that doesn’t sound helpful  
right now.”

“No, but you’re right. I just can’t  
figure out how.

“You know, we came to an agree-  
ment.”

“Who?” he asks.

“The hypothetical God and I.”

I’m trying but it’s hard  
Feeling around in the dark  
Bumping into things

Stopping and starting the process  
What does it mean?  
I don’t have to know

Please, stay with me in the darkness  
Show me things I didn’t know were there  
I am afraid

I tell him I don’t know how to con-  
ceptualize it—a spiritual experience  
from the perspective of a non-Christ-  
ian communicating with Christians.  
He tells me not to worry about it.

“People think there’s a fence, that  
you’re either saved or damned,” he  
says. “There is no fence. It’s a desert  
and there are two directions: toward  
the well and away from it.”

§

When the community doesn't reject me, I open up about other things, including my time in the trap house with Henry.

"I've convinced myself it wasn't that bad," I tell Matt when I give him some of the details.

"What you went through was uniquely bad," he says. "I'm onto you. You're angry."

Usually, my response to that sort of accusation is something along the lines of "Fuck you, I'm not angry," but I understand what he means.

"You could do serious damage,<sup>10</sup> but you bottle it up so well I don't feel threatened," he says.

How can they see it when I can't?

I'm in the process of accepting that part of myself—of allowing myself to feel the pain that produces the anger.

"There's no way you're OK, even without the abortion," he says. "What does it say about you that you stayed with Henry?"

I think it isn't bad because I survived  
I survived because I'm strong

"You've been surviving," he says, "and you're very good at it. But I want to see you thrive. We could keep having these conversations, but, eventually you need to go to therapy."

So I did.

---

10. I'm 5'10" and I spent the summer doing physical labor.

§

I learned to recognize and feel upset about an overt dismissal of my feelings—like when Henry would tell me that I was just inventing problems—but I have trouble recognizing emotional disregard when it isn't as obvious.

I follow our rules: I wait a month before I ask him out again. I want him to take me out for my birthday. He doesn't text back for six days and his only response is "Don't take it personal." He's great in a crisis, but he won't pick up a phone.

Should I give up the thought of you?  
I thought I had your intentions  
That you wanted me, just wait

You could have had me  
I could have loved you  
Nearly had a child with you  
Now there's nothing

Letting things catch up  
Seeking help  
Not exactly functional  
Stuck

I still want you  
Didn't intend to

Don't know it's real  
But I do want you  
And if you ever wanted me again  
Even though it was never a good idea  
I'd jump at the chance  
To watch Sci-fi and eat ice cream and fuck

"I miss you," I say  
"Thank you," he says

“Has it occurred to you,” my therapist asks,  
“that his emotional distance may  
actually intensify your feelings?”

I decide to confront him before I  
give up. I give him a phone call.

“I still have feelings for you. They  
may or may not go away— in spite of  
whatever you do—and I need you to  
be straightforward.”

I can’t see his face, but I bet he  
looks like a deer caught in headlights.  
There’s a long pause as he tries to col-  
lect himself.

“I...thought you wanted distance,”  
he says.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention.”

“What am I...supposed to do?” he  
asks.

“You don’t have to do anything. I  
just wanted to be clear.”

He won’t pursue.

§

I’m sitting in the backyard at the  
Safe House, ripping strips of cardboard  
to throw into the bonfire.

“It’s OK to be angry,” Andrea tells  
me. “It’s lagging, but it’s healthy. It’s  
backed up.”

I pray:

Where the fuck were you  
While I was sitting in a pool  
of my own blood?  
While I was dating a drug addict?

You let it happen  
Let me get it wrong  
Created a science experiment

Stood over it with a magnifying glass  
Waited for it to fail

You allowed me to feel violated  
Alone  
Unloved

And I’m angry at myself for  
putting up with it

“What does it mean about you that  
you stayed?” Matt asks.

I can’t explain it without the nega-  
tive thoughts:

Because I’m a stubborn idiot  
Too dependent to live my own life

If you don’t get credit for the bad things  
Why should I credit you for good things?

Selfish, socially inept, lazy  
I did it to myself

The anger has to be directed somewhere  
until I learn better  
If not you, then myself

I was nonfunctional  
What did you expect  
When proper emotional interactions  
were never modeled for me?

I can’t figure out what to do with the anger  
Trying to reframe it

No one saved me  
But I didn’t leave

You knew what I would do  
What being raised that way—  
what those experiences—would do to me

Why weren’t you there?

You could have stopped it  
You could have created me differently  
Or not at all

Didn't I ask you?  
And you let me wallow in it  
Why?

It's important that I focus on the  
things I have now rather than the  
things that almost ruined me.

Is that healthy? Aren't I entitled to  
feel angry?

Why didn't I leave?  
The alternatives were worse  
Crippling social anxiety  
Feeling responsible for what he would do

And when somehow  
Miraculously  
I find a supportive group of people  
who make me feel like I matter, he tells me,

You spend too much time on your projects

I lived off the money  
But I never knew when it was coming  
or how much  
or where it would go

Nothing of my own  
But when he left he said  
It had been mine too

I can do a lot better  
Having trouble remembering that

People *do* care  
Still hurts a hell of a lot  
I still can't eat or sleep

But no drug addiction

How?  
Did you keep me safe?  
Could I be self-centered enough  
to believe that?

Depression, panic attacks  
Self-esteem issues, social anxiety  
Emotional abuse, guns in my face  
Powder on the kitchen counter

Now I'm depressed  
Now I'm really angry

That's it?

How was I the only person in the room  
who never went to the psych ward?

I'm asking for this  
God, break my heart  
Keep doing it  
Make me act  
Make it beautiful  
Pray for wisdom, expect pain

Didn't I ask for this when I said, "Send  
me a sign?"

And then I said, "Fuck. What are the  
chances?"

Even now, I don't want it all to go away  
I don't want to say a few magic words and  
give myself away  
I'll keep feeling this until I learn

Heal me  
Teach me to heal others  
I've been asking for years  
Let it mean something

Let me create something out of this

I know what I need to do, if I'm honest  
But how do I get out of bed  
when it takes all my energy to eat

and sleep?

How do I move past the anger and sadness?

It's not that I want the pain to disappear  
It's part of who I am  
But I need something to move me

Do I believe in something?  
Yes  
Do I believe it can save me?  
I have to

§

I'm sitting in a coffee shop with  
another Christian minister.

"We're not crazy," he says. "And  
we're not stupid. Faith is a choice."

He wants to talk about a com-  
ment I made when we discussed Mark  
1:9-13. I told the group I was jealous  
because, before something bad hap-  
pened, at least Jesus was reassured.<sup>11</sup>

"You don't know what it feels like  
to be tempted that way," he says. "Jesus  
was alone, but God never once left  
you."

§

I prayed while I edited this paper:

I want you to make it hurt so bad I  
Can't not tell it  
I want you to make me  
Call me to it  
Push me

Even if it hurts  
Even though I am afraid  
Even when I push back in anger

Especially then

Teach me to care for others  
Help me learn to accept love  
and understand why I do the things I do  
Push me

Everything else I know  
will be secondary to this  
if I can believe in it

My heart is broken  
You can have it

---

11. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my  
Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."  
At once the Spirit sent him out into the  
wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty  
days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the  
wild animals, and angels attended him.

# The Turban Head Finch

Benjamin Carter

Nobody knows his name, they just know he's  
a Turban Head Finch, boasting bright blue feather streaks  
woven into his proud purple plumage. The River Monitor held  
two tickets for the World Cup in Women's Cricket until  
the sly foul fowl slipped the stubs silently  
from under his claws while he was watching  
the Mary Tyler Moore Show.

His beady black swamp eyes sunk into the screen like  
quicksand unable to notice the  
Turban Head Finch zip skyward heading east  
to catch a flight in Brisbane.

The morose monitor lodged a complaint  
with the Southpaw Tigers (who handle these situations)  
but the plane had already gone, and the Tigers  
have no jurisdiction in Bombay.

Sulking into his river,  
the monitor imagined the Turban Head Finch reclining  
in first class, sipping on a Mai Tai  
made from airplane bottle booze which he nicked  
from a grumpy executive in Row 3 Seat D, who'd consumed  
quite enough already.

Week old tears grew moldy on his face.  
The monitor picked up the match broadcast and  
fixed a strict stare  
on his still life television  
and sneered at a shot of a sideline official  
who had perched on his shoulder  
the drunk thieving  
Turban Head Finch.

# Beware the Bacon

Seth Peterson

they said. "It'll back you up  
past the point Draino  
can fix. "It'll stick around  
until you can no longer  
ride a roller coaster."  
"Your cholesterol will rocket  
to the moon leaving you  
six feet under at only twenty-four."

But why deny it?  
No, not that turkey shit.

I mean the real Porky Pig.  
Th-th-th-that's all folks.

So what if  
it backs me up  
like Tampa at five o'clock?

Chugging Draino is worse.

So what if  
it sticks around  
like a fanny pack of lard  
hugging my hips?

I'd rather have crispy bacon than floppy friends.

And who cares how high  
cholesterol flies  
as long as I can take

one small step away from my father's put-downs

and one giant leap  
toward cured meat?

If that is my end  
FINE.

Let that greasy slick meat strip  
hold my hand  
and let my epitaph read:

With Bacon and Justice for All.



thanks for reading!

