

# pulse

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# PULSE

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Department of English And  
Modern Languages

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<b>Quinton Gaines</b>	Instances
<b>Barnes Poetry Award</b>	
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<b>de Schweinitz Poetry Award</b>	
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## Quinton Gaines

### Asphyxia

I will not come to you,  
demure,  
glittering with sadness,  
hope bubbling beneath skin.

I swore  
I would never spin dreams  
with a spool of need.  
The only silk lingering  
is the slide of steel  
sweeping your song's surface;  
under ice is a mass of water -  
nadirs I will never inspect.

I will not be seen wanting  
words you will not speak,  
I will not keep assertions  
of fondness; there is no depository  
for feeling.

You are no coast  
to rest my wearied fins,  
no hand to ease the glide  
of scales from guarded flesh.  
I am a fish out of water but  
I will not wander  
your hollow continent for breath.  
I will not amble towards  
the cut above your indifference.

I cannot breathe  
such complicated air.

### Despot

I'm fashioned to fit  
the nooks between your bones  
where you've been packing gauze  
to halt the grinding  
of words and arctic trembles.

And your breath lingers  
like a forest fire on my ear,  
your tone troubles my defenses  
and the concrete crumbles  
like pallid plumes  
clashing against my shins.

Declarations from those lock-and-no-key lips  
leave me caked in a throat-full  
of thawed insolence  
as I permit you to absorb  
from my fractures.

## Dirge

Sometimes there is a sliver  
of sadness in my palms. Sometimes  
my cheeks are hotter than hot, and  
sometimes this does not extend to you,  
to where it ought to matter most.

Sometimes I think I am too brittle  
to bear wind and rain in my tread;  
sometimes I am the leaves that glide artlessly  
into your arms, the wisp of a breeze  
above the sea, come to aerate  
your blood with my essence.

I am the sapor of summer – bittersweet  
on a lifeless tongue left long ago,  
over shores you could not wait to leave.  
There was nothing here for you.

Sometimes I ignore that I am not meant  
to love you. Sometimes it is simpler  
to put this into blunted speech, to brush  
away flimsy metaphors that cannot  
say how much I loved you. I cannot  
recall the scope of my sorrow –  
the distance has erased that –  
but the blood will surge again  
into the open wound as the night  
grows cold and the moon grows old  
and we return to our unfailing post  
to await a train that will never come,  
the air humming with snow that will not fall,  
a heart that cannot halt the thought  
of living without you. Sometimes

I wish you loved me. Sometimes I anticipate  
a hand I will never hold, and sometimes  
I imagine a future that is only disaster. Sometimes  
when you are gone, I miss you, but

always – I will love you more when I am not with you.

## Effigy

Some day soon, I'll write you a love poem;  
it will contain the color of your eyes  
and I will blather about the hair on your arms like string  
or a way of knitting myself into you. Maybe then I won't bury you  
in poems about other people,  
talk about your body like an allegory  
for the heart they hardened. I'll admire your lips  
like they are your lips  
and not run-down railroad tracks or butterfly wings  
or anything at all to carry me away; I'll remain here  
and your mouth will be my damper.

Maybe I'll write this all down minus 'maybe';  
I'll start stanzas with your name or your hands  
or the bow of your earlobes. There will be a sureness to our sex,  
it will be a creation rather than a conspiracy  
or a survey of the sound of exhausted extremities  
and there will be lines  
about breathing,  
about being,  
about the things you do while you're sleeping  
and the stillness of my hands  
by your side.

Love, I swear, maybe  
I'll leave verses on your pillows  
without other names like Him or Her or  
You-Could-Be-Anyone.

Untitled (Instances)

Comprehend this: love is the religion  
of avians, of impatience, of departure.  
Of shifting somewhere warmer when the frost settles in,  
of craving, of parting, of being  
the one left behind, of feathers,  
of an unfilled nest in the heart of winter,  
huddled in the firm elbow of broken branches  
that stopped stretching to the sky when the final  
leaf fell, somber against a backdrop of  
monochrome save for one  
tiny speck of red string,  
slipped fondly amongst the twigs,  
so devotedly garnered, bit by bit,  
by a creature who had observed winters past,  
but bore a home for himself here nonetheless.

Donald Case

Dancing for Springtime

I watch the water as it drip, drip, drips  
The snow is melting from trunk to bough's tip  
New sunlight beckons the first day of spring  
Gaily, I laugh as my feet start to skip

Oh, woe, to long winters filled with nothing  
Nightmares flee before a new day breaking  
Many moons have I slept, but I digress  
There is something to be said for waking

For moonlight turns to sunlight nonetheless  
Giving new life that springs from death's caress  
On the horizon, newborn eyes gape wide  
Thus, the dark mister Grimm is powerless

So dance, my children, with laughter inside  
Because it can be cruel on the outside  
But, for now, the world is without buttress  
Allowing us freedom from past blindness  
And with this new season, we shall sing  
Of death's lost grasp and new life blossoming  
Our feet are planted, and we will not slip  
There are yet more months without winter's whip

### Scars

When I shut my eyes  
Everything is sideways  
The universe coalesces  
Into staggered trusses  
Always there is structure  
Looking to be punctured  
By the smiling butcher  
There will be no suture

From the scar, a rose  
Beautifully imposed  
On a blank canvas  
Surrounded by sadness  
Steeped in a symmetry  
That only the blind can see  
Everything is sideways  
When I shut my eyes

### Silent Joy

This room of noise, mindless sound  
Is really silence not yet found  
Some arbitrary nonsense emitted from the mouths  
Of babes  
These underdeveloped children of intellect,  
So much knowledge, and yet,  
They have not the experience to reconcile  
All the things that make life worthwhile  
Love and loss in them are juvenile  
No thing is more important than the self  
And pain is just an idea placed on a shelf  
Only when they can imagine eternity, feel the void,  
Will they find their silence  
And understand the importance of life's little joys

It was a cold December morning. The sun was bright, there was not a cloud in the sky, and a thick layer of pure, white snow covered the ground. Set in the middle of this winter wonderland, there was a small, perfectly circular pond, which had the unnatural habit of freezing over every year on exactly the same day, for only that day. Sitting next to this glass pool on a stone bench covered in a web of intricate carvings was a young girl. Her name was Clarise.

Winter was Clarise's favorite time of year, and this day, the shortest of days, always seemed to keep such promise. Her left hand idly traced one of the carvings on the bench, a queen commanding a conquering army, while her eyes surveyed the paradise around her. Everywhere she looked, the sun's rays left sparkling diamonds embedded in the snow. The whole area was shining with heavenly light, and the frigid wind had flawlessly assembled every snowflake into vast spiral patterns nestled amidst snow banks that rose and fell like the waves of a stormy sea. It was easy for Clarise to become lost in such an enticing vision.

Now, with a smile dancing on her lips, her gaze left the endless horizons and fell to her feet, tracing the path her footprints had forged through the snow. They led her eyes back across a large, open area to a solitary oak tree that provided the only change in the vast, ivory ocean around her. She had made the long walk from that tree to the bench where she was sitting many times, but none had been as important as the first.

Her mother had stolen her away for a day and brought her to this secluded place. She was just a child at the time, but her mother had taken it upon herself to have a heart to heart with her. They had walked hand in hand from the old oak, then covered in vibrant springtime foliage, to the captivatingly carved stone bench. Birds flitted and twittered around them as they sat next to each other and took in the lively scene, still holding hands. Basking in the surrounding radiance, Clarise's mother seemed encapsulated in a halo of light that amplified her already substantial beauty. And, even at such a young age, Clarise reflected many of her mother's characteristics. Her mother had soft golden curls that fell just past her shoulders. Her skin was flawless and silky smooth, and her eyes, oh, her eyes, were a deeper green than the leaves of the old oak and seemed to hold captive all the joys of life and the universe itself. And, it was at this beautiful creature that Clarise was forced to look when her mother began to speak.

"Clarise, my darling, my baby girl, I've been meaning to bring you here for a very long time. I discovered this oasis on the day of your birth, and I've been wanting to share this private world of mine with you ever since. So, finally, I have decided that you are ready, ready to begin learning and growing, ready to begin your journey into the world, with a little help from your mother of course.

What I want more than anything is for you to succeed and to be the best at everything you do. I want you to do all of the things I never had the chance to do. But I can't make all of that happen by myself. You have to promise me that you will work very, very hard and that you will let me guide you through life. If you do that, you will never make any mistakes, and you can become my little prodigy. What do you think? Can you do that for me, honey? Can you promise?"

With the end of her mother's speech, a smiling, blissfully happy Clarise replied obediently, "Yes, Mama, I promise."

"Clarise, my darling, my baby girl," her mother cooed as she enveloped her jubilant child in a warm embrace, "I love you so much. I love you even more than I love myself, and I promise that I will never, ever let you go." And Clarise knew that, from then on, her mother would never, ever, let her go.

Snapping out of her reverie, Clarise stood and began moving away from the bench back across the open space between it and the old oak. With every gay, bouncing step, she covered up some of her old footprints with new snow. Curiously, she noticed too that there were no birds trilling on this fine winter morning, so she started crafting a tune of her own. Her song was a

ballad, a beautiful tribute to a life that was hers and hers alone. She sang no words, but none were needed. The very air around her hummed and vibrated with the melody of her song, and it twisted with her body as she danced to her own music, throwing yet more snow across her old footprints. Step by step, note by note she forged a path toward the isolated oak. At a point halfway between the old oak and the stone bench, her song ended and left her standing quite still. Alone, and now without distraction, another of Clarise's memories with her mother was allowed to resurface.

It had been several years since the first time her mother had brought her to this place, and they had been coming almost every day thereafter. Her mother always had something new to teach her, a new lesson for her to learn. Clarise had kept her promise, too. She worked diligently and always did exactly what her mother told her to. On this particular day, her mother was teaching her how to fence.

"Clarise, my darling, my baby girl," she said, "the world is a dangerous place. It's full of terrible people and many obstacles, but someday, you'll have to face it. And, I think that this is the best way to teach you the discipline and mentality necessary to overcome any challenges that you may come up against."

After putting on their protective gear, her mother showed her the basics of swordplay. There were thrusts, slashes, and parries, each one vital to defeating an opponent. As the lesson progressed, Clarise demonstrated the techniques a few times for her mother until she nodded her head in satisfied approval. Then, just as the introduction ended, her mother attacked without warning. Every ounce of her considerable skill was aimed at landing a blow on her daughter. But Clarise was a natural. She countered every attack her mother made, and, though they were both fighting as aggressively as possible, she could make out a stunning smile of pride through her mother's face-guard. The same smile was reflected on her own lips. Together, they danced. They danced all the way from the grand, old oak to the stone bench, using every available inch of space. The tides themselves appeared weak and feeble when compared to the push and pull of this mother-daughter battle. Exhaustion eventually proved to be the determining factor, though. The summer heat was brutal, and Clarise did not have the necessary experience or stamina to continue fighting. So, after what seemed like days, she was finally bested by her mother.

The memory faded, and without realizing it, Clarise's absentminded reminiscing had brought her to the old oak tree. Even in the winter, the tree really was beautiful. It was so wide that two grown men would not be able to wrap their arms all the way around it, and its branches reached out in every direction and tried to grasp eternity. Clarise laid her hands on the trunk and ran them along the rough, ancient bark. She could feel the life-force of the tree. She felt all the years it had used up and all the years it had left to give. She could also feel its scars. It had taken some blows before, but it had always found a way to keep on living. This tree was a survivor. It was also the site of her last memory of the oasis, a much newer memory.

It was the fall. The weather was perfect. There was a light breeze, and the temperature was neither too hot nor too cold. Clarise was holding her violin, and her mother was sitting on the lush, green grass with a smile on her perfect lips, accentuating the beauty of her perfect face, a face that Clarise now shared perfectly. Birds were singing in the tree directly above both of them, and they sang until the instant Clarise's bow touched the first string on the violin.

The music was captivating. It rose and fell with such beautiful sounds and such vivid emotions that the whole world must have wept. But Clarise just stood in the eye of the storm and played Paganini's piece like the devil himself was chasing her. Her fingers manipulated the bow like it was an extension of her own body and not a single sour note escaped her instrument. The music should have gone on forever, but, alas, it had to end. When Clarise played the last note and her bow touched the final string, there was silence, complete and total silence. Not a single sound was made, except by the first brown leaf of the season as it brushed Clarise's nose on its inevitable descent to the ground.

While she had been remembering her last visit to the old oak, Clarise had stepped away from the tree and was now looking at the perfectly circular pond that was the centerpiece of her paradise. She had one last thing to take care of before leaving this place yet again. The birds were still oddly quiet, so she began to sing again. It was another wordless ballad, beginning where the other had ended. Promises of second chances and new life swelled from deep within her and crashed into an unsuspecting world. Clarise sang until her feet touched the edge of the frozen water. Her goal was straight across from her on the other side of the pond.

Carefully, she picked her way along the slick ice. As she approached her destination, its contrast to the rest of the oasis became clear. It was darker there, as if someone had specifically dimmed the lights in that one place. The banks around it were covered in mud, and there was a horrible, stagnant smell permeating the air. She halted in the middle of the dark area and breathed deeply the smell of decay. Then, Clarise looked down, through the ice. And there, staring up at her from the pitch black water, was her own pallid, rotting face. Her flesh was peeling off in chunks, her lidless eyes gaped wide in a look of pure terror, and her mouth was locked in an eternal scream.

Still smiling, Clarise bent down, and gazing into Clarise's lifeless eyes, she whispered, "Hello, my darling, my baby girl. It's been such a long time since I saw you last."

## Tara Tatum

Ersatz Blvd.

We used to live on Ersatz Blvd.  
In the front, two L shaped hedges  
were framed by wooden timbers,

but the leaves spilled over the way  
legs sprawl over a couch. They revealed  
a tangled green and concealed us

like breathing masks. Someone ripped  
the roots from their soil. Our house opened  
and the neighbors could see

everything too well (I learned early  
about being seen too well).  
I had to share the way the climbing metal vines

held the roof flat and steady--  
the way I looked at clouds and saw  
faces disperse into blue. I started

feeling guilty when I would cleave  
linked love-bugs and botch  
a wing (I only wanted to mend it after).

People see these things.  
The house we moved into after  
wasn't much different. The road

curved into an L.  
But there were trees there, soaking up secrets  
we yelled into the low vault of sky.

Far Away Words

Say nothing at a wake. Words swell, then vanish.  
The one I most remember was my uncle's.  
I cried mostly, and I remember seeing  
his lucid face. And he was honest, loving,  
and all the words that make great men seem greater,  
untouchable, although I touched his face,  
or wanted to, to see beneath the dust.

It wasn't him or dust I recall most,  
but this: I saw my father cry and bend  
into himself--the first time that he wept,  
aware of me

I know this story well--  
notions of air and grief are broken down,  
through drawn and rising breath, and I believe  
the blows of gathered gasps will come again.

His eyes turned threaded red, more than the rose  
my dead uncle wore pinned to his collar.  
The collar my father wore was stained with salt  
water, white, and firm. It was too firm.  
I neared and veiled the stains, the sobs, the shoulders

For years and years we clung this way, ensnared  
by choking sounds we knew too well to bare.

Souls for Marionettes

Kleist said souls were not located in  
centers of our bodies but disjointed--  
maybe in an arm, an eye, a crease.  
They maybe move around with each new action.  
This man--it's in the cartilage of his finger,  
which a ramp fell on last week. It throbs and swells  
behind the stitches made to keep it whole.

My sister, who is fifteen--maybe now  
her soul runs through her spine because she arches  
when she dances. Achilles--in his heel:  
it's what we know him for. It's just that simple--  
but also not. Last week my pregnant friend  
almost stroked her soul into a vortex  
located in her belly. Now it swirls  
inside her breasts after the baby came.  
I know because I saw her child suck  
her nipples raw, still both were awed, both humming.

Sometimes I cannot see where others keep them  
A lady with a handbag pieced with jewels  
who was inside the bank beside me, pursing,  
may not have even had one. Then again,  
her right leg pivoted in slow sequences  
as if a hand still lingered there. I swear  
her soul crawled down her thigh between the dawn  
and the afternoon.

The soul--it tilts  
in scales by parallax, often in slow,  
deepening beams, leaving us to guess  
what thin of skin or bone it clutches next.  
Don't think that only our heads contain them,  
or our hearts. Mine has been in my palm some.

I touched my dead uncle with it; I heard  
it rattle. Once it slid there when my friend  
held my hand and told me she was broken.  
I'm pretty sure I've smashed mosquitoes with it,  
then wiped the blood off on my leg. I held  
an ornament with my right hand, the one  
I threw at my father's head. The ball cracked,  
then shed its glitter like volcanic ash,  
taking blessings from my upturned palms.

### The Goodbye

*Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him,  
If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.  
-John 13:8*

Liz kneels before me, clutching a pumice stone,  
scrubbing at what my feet have hardened into.  
This is the worst way for a girl to kneel--  
a gesture saying this is how I'll leave you,  
with feet like shaven wood. She'll go tonight.

They'll callous in a week, two weeks at most.  
Maybe she knows my thoughts and thinks I'll kick  
the pity off her face, but only now they  
will be too soft to hurt, like strapping bands  
of silk across a mouth. I know her hands.

Now and again they tremble, so contain,  
in vague rhythms of collapsing and keeping,  
anomalies of lust. Her hands undo me.

She cleans my feet not only with soap, grit  
and water, but origins of flaky  
skin and bond--she's mimicking what Christ did,  
in some odd way. But customs have erased her,  
and not she them. She only has reversed it.

My feet are crackled clean. I say don't do this.  
The act is selfless, hence her hands: raw, broken,  
with flecks of endless filth she gathered by  
the hours of her touching. Time is quick,  
like contact, like the frailty of soles.

She focuses her eyes, bending, and shaves  
the clotted miles, unfolding, from my feet.

### The Nut House

You know how writing conferences go:  
there's a whole lot of ass kissing, in more  
ways than one. That is, with amateurs,  
it's figurative, and with the older,  
greater writers, literal--ass kissing.  
How ironic, right? They've had enough  
of metaphors and irony and talk  
of pedantry, thinking even, and want  
to feel some juicy, young lips on their asses.

This is a true story. I swear. Last year  
I went to the Langdon Review in Texas  
(see pure facts here, no disputing them)  
and a friend invited two writers (for legal  
reasons I will not provide their names),  
apparently "extinguished" writers, hell  
if I know, to our pool. Well, I was wearing  
one of those tight bikini bottoms  
like boy-cut underwear, where your ass cheeks  
hang out this perfect way that thins your legs  
but shows the bottom half like some plump fruit  
you want to suck the juice from.

My mistake,  
those shorts, I'm sure of it. But then again,  
it probably would've happened still.  
It's not a big deal (it could've been, depending...)  
This one writer, my grandpa's age, struck up  
a conversation, all bullshit at first,  
asking what I wanted out of life,  
as if he cared, me asking him where he taught,  
what he wrote, as if I cared; then he grabbed  
my naked leg. He carressed it, mostly. God,  
some older men have no restraint. There are  
younger girls who don't believe (not always)  
a sticky night will always get you published--  
I thought he used to always get his ass kissed.  
I played it cool. You play it cool after  
you drink a bottle of whiskey, one of those  
"I might puke if I get too worked up" cools.

He wasn't creepy, though. He had these bright  
blue eyes and tanned skin and real rough hands  
(I love rough hands--I love contrasting skins)  
and had "aged well." He had. And for a second  
I wanted to sit on his lap. I get those urges--  
to straddle laps--my body melts in sweat.  
It's the closest thing to safety that I've felt.

But this is what got me: his hotel's name:  
The Nut House. Honestly, The House of Nuts.  
Swear to holy acorns, look it up.  
Granbury, Texas. So, Mr. Blue Eyes  
asked me if I wanted to go there  
to stay with him. He was a serious writer  
and had a wife and kids. I'll never marry  
a serious writer. The House of Nuts  
is the only place I imagine writers staying.  
'The nuts who crack from stresses of a hand--  
The sagging nuts, the nuts filled up with seeds,  
the nuts who fall off trees into a lap.  
Look it up. In Granbury. Go stay there.

## Kevin King

### Santa Muerte: The New Plague

The blistering heat from the merciless sun radiated from the long stretch of highway just east of Monterrey. The heat lingered just a few inches above the asphalt giving the illusion of black flood water flowing over the weathered Mexican road. An indistinguishable carcass lay in the road—a victim of its carelessness and the relentless technology of mankind. Opportunistic carrion birds accumulated near the breakdown lane adjacent the roadkill—gathering like salespeople around the door of a department store waiting for the next customer to walk in so they could pounce on them. One vulture gorged himself to the point of vomiting and regurgitated his portion of the carrion onto the dirt alongside the sweltering highway. The stench of vomit—a mixture of rotting flesh and gastric juices—lingered in the air.

It was the smell of the infinite cycle of death. To the vulture, preying upon the vulnerable wasn't just a matter of survival. It was more than that. Hovering thousands of feet in the air searching for a victim—waiting for it to make the wrong decision—a life-ending decision—then swooping in to enjoy the spoils was a part of a very rewarding daily routine.

The eagerness—the desire—to taste the salty, sour flesh of the carcass oppressed the vulture. No reasoning, only impulse. His belly still partially full of strands of what appeared to be a hind leg and the maggots that had begun the decomposition process, the bird slowly walked toward the centerline where the carcass lay and began to indulge himself once again on the morsels that remained.

María Padezco was hauling ass west toward Monterrey in her gold mist Cadillac Escalade—like a lottery winner procrastinating until the last minute to claim her prize. She was in the midst of a disturbing phone call on her cell from her father, Victor, who owned Humildes Comienzos, a hotel in downtown Monterrey. He had been approached by a couple of men wearing cowboy hats and black Ferrari leather jackets. One of the vaqueros introduced his partner and himself as salesmen with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity Victor could not refuse. He had emphasized the offer by slamming his fist down on the lobby counter. But Victor, a proud businessman whose parents had nothing, had earned everything he had in life. He lived a lucrative life. His daughters and his grandchildren were well taken care of because the hotel was successful. The old hotel was going out of business, but Victor turned it into one of the most beautiful (at least in his mind) in all of Monterrey. He paid with his sweat and blood, and he damned sure wasn't going to just hand over his hard-earned money to some punks who were trying to intimidate him. He respectfully refused their offer and asked them to leave.

One of the young thugs had a scar under his right eye from what undoubtedly must have been one hell of a knife fight and a tattoo of Santa Muerte on the right side of his neck. Victor stared intensely at the skeletal figure; it was clad in a long, black-hooded robe and held a scythe the length of its body in its right hand. The blade's curvature was unique and the handle looked like human bones. It held the earth in its left hand with a grip firm enough to signify control yet loose enough that it might easily be dropped. Victor saw Mexico in the center of the globe. The tattoo artist had blackened Mexico, while the United States and South America were inked in tan. The man noticed Victor's fascination with his tattoo.

"You should seriously consider our offer old man. If not, then I will personally introduce you to St. Death," the man with the neck tattoo promised.

His partner laughed, smiled at Victor, and then spat tobacco juice into Victor's face. His smile turned into a look of grim death and hatred. He and his fellow salesman—temporarily satisfied with the embarrassment they had caused Victor while delivering their sales pitch—

walked back out the front door of the Humildes Comienzos leaving Victor to ponder the offer.

Victor collapsed in his chair behind the front desk. He pulled out his red bandana from his back pocket and wiped the sweat off his receding hairline. Then he rested his hands on his fat belly. Crime in the city had become too much to bear, especially for an old man. But he worried more for his family than himself—especially his grandchildren. How could little Edita and Lola continue to live their lives in constant terror? He likened it to the Hamelin plague that had ravaged Germany in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Yes, Santa Muerte was always busy—so many lost children to lead to the netherworld. Punishment from God some called it. Were these men a plague, as well? The rats were loose again, spreading disease. And all the pipers were paid off by the vermin to turn a blind eye to their gluttony. Instead of leading them out of town with flute music, they were sharing in the fun.

The office phone startled Victor when it rang, waking him from his nightmare come true. "Humildes Comienzos," Victor answered with a hint of hesitation in his voice.

"Papi?"

"Maria? Where are you?" Victor asked, still startled by the sales call.

"I am on my way to Monterrey, Papi. Is something the matter? You sound flustered."

"Oh, no, mi hija. I'm fine."

"No you're not. I'm not stupid. What's wrong?"

"I had some visitors who were inquiring about some business with me."

"What are you talking about? Were they selling supplies?"

"No, I'm afraid not. They were pandilleros."

Maria wasn't paying attention to the road. She didn't notice the vulture buffet in progress. All of the birds bolted save one. He tried to, but he didn't allow himself enough time to clear the SUV. Maria slammed her foot on the brake, but it was too late. The bird collided with the windshield with such force that she feared it might shatter the glass and kiss her with its beak. A mini whirlwind of black feathers swirled in front of the vehicle. The vulture struck the windshield and slid down the hood into the pavement in front of the Escalade—its body contorted. Maria attempted to pull herself together. She inspected herself for injuries. She could still hear her father's muffled voice. Her cell phone was lying in the passenger floorboard. She picked it up and placed it to her ear.

"Papi, let me call you back."

Maria opened her car door to inspect the damage. Stepping from the vehicle, she caught her left heel between the Escalade's running board and the door frame. She fell backward, scraping her butt on the asphalt. Her shoe was lodged in the running board. Maria stood up angrily and dusted off her True Religion jeans. She retrieved the shoe and put it on, then braced herself for what was sure to be a grim image. The vulture lay in front of the vehicle, its body twitching like a death row inmate being shipped off with 1,700 volts of bon voyage. It was still alive. Its body lay partially paralyzed. Beyond it, she noticed the flattened remains of an animal that had been picked to the bone.

"Look what you have done to my truck you hijo de puta. Why should I have mercy on you? Did you show mercy to your friend over there?"

The vulture shrilled in pain. The sound echoed in the distance, bouncing off the mesas. A sense of foreboding overcame her. Maria placed her heel on the bird's neck. Then she stomped it furiously—several times more than necessary. Finally, there was silence. Maria caught her breath and examined the damage to her windshield. She spotted her own reflection in the glass. Her eyes filled with disgust—the rage of a valkyrie ran through her blood. She had spent forty minutes on her chignon that morning, and now it was a total mess. She attempted to straighten it, but it was no use. Was the vulture a bad omen? She wasn't sure. The only thing that was certain was that she needed a new pair of Christian Louboutin shoes.

A ghastly statue stood upon a somber altar riddled with snow-white candles. The smell of

jasmine incense lingered. The dark, damp basement had been turned into a makeshift shrine that reeked of water damage and mildew. Its ceiling and support beams were trimmed in spider silk. The salesman with the neck tattoo knelt with fingers interlocked in prayer. He would ask for Holy Death's protection before he set out to terrorize the masses.

"In the name of Jesus Christ the conqueror, who on the cross was conquered, conquer the unworthy, so that they may be conquered for me in the name of the Lord. You are as fierce as a lion yet can be as tame as a lamb—tame as the flower of rosemary—you must come."

The salesman looked at the statue of Santa Muerte and followed a black widow spider as she made her way from the ceiling onto the statuette's head.

"You ate bread, of Him. You shared it with me. And with it your word. I want you to humble these weaklings. May they be defeated at my feet to complete the pact between us bonded with my blood. Santa Muerte, I beseech you lovingly in as much as Immortal God bestowed upon you your great power over all mortals."

The spider stared down at the man, as if she believed he was praying to her.

"Place them in your celestial sphere where they may endure the darkness of night for all eternity. Death of my heart, do not abandon me from your protection, and do not permit my enemy a single moment of peace."

From his wallet, the salesman produced a picture of a middle-aged man wearing a baby-blue blazer and placed it upon the altar.

"Molest him each moment, mortify him, and worry him so that he always thinks about me and does what I want. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I pray, and I beseech you that you deign to be my protectress."

The spider worked her way down the figure onto the base and crept towards the salesman.

"And that you concede all the favors that I ask of you until the last day, hour and moment in which your Divine Majesty commands you to take me and place me in your celestial sphere forever. AMEN."

The man made the sign of the cross once more and rose. He finished the sign with the Holy Spirit and hammered the spider with his fist. He retrieved a silk handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the remains from his hand. Then he rubbed his calloused hand up and down the dusty, mildewed altar stone. The wall slid open to reveal the back room. On one wall hung a pair of shackles and chains similar to what one would find in a medieval dungeon. Grated drains lined the floor, and a multi-pressure washer—similar to what was provided at a self-service car wash, was visible. A pool of crimson stained one corner of the room. The man grabbed the spray wand from the wall rack and set the pressure to medium high. Lifeblood—a concoction of hope, dreams, memories, nightmares, misgivings, insecurities, convictions, weaknesses, strengths, joys, and torments trickled down the drain of a madman. He returned the wand to the rack, exited the room, and ascended into the light of the main floor of the safe house.

"Julio, it's about goddamned time. You've been down there an hour. We gotta go, hombre; we got work to do."

The man who had accompanied Julio to Victor's hotel sat at the kitchen table reading *Playgirl* wearing only boxer briefs, boots, and a straw cowboy hat.

"Says the naked man who smells like shit. Go take a fucking shower. Would you, Hector?"

"No time for that, cabrón. It's time to move on that nightclub. They refused to pay their protection dues."

Julio laughed.

"Not a wise decision on their part. What about this Padezco? Have we got any dirt on him?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Humble Beginnings. He has one daughter and two granddaughters."

"No wife?"

"Deceased."

"Even better. She have a good life insurance policy?"

"You're a heartless bastard, Julio, you know it?"

The two men looked at each other seriously before laughing.

"Well, I feel like clubbing tonight. Don't you, Hector?"

"I think we should pick up our friend Victor and bring him along for the ride."

Maybe help him make his mind up about our little offer. What do you think?"

"Great idea, ese. I hear they have some sexy chicos at El Último Baile."

"Smoking hot, Hector, smoking hot."

Victor scratched his head as he reviewed the ledger for the past few months. The books were down, a result of the latest wave of violence that had hit Monterrey and the rest of Mexico. He wondered how much longer he could go on. How much longer could Mexico? But a call to the police would be like suicide. The Monterrey P.D. had been corrupted by low wages and high-risk duty. Why would they risk their necks for him? Most chose the easy road and turned a blind eye to injustice. And the Federales? They were too focused on shutting down the cartels to care about lesser criminals. They went where the money, weapons, and drugs were. In the meantime, the citizens suffered. They were at the mercy of violent and barbarous murderers, rapists, and extortionists.

Victor heard the bell ring on the front door. Customers. He looked up to welcome them, but Victor was shocked to see the two salesmen before him again. Julio reached across the counter and grabbed Victor by the silk, lavender Antonio Ricci neck tie Maria had bought him for Father's Day.

"Come on, old man. We want to show you something that may help you decide to purchase our services."

Hector grabbed Victor's right arm and gave it a hard pull. Julio latched onto Victor's back belt loop and dragged his fat belly across the counter. Victor hit the floor face first. He moaned in pain. The two men picked him up and dusted off his pants and shirt. They smiled at him.

"See, we aren't so bad, huh?" Julio patted Victor's balding head.

"Where are we going? I can't just leave. I'm running a business here."

"Oh, come on, Victor. You are the owner. You can do whatever the hell you want, right? It's good to be the king, that is until someone decides to dethrone you."

Hector punched Victor's arm, a display of his ability to hurt him. The two men looked at each other with devious intent. Julio put his arm around Victor.

"He's right, Victor. Turn off your vacancy sign and close up shop. You...we are going for a ride, señor. We want to demonstrate our services for you. You know, to help you decide whether to buy."

Victor closed the hotel and exited with the two men. Julio pulled his Colt .45 out of his waistband just enough for Victor to see it. Victor eyed him nervously and shook his head in disapproval. He approached the back seat driver's door of the black Ford Dually. Julio pulled his gun out of his pants, and pressed it hard into Victor's back. Victor could feel the barrel of the gun between his shoulder blades. Julio motioned him toward the back of the truck.

"Get in, old man. What are you waiting for?" Hector slapped Victor on the back of his head.

In the bed Victor noticed an orange two-hundred liter industrial barrel. He pulled the handle and brought the tailgate down gently. Victor attempted to hoist himself up into the bed of the truck but failed miserably. He was a short, portly man with little athletic prowess, and the Dually was jacked up on thirty-four inch tires. When he finally managed to scale the mesa of a truck, he sat atop it satisfied with his efforts. He resembled Humpty Dumpty on the Colchester city wall before his great fall. Victor's celebration was short lived, however, when Hector grabbed a strand of rope and tied his wrists and ankles together. Julio took the lid off of the barrel. The

two men lifted Victor and dropped him feet first down into it. Hector took the stinky bandanna from his back pocket and shoved it into Victor's mouth. Victor gagged in disgust but could not dislodge it.

Julio grabbed his back in pain. "Goddammit, old man. Lose some fucking weight." He placed the lid on the barrel and grabbed his Bowie knife from his waist holster. He jabbed the knife into the barrel three times to provide Victor with air but barely missed his right eye. Julio peered into the barrel at him and smiled. Victor was trembling. Hector tied the barrel against the back of the cab and secured it to the bull ring anchors on the sides of the bed. He slapped the lid twice and hollered to rattle Victor's nerves.

"Hold on tight, old man. It may be a rough ride."

Victor's imagination got the best of him as they chauffeured him to destination unknown. Where were they taking him? How would Maria fare without him? He closed his eyes and pictured his wife's face. He longed to hear her comforting voice just once more.

"Johanna, I may be joining you soon. It was best that God took you when he did, mi amor. I am glad you don't have to see Mexico and all this suffering mi, cariño."

Victor wept. Then he felt the truck come to a stop. He heard the tailgate fall with a crash and footsteps approach the barrel. He could tell he was being carried out of the truck. He heard Julio grunting and cursing.

"¡Panzon bastardo!"

"Damn, Julio, maybe you should hit the weights."

"Shut up, Hector, and help me get him.....argh.... out the truck."

The two dropped the barrel onto the street.

Victor's grunt was muffled by the gag in his mouth. Victor assumed that the smell and taste were what he thought them to be: ass.

"Come on, Hector, let's roll it the rest of the way."

Victor's head spun, and he became disoriented. He felt sick. He could feel vomit creeping up his throat, an uninvited guest sneaking into a party. He swallowed hard. The puke burned his throat as it went back down. The two men righted the barrel.

"Sit tight, old man," Julio laughed.

As if he had a choice. Victor wondered what these bastards were doing. Surely they wouldn't kill him without extorting him first. They were just trying to scare him. He couldn't let them intimidate him. Somebody had to stand up to these hooligans. He would do it for his family, for his friends, for Mexico. He could hear the men returning, but they weren't alone.

"No, please, Julio. It wasn't my fault. We've been really slow lately. I've got a wife and kids to support, man. Please."

"We had an agreement my friend. You agreed to buy the extended warranty, and we agreed not to kill you."

Moonlight greeted Victor's eyes when the lid of the barrel came flying off. Julio and Hector were holding a man wearing a baby-blue sport blazer firmly by the arms.

"Victor, meet a friend of ours. This is Braulio. Braulio—Victor. Braulio is the owner of this fine establishment. He agreed to our sales contract, but he is late on his payment. So his credit with us is null and void."

Hector toppled the barrel and pulled Victor out onto the cold, dirty concrete. He dropped him at Julio's feet. Hector tied Braulio's wrists and ankles and gagged him, but somehow he managed to spit the gag into Hector's face.

"Do that again, cabrón, and I cut out your fucking tongue!" Hector shoved the bandana back into Braulio's mouth. This time the man didn't resist. They picked him up and placed him feet first into the barrel.

"What do you see here, Victor? Just a barrel, right?"

Victor was confused but nodded his head in affirmation.

"Aha, but that is where you are wrong, my corpulent friend. Hector, if you please."

Hector disappeared behind the dumpster of El Último Baile and returned with several containers of diesel and placed them at the base of the barrel.

"See, Victor, we fill this barrel with diesel like so," Hector said, hardly able to contain his excitement. He poured the containers onto Braulio—as if he were prepping him for a baptism by fire.

Victor grimaced as Braulio's muffled screams reverberated off the alley walls. The barrel was filled to the man's chest. Braulio's eyes pleaded with Victor's for help, but what could he do? His hands were tied. Hector took a matchbook from his front jeans pocket. The flap read Pork Barrel Barbecue. Hector had picked it up in Texas during a drug run.

"No, Victor, this is not just a barrel. This is a Pork Barrel. We use it to cook pigs who refuse to pay!"

The strike illuminated the dark alley, but it was not a light of hope—it was the flash of Braulio's life burning before his eyes like the wick of a candle being burnt to its end. Julio grabbed Victor and dragged him away just as Hector flicked the match into the barrel. The diesel ignited with a flash that Victor thought might blind him. Braulio's body was engulfed in flames. The flesh melted off of his body. Braulio squealed as he was barbecued alive—his own lard providing the grease. Victor cringed as he watched the modern-day autodafé. When the fire died down enough for him to approach the barrel, Hector opened the back door of the club, kicked the barrel into it, shut the door, and locked it with Braulio's key. Then broke the windows lining the club and threw Molotov cocktails into the building. Victor could hear patrons screaming inside. These petty criminals were far worse than he ever imagined. Victor hoped some might escape out the front door.

"Oh, don't worry. We locked it on the way out," Julio smiled at Victor. "So have you made your decision? Will you pay?"

Victor stared at Julio's Santa Muerte tattoo again and understood why the artist had colored Mexico black. The Black Death had indeed returned. He knew that giving these bastards his money would only delay his fate—not prevent it.

Maria woke in her Escalade. It was six. She had stopped by the liquor store on her way home the night before and picked up a bottle of tequila. After the vulture incident, she had needed it. Maria drank half the bottle on the way home—so much of it that she had passed out in front of the house and had never even pulled into the driveway. She had drunk way too much—much more than was needed to get the job done. She finished what tequila was left in the bottle, started the SUV, and cranked the A/C to high. She sat for a minute and enjoyed the cool breeze and the song on the radio by Jennifer Peña—"Vivo y Muero en Tu Piel." Then she put the SUV in drive and pulled up to the access panel where she entered her code into the key panel controlling the sliding gate to the Padezsco estate. 8-6-9. Nothing happened.

"Damn it!" She re-entered 8-9-6, and the gate opened revealing the entrance to the long, blacktop driveway. The Transportation Ministry could learn a lesson from the man who had laid the asphalt for the Padezsco. To the left were magnolia trees—their creamy, white blooms masking the stench of chaos nearby with a delightful lemon-like fragrance. Closer to the house, a few Mexican fan palms planted two springs earlier were fairing well thanks to a couple of tropical depressions that had found their way to Monterrey last August. The storms were the pleasant kind that brought the benefits of drought-ending rain without the furious winds of a hurricane. Beds of azaleas—emerald palettes sprinkled with pinkish hues—lined the front of the house and wrapped around a large granite statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the right of the entrance and a smaller statue of Our Lady of Charity Nuestra Señora to the left. Across from the entrance to the house stood an old Monterrey oak. This was not just any old tree—it was Maria's favorite. She remembered climbing it as a little girl, especially when she found herself in trouble with Papi. She would climb just out of his reach and cry until she made him feel bad for wanting to scold her. Then Maria would climb down into his arms, and his scolding turned into kisses

and hugs. Then he would apologize and take her into the house for Chaca Chaca. The candy was made from tamarind and had a taste caught in limbo between sweet and sour. She remembered the package. It was very odd. A train bearing the number 13 and the initials N de M headed along a railway. But some children who ate it died of lead poisoning, and Papi no longer bought it. Although the N de M on the train stood for Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México, kids jokingly interpreted it as Norte de Muerto. "Stay away from Chaca Chaca if you want to stay north of the dead," they would joke.

The house—while not a mansion by any means—was a testimony of upper class prominence. It was of Mediterranean design with beige exterior and a red clay roof. A three car garage housed a black 1957 Rolls Royce Silver Wraith, Victor's baby. The only time Maria remembered her father taking her out in it was to her quinceañera.

Maria remembered that birthday like it was yesterday. She was dressed in a lace-up floor-length Champagne ball gown and a tiara. When she arrived at her fiesta, she felt as if she had stepped into the scene of a story book. Her family and relatives had spent days preparing to make this a perfect day—her perfect day. Hundreds of papier mache butterflies had been strung up outside for decoration.

There were yellow and black swallowtails—the famous butterfly drawn by John White, artist and commander of Sir Walter Raleigh's 1587 expedition to North America. She had read in college about the disheartening story of White's lost colony. After helping establish the settlement in Roanoke, the colony fell on hard times. Other colonists urged White to return to England to fetch further supplies. Regrettably, he was forced to leave his family behind. Arriving in England, he discovered that Queen Elizabeth had issued a stay on shipping because of an impending invasion by Spain in the Pope's name. He was unable to return to Roanoke for two years. When he did, he discovered the colonists had deserted their settlement. White had made a pact with the settlers and his family—if they were forced to leave because their lives were in danger before his return—they were to carve a cross in the oak tree in the center of the settlement along with their destination. White found no cross but instead found the letters "CRO" carved into the tree—short for CROATOAN, a nearby island and local Native American tribe. He was hopeful his family had left the settlement by choice and was not in any danger. However, the colonists and his family were never found. Whenever Maria saw a tiger swallowtail butterfly, it reminded her of the sad story of John White.

Other butterflies were painted to look like monarchs—the nomadic insects that migrated 2500 miles from areas east of the Rockies to Mexico every winter to escape their frosty demises. Others resembled the blue morpho from Brazil whose lifespan was only 115 days—most of which was spent eating and mating. They reminded her of her best friend in high school, Dina—an overweight chicana who loved her comida. She was a sweet girl with a great personality, but she was also promiscuous. Dina fell in love with a boy named Adulio. He was talented at pleasing the ladies, and he liked them big. However, he also sold drugs. His career started early with one of Mexico's most violent drug cartels. Dina followed him around like a blind person following a guide dog. She was caught in the middle of a drive-by attempt on Adulio. She lived and died like the blue morpho—a short and sweet life of lust and gluttony.

Maria's favorites were the zebra-striped swallowtails—the homebodies—who never ventured far from the safety of their paw paw trees in the eastern U.S. She could most relate to them because, if one couldn't feel safe at home, then where else could she?

At Maria's quinceañera, this papier mache melting pot was the main attraction. But she also remembered dancing with her father—her first dance partner. She was the queen of the spotlight. Her friends were envious that day, and Mamá was so proud. Poor Mamá! She was fighting stage three melanoma. Her hair was falling out from the chemotherapy treatment, but still she managed to smile. Maria felt guilty for having so much fun that day. Mamá battled chemo for a year before she passed. She spent her last days, as she insisted, in her own bed rather than a hospital. The Padezsco house was full of friends and family that day, but Maria shut her-

self in Mamá's room, sat bedside, and held her hand.

In their last conversation, her mother spoke of a disturbing dream she had the night before. Sickness had swept southern Mexico and was spreading north. Citizens were contemplating moving north to the United States. However, the government of the United States insisted it had only enough vaccine for its own people. The citizens of Mexico did not want to die, so they found ways to cross into the United States illegally. Many did not survive the sickness, and bounty hunters kept the "plague-ridden" from crossing over. Just as hope seemed lost, many American citizens set up an "underground railroad" to smuggle Mexicans into the country and share the vaccine. This act of kindness kept many people alive. Although many had died, there was optimism that some could survive.

Mamá grabbed María's hand and squeezed it tightly. It was so cold. It felt as though she were holding the hand of Santa Muerte. She asked one last request of María before she died—to learn English, just in case her horrible nightmare came true someday. María agreed but expressed discontent at the idea of leaving her home. After Mamá died, María wondered whether Mamá's soul had been collected by Santa Muerte and placed in the purgatorial celestial sphere.

María's stench awoke her from her daydream. She was exhausted from the drive to the border to drop off Edita and Lola with their father. Her clothes smelled awful and were stained with vulture blood. She and Carlos had been separated for a year. She had stopped using her married name, Eleuterio, even though they were not officially divorced. He had wanted to move his construction business to Texas, but María wanted no part of it—she refused to leave her father behind. So they sold their house, and she and the kids moved in with Victor. Carlos applied for citizenship, learned English, and became a resident of Corpus Christi. She let him have the kids in the summer and when they weren't in school. But, she never filed for the divorce. She had hoped that his crazy expedition would fail, and he would come crawling back home to her. She was alone but remained stubborn and refused to give in to him. He was a Monarch, but María was a Zebra-striped Swallowtail.

She looked up to Mamá's window. Although, it had been 15 years since her death, she could still feel her warm presence. Now more than ever she found solace here in a world of insanity. Now her daughters could enjoy the house just as she had as a girl. But the country was in a state of disarray. The drug cartels were at war—each wanting to be the main supplier of narcotics to the United States. Even worse were the smaller criminal organizations feeding off of the chaos like parasites. María had to leave her job as a science teacher because of death threats by extortionists. Thankfully, María had her father's money to take care of her and the kids, and Carlos sent her as much as he could spare. It was enough, at least temporarily anyway. The rest of the teachers were not so lucky. The extortionists demanded that the school's employees give them half of their annual salaries, or they would terrorize not only them but their children as well. What was the point of working for half salary? And who was to say that they would honor the agreement? Shortly after María quit, they shot out the windows of the school. María's former co-workers told her about the incident. The children were forced to lie face first down and kiss the floor. They held hands wondering if they were going to survive the next few minutes. The teachers encouraged the children to sing songs to keep them calm. No one was hurt, but afterward many of the parents refused to send their children back to school. The incident also led to the resignation of many teachers. The school had to shut down early for the year for lack of personnel. María sent the kids to live with their father so he could enroll them in school in Texas.

María looked at her phone. One missed call, Papi—she hadn't called him back. But she had to take off her nasty clothes first and take a shower. She had almost convinced herself that everything was going to be alright, but in the newspaper that lay on the table next to the front door she read: *50 innocents burned alive in El Último Baile nightclub blaze, arson suspected.*

Victor woke up naked, his face pressed against a cold alabaster wall that was surprisingly clean and smelled as if it had been washed with bleach. His nose recognized the aroma of copper. It reminded him of the smell of his father's slaughterhouse. However, the smell was distinctly different from the smell of pig blood; it had a more human-like quality to it. He saw that his arms and feet were chained to the wall. His head was throbbing.

"Ah, you're finally awake."

Victor recognized Julio's voice.

"Hector and I decided to bring you here to let you think about what you witnessed at *El Último Baile*. You will remain here until we can come to an agreement."

"Why are you doing this? This is a time when people should be helping each other."

"Well, Victor, my friend, you see we are not the same, you and I. I am a hawk and you—you're more like a prairie dog."

"You are a vulture!"

"A vulture? Please explain I am intrigued."

"You aren't skilled enough to hunt and kill your prey; you wait until they are sick or dying, and then you swoop in at the most opportune moment to finish off the weak and gobble them up."

Victor heard a whip crack and felt the skin tear off his back. His back was on fire, and he cried out.

"I guess hearing the truth is like a mosquito buzzing in your ear, eh, Julio?"

Victor grimaced in pain.

"What do you mean I am not skilled enough to kill? You witnessed it with your own eyes?"

"That man was already dead, as we all are."

"Already dead? What the hell are you talking about, you loon?"

"Mexico is dying from corruption. The police are no better than criminals. They should be protecting us from scavengers like you, but they are just as greedy. They choose money over duty, even if it is stained with the blood of thousands of innocents."

"I'm a businessman, old man, just like you."

"Your business is killing Mexico. You're a plague. Tourists from all over the world used to visit our country. Now our own citizens flee in horror."

"Enough of this nonsense, old man. I took the liberty of taking all the cash you had on you, your credit cards, and this lovely photo. Wow, she is my type, definitely the way I like my women—not too gorda, yet not too flaca either, with just the right amount of meat on her. Who is this señorita?"

Julio held María's photo in front of Victor's face, teasing him with it, offering it and then pulling it back just out of his reach as if it were a treat and Victor a dog that had just performed an unworthy trick.

"She's not a señorita. She's married, and she has—"

Victor stopped mid-sentence realizing he was about to give out even more information about his family that would only worsen their situation.

"Two daughters, yes, I know. We are not as small time as your earlier insult implied. We have done our research."

"They're safe. You won't be able to get your hands on them. They aren't even in the country. They are with their father."

"Well, isn't that a shame. Veal is so much tastier than matured beef, wouldn't you agree?"

"You sick bastard!"

Julio laughed at his own comment.

"I also took the opportunity—like the vulture I am—to acquire your cell phone from your pants pocket before we stripped you down."

Hector came in. He placed a ball gag in Victor's mouth, tightened the leather straps around Victor's head, looked at him, and then licked his lips.

"And may I say, Victor, you look much better with your clothes off than on. You look as juicy as a suckled pig, all spread out against that wall."

Julio laughed and patted Hector on the back.

"They'll be plenty of time for that later my friend."

"Yes, there will. Plenty of time for us to get better acquainted, right Victor?"

Victor shook his head and tried to yell to Hector, but his voice was muffled by the ball gag.

"Those are excellent sales skills, Hector. It is always important to know your customer on a more personal level."

The two men stared at Victor. Their terrifying laughter echoed in the alabaster-tiled room now serving as Victor's dungeon.

"I see you have María's number here. Let's give her a call, shall we?"

María stayed in the shower long enough to fog the mirrors in the bathroom yet got out in time to prevent her skin from pruning. She wrote a message on the mirror with her index finger, just as she had done as a little girl. Her father even let her take showers in the master bath because he knew how much she loved to. To show her appreciation, she would leave a cute message in the fogged up mirror above the sink—"Te amo Papi" with a heart in place of the dot on the i.

María's phone began to vibrate on the bathroom counter. She picked it up and looked at the display screen—it was Papi.

"Hello?"

"María, I presume? Your voice sounds as sweet as I thought it would."

María did not recognize the caller's voice.

"Who is this?"

"A friend of your father's . . . well, more like his salesman."

"Why are you calling from his phone? Let me speak to my father."

"In due time, my girl, in due time. But what I want you to do now is to go to your father's safe. You do know the combination, right?"

"Tell me who this is, or I'm calling the police."

María held the phone away from her ear. Laughter emitted from it. Once it subsided, she placed the phone back to her ear.

"That would not be a good idea, mamasita. We have friends on the force; as soon as you call them, we will know, and your father would not appreciate that—trust me."

"What do you want with him?" María began to sob hysterically.

"Shhhhhhhhhh . . . it's okay, mi amor. Just listen to me and everything will work out just fine. ¿Entiendes?"

María nodded, unable to speak, but realized then that she had to say "okay."

"Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Your father has told me that he doesn't keep much money in the bank because he doesn't trust the banks. Can't say that I blame him. The corruption is awful these days, wouldn't you agree?"

"Please, enough small talk, already!"

"Oh, aren't you the feisty one? Okay, well, it's easy. Empty the money out of the safe, and place it in a big suitcase along with your mother's jewelry. She doesn't need it anymore."

"You inconsiderate bastard, you leave her out of this!"

"I struck a nerve, did I? Here's what I want you to do. Tomorrow night is the Día de los Muertos celebration."

"You want me to meet you in Monterrey for an exchange?"

"Interrupt me again, and you will never see your father alive."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Not in Monterrey. I want you to drive east to Lake Cuchillo. You know it?"

"Yes, my father and I used to go fishing—"

"Look, I don't give a damn. If you don't shut your pretty mouth and listen, it will be the fish who are feasting on your father."

"I'm sorry. Please don't hurt him."

"Meet me in China near the dock on the east side of the lake at six tomorrow night."

Look for a man in a mask."

"Lots of people will be wearing masks. It's el Día de los Muertos—"

"A vulture mask . . . right, Victor . . . hahaha—"

"What? Let me speak to him."

"Say hello to your daughter, Victor."

But María heard no words from her father, only his muffled screams, terrifying laughter, and then a dead line. She was speaking to no one. She knew that she might never see her father again.

María woke early on the Day of the Dead. She baked pan de muerto—the bread of the dead. It was Papi's favorite. It was made with piloncillo—a refined sugar with an earthy taste. She prepared an altar. Its arch made from sugar cane stalks joined together at the top with string and tied to the back legs of the altar. The arch represented the passage between life and death. A glass of water was placed on top of the altar to quench the thirst of the spirits. Then the altar was decorated with several candles arranged in the shape of a cross—the cardinal directions—so the spirits could find their way. She scattered the petals of compasuchilis—pumpkin-colored marigolds symbolizing the impermanence of life—over the altar surface. María placed the pan de muerto on the altar along with some tamales and chocolates she had prepared for this special day. The aroma of copal incense filled the room—lit to chase away evil spirits and to help the dead find their way. She placed a picture of Mamá in her wedding dress upon the altar. She looked so happy in the picture. She struggled with the next picture—her conscience scolded her for placing it on the altar, but she had to just in case she never saw him again. While she hoped for the best, she planned for the worst. And if . . . if. She placed the picture of Victor next to Mamá's. Her mascara hitched a ride with a tear down her cheek. Perhaps it was time for him to be reunited with Mamá again, but she was selfish for his affection. She wasn't yet ready to give him up.

After saying a prayer for their souls and making the sign of the cross, María rose from her knees. She was dressed as if she were headed to a funeral, and perhaps she was. She was adorned in black—a pencil skirt, black blouse, and Andrea boots that hugged her knees. María reached under her bed and pulled out a Te Amo cigar box, she opened it, and pulled out her Black Widow boot knife. Her father had given it to her when she was a teenager before her first date—just in case the boy had tried to rape her. "Aim for the jugular," he told her, as he showed her the location on his own neck. She had never had to use it, but she placed it in its black sheath and tied it around her leg, snug inside her boot out of sight.

María turned the dial on her father's safe—entering her birth date. There it was—all the money he had worked for—10 million pesos. She gathered it and stacked it in the Armani suitcase. She emptied her mother's jewelry into the suitcase as well. She began weeping again and reluctantly placed her mother's wedding ring inside. María grabbed her purse and the keys to her father's Rolls—this was a special occasion after all.

Inside the glove compartment of the Wraith, she found her father's favorite pocket knife. It was an Old Timer with a smooth wood finish. She opened and tested the blade—still sharp to the touch. After an hour or so, the task was finished. The old oak in the front yard had a new tattoo—a cross and underneath it the initials C.C.

Julio left La Tienda de Disfraces de Monterrey with a black vulture mask. It was a hand-painted, half-face latex mask secured with elastic. The beak was black and very narrow. It hung down a few inches and was rounded, not pointed. He was beginning to embrace the idea of being a vulture and was not as offended as he was when Victor first called him one. "What is the condition of the merchandise?" Julio asked Hector.

"He . . . I mean . . . it is a little damaged at the moment, but I'm pretty sure she will still be willing to buy."

"We aren't selling it to her. I have a better idea—a way we can profit even further. So don't damage the goods too much."

"A better idea? Such as?"

"I will meet the buyer at China and tell her that, if she wants the merchandise in one piece, she is going to have to give us the money in advance to cover the shipping. I'll tell her that we will make delivery at another time."

"She won't go for that, Julio."

"What choice does she have? I have her right where I want her. We'll make the deal on the lake. I'll pay one of the fishermen to take us to the middle of the lake."

"And then?"

"Then once she gives me the money, I will void the sale, permanently, send her on her way, and pay the fisherman to take me back to the shore."

"Then we can sell the merchandise to someone else."

"Exactly."

Julio arrived at the end of Lake Cuchillo opposite from the agreed meeting point. He stashed two small anchors—each with plenty of line—and two black body bags—each with a shackle attached to the end—behind some brush. His plan was to get the money from María, finish her off, and then pay the fisherman to keep his mouth shut. If he refused, he would dispose of him as well. Once the deed was done, he would have the fisherman take him to the other side of the lake where he had stashed his gear, zip María up in the body bag, and have the fisherman take him back to the middle of the lake. He would then attach the anchor to the body bag, wrap the anchor line around it several times, and throw her overboard. If need be, he would do the same to the fisherman, if he refused to cooperate. Julio doubted that would be necessary because, once the fisherman saw the money involved, he would want to get in on it. Once Julio disposed of the body, he would take the money to the hideout where Hector and he would begin trying to sell Victor to human traffickers. Julio had some connections through his cousin who did business with one of the cartels. He had told Julio about the market for laborers in Brazil. The blood diamond trade was flourishing, and mining companies were always looking for new hands. The cartel had worked out a deal with a mining company to buy a bulk amount of diamonds for a discounted price. In exchange they would supply the company with a substantial amount of slaves. Usually the mining companies would only take young, healthy men, but the business was booming and they couldn't be too picky. Julio was sure that his cousin could convince the cartel to buy Victor. The resale would increase his profit from the whole ordeal, a fool-proof plan, at least in his mind.

María arrived in China thirty minutes before the agreed exchange time. She parked her daddy's car in front of a cantina named *La Última Ronda*. María observed the surreal scene around her—men, women, and children, some wearing masks and others with their faces painted like ghouls. A terrifying thought entered her mind. What if they were the dead? She wondered if she be joining them soon. A man shuffled past the front of the vehicle; he was short and portly—she swore it was her father. María rolled her window down and shouted out. "Papi, Papi, is it you?"

The man turned to look at her. He donned a fiendish mask resembling a skull with only the superior teeth; the incisors were sharp and pointed. Painted down the center of the mask was a red vein resembling a bolt of lightning striking between the eye sockets down to the upper jaw.

There were black flowers hand painted on the forehead of the mask and a cobweb to add a hint of aging. María tried to peer into the man's eyes, but her eyes were met only with a black void of soullessness. Was she witnessing her father's spirit on its way to its final resting place?

"Are you okay?" The shell of a man called out to her.

"Papi? What have they done to you?"

"Lo siento mucho. I have no daughter." The man pulled up his mask to reveal his face. He looked nothing like her father. He had a gunslinger mustache and looked as though he hadn't visited a dentist, but once or twice in his life.

"Oh, I'm sorry señor. I thought you were someone else."

"Are you feeling well?"

Of course, she wasn't feeling well. She was surrounded by fantasmas on a day celebrating the dead, and she was about to meet up with a killer who may have already murdered her father. How well could she feel?

"Sí, señor. I'm fine. Carry on."

She exited the vehicle, suitcase in hand, and made her way toward the lake. The Day of the Dead was rapidly becoming the Night of the Dead. The sun was fading like the lives of so many who called out from beyond the grave to be remembered one more time. The horizon of the lake was surrounded by trees adorned with white lights. Several fishermen sat in their small boats. Large nets hung from the bows like drooping butterflies. Candles were aligned on the starboard and port sides. It was tradition for them to move their nets up and down to awaken and guide souls to the nearby cemetery. The villagers called it the butterfly net dance. Every year at midnight, women and children would leave their homes with food, candles, and *compasuchitl* flowers and head to this cemetery to prepare altars for their dead ancestors. The bell in the cemetery would toll all night to call the lost souls back home. Family members would decorate each grave with a candle—a welcome light to those forever clothed in darkness.

María waited under a large cypress tree, a favorite roosting spot of the monarch butterfly. She looked for the man in the vulture mask. No one fit the description. A cold chill ran down her spine, as she felt hot breath on the back of her right ear.

"You look as though you are dressed for a funeral."

María started to turn around, but she felt the gun barrel in her back.

"Don't make a scene. See that fisherman ahead and to the right?"

María nodded.

"Wave at him and smile."

She waved and smiled, almost sarcastically, as if she had just won first prize in the *Nuestra Belleza México* pageant. The man pushed her toward the boat.

"Señor, would you mind taking this beautiful lady and me out in the lake? I would gladly pay you."

"It would be a tight fit my friend. My boat is —."

The masked man produced a 500 peso bill from his pocket with his free hand and handed it to the fisherman.

"There's more."

The fisherman nodded, took María by the hand, and helped her into the boat.

"Be careful not to trip on the net," the fisherman warned.

Julio tucked away his Colt .45 and followed María into the boat. Her back was to the stern facing him. She peered at his black mask. The lines on the mask's forehead reminded her of the worry lines on a human forehead. Yes, he did have plenty to worry about, María thought to herself. The beak was small but hung down below the mask; it reminded her of a Muppet's nose. He was wearing a puffy pirate shirt and a Zorro hat. When she laughed, Julio gave her a sharp look.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I laugh when I get nervous. What's your name?"

"You don't need to know."  
 "What will it hurt?"  
 "I suppose you are right. Julio."  
 "Well, Julio, I came with my end of the deal. Where's my father?"  
 "He's in a safe place. Don't worry. What I need you to do is open the suitcase and show me what is inside."  
 Julio pulled out his gun and pointed it at her, out of sight of the fisherman behind him. He motioned to her to proceed. María unlatched the right side of the suitcase and then the left. She lifted the lid to reveal the money and jewelry.  
 "How much?"  
 "10 millón."  
 "Good girl. Now, about your father—"  
 "Yes, about him."  
 "Once you give me the money, I will arrange for a second meeting where we will drop him off to you."  
 "That wasn't the deal."  
 "This is a no haggle price, señora."  
 "Señora."  
 "Ah, yes, your father corrected me as well, but I see no ring. Where is this husband of yours? Why would he leave such a beautiful woman all alone in such a dangerous place?"  
 "We're separated. He left Mexico for the United States, and I refused to go with him."  
 "A woman who has an undying love for her country! I respect that."  
 "I don't want your respect; I want my father back. And what do you know about pride in one's country? You rape her every day when you prey on the weak."  
 "That's because I am a vulture, like your father said. What he said makes sense to me. This is an opportune time for vultures like me, is it not? Everyone is terrified. The country is in a state of chaos. People die, and the vultures feed."  
 "And you take advantage of the situation."  
 "This is a new age for Mexico. The cartels are the authorities. Their grip is unbreakable."  
 "But criminals like you only make it worse."  
 "What would you have me do, fight on the side of justice?"  
 "You are obviously not man enough for that."  
 Julio placed his hand on María's knee and began to run it up her thigh. She didn't resist him.  
 "You need someone to protect you, mamasita? You want a hero?"  
 Julio moved his hand higher up her skirt along her inner thigh. When he leaned forward, she saw his neck tattoo of Santa Muerte holding a scythe and a celestial sphere. Julio scooted forward and began to invade her panties, his hand like a grave robber entering a sacred tomb. She moaned softly and cocked back her head slightly. Her eyes caught the fisherman's over Julio's shoulder. A tear ran down her cheek. She smiled at the fisherman, winked, then reached into her boot and withdrew the knife. The fisherman shook his head and continued rowing the boat toward the middle of the lake. Julio's fingers explored her greedily. She focused again on the celestial sphere of Santa Muerte. Black Mexico caught her eye. There was nothing left in Mexico for her; it was time for her to fly away like the monarch. María raised the knife and plunged it into Santa Muerte, slicing not only Julio's jugular but his carotid artery as well, cutting off the main supply of blood to his brain. She pulled out the knife and plunged it in again, and again much deeper than was needed to finish him off. Julio fell face first onto María's lap; his gun dropped to the floor of the boat. He covered his neck with his hands to try to stop the blood from squirting out. He tried to scream but couldn't breathe. His white shirt turned as red as the Nile during the blood plague of the Old Testament. Within seconds, he was dead. The

fisherman looked at Julio with horror and then at María, astonished. He wondered how such a beautiful girl could be capable of such barbarism.

"He is . . . I mean was an extortionist. He kidnapped my father, who is probably as good as dead now. I have no idea where he is, and I am sure this man had no intention of telling me."

"I understand. My brother was killed by such a vulture. He agreed to their price, but they—"

"Voided the sale?"

"That is one way of putting it."

"This seems to be their way. My family needed this money more than this bastard did."

"Your family?"

"I have two daughters and a husband in the United States. That is where I plan to go now. There is nothing more for me here. Here is some money for your services, for the mess."

"Thank you, Señora. By the way, you never told me your name."

"María Eleuterio."

María handed the fisherman money enough to feed his family for several months. He smiled at her and nodded.

"I will remember this man and your father. When I perform the dance with my net, I will guide their souls to the graveyard for eternal rest."

"Thank you, señor."

"But, Señora Eleuterio, what if your father is still alive? What if he somehow escaped?"

"He will know where to find me."

"But how?"

"The trees will tell him."

## Alaina Bray

Dust

Lilith froze. She turned back to consider the town for a moment.

She stood on a hill just within its borders, the only break in the flattened landscape. Elevated, she saw the lamps and lanterns of Charming flicker out as it put itself to sleep—electricity a fad that had not yet reached the town. Only a few windows still glowed; most of Charming's residents were long asleep, preparing for another day of farming the cotton that would not grow except in small, bedraggled patches like the spots of fur left on a dog with mange.

She turned her back to the city once again and lifted her foot to take her next step. She stopped, left the foot poised in the air, feeling as though there was something sacred and forbidden in the step—that this dirt, though only a single step farther than the dirt she had trod before, was what her father had always warned her about. This was dirt walked upon by the immoral and the reprobate whom her father said awaited her outside of Charming. Charming abided no such wickedness. The outsiders, the ones not to be trusted who robbed banks with tommy-guns and refused to remove their hats when meeting a lady, behaved this way.

Lilith brought her foot down to rest next to the other—in Charming. She sighed. Her father would smirk if he had been watching her, proud to know his warnings had chipped their way into her skull and burrowed through to the center of her brain, where like ear-wigs they snuggled in her mind, laying eggs and occasionally out of sheer boredom raising their pincers to sting pieces of the soft, pink mass.

But her father, of course, did not know she was here, so he could not share his satisfied smirk. He was resting within the wooden walls of their home, a home that stood alone among acres of empty cotton fields. He lay peacefully underneath his tin roof and faded quilt in a bed next to Lilith's faded mother.

His teeth were like millstones in Lilith's presence, grinding together and eroding like the Oklahoma topsoil he could not keep from blowing away. Lilith's mother could sometimes hear the scraping as they sat in church where Lilith, lacking the proper air of seriousness, smiled in such a way that her nose crinkled while she sang along with the congregation to the slow cadence of the hymns.

Once, with the last chords of "I'll Fly Away" still resting in the air, Lilith had sung on, unnoticed at first—by all except her father, whose teeth had been grinding furiously between stanzas of his own singing. It took several moments for the echoes to fade from the whitewashed walls and for the rest of the congregation to realize not everyone had stopped singing. It was a realization that came slowly, people turning their heads to see what their neighbors were looking at, starting with the families sitting around Lilith and rippling from this center to the edges of the church until each dusty face was turned towards the girl who had not gone silent with the music.

Lilith stood with her eyes closed and her palms upturned, swaying peacefully to the sound of her own humming. The corners of her lips turned up into a brief smile as the words "Fly Away" came out in a half-breathed whisper and rounded with the murmur of "O Glory...I'll fly away." The other words were swallowed by a hum that emanated from her throat like the sound of distant train horns at night.

Those sitting closest could make out the words. Others felt only the hum and its weight, but they were enough to keep them enraptured in the thin, blonde spectacle. Men stood stony faced, some clenching straw hats in the leather of their hands. Women fidgeted next to their husbands, looking at the wood floors when the men glanced toward them and then, with a swallow, quickly back to Lilith. Those Lilith's age appraised her, running their eyes from the curls tied

back messily with a ribbon to the bare feet that poked out beneath her faded floral print dress and the cracked leather shoes lying next to them. Many mimicked the expressions of their fathers, and the rest found themselves humming secretly, inaudibly along with her. The children, amused, watched with the same attention and affection they'd have given a stray dog doing tricks in the street.

Lilith's eyes squeezed tighter, as if in pain, as she half-hummed half-sang the last words, "Hallelujah by and by. I'll fly away." Then she opened her eyes and lowered her palms back to her sides. Blood pooled pink in her cheeks, but she made no other acknowledgment of her audience other than a raise of her chin and a slow sweep of eyes across those who stared. Folding her body into the wooden pew, she started a ripple much like the last one, and those nearest to her sat down first with the rest following, sitting uneasily in the hard seats and hard silence.

It was then that Lilith's father chipped his tooth: the bottom left molar, second farthest from the back. His wife heard the crack and turned. Lilith looked resolutely forward as the preacher shuffled to the pulpit in his wilted suit and cleared his throat, unsure whether to begin. Drops of sweat were already beading on his pink, spotted forehead. Lilith's father spat out the fragment as he would a sip of sour milk and caught it in his hand. He looked at it, at Lilith, and back again and curled his lips in disgust at one of the two.

When the preacher had decided to speak, he began uneasily, quite aware that the congregation was still occupied with the sway and the hum of a farmer's daughter. But the farmer himself looked not at Lilith nor the preacher but at the fragment of tooth in his hand and rolled it steadily between the calluses of his thumb and forefinger until the service ended and the people filed out, heads down in eager whispers.

The tooth's ivory interior contrasted with its surface, yellowed with the well water and the food the man had been too tired to brush away after nights of plowing, sowing, reaping under the Oklahoma sky. He came in only when dusk had begun to claim the plains and the Mexican free-tails joined him on the fields, gliding by his head and through the rows of cotton like dancers. He was fond of the bats many years ago, knowing they hunted the flies and mosquitoes that plagued him as he worked. He called them "My own personal farm hands," and when Lilith was a toddler, he would carry her outside, just after her mother had bathed her and dressed her for bed, pulling his reluctant wife too along by the hand.

"Jasper, you're going to get her dirty," she'd say.

He would smile—his teeth so white, so charming then. "We have to see the bats, Lila Beth. The girl wants to play." He waited for the toddler's affirmation—a giggle or an eager tug on the straps of his overalls—and turned back to his wife. "Have a heart."

"Your food will get cold."

He would sit at their table and place Lilith on his lap. He made a game of seeing how fast he could eat the food, much to his daughter's delight. He grabbed handfuls of whatever Lila Beth had made him that night—chicken, beans, even steak on the best of nights—and shoved them into his mouth.

Lila Beth turned away so he wouldn't see her lips turning up at the corners. "Jasper, look at yourself! She is never going to have manners if you behave like that."

He looked to Lilith and pretended to snarl with his mouth full. She shrieked with laughter at his growls. "Pa is a bear!" she would announce to her mother who was still turned away, the edges of her frown twitching and threatening to lift.

"Hear that, Jasper? You're a bear."

He chewed and swallowed as quickly as he could manage and rose, setting Lilith on the floor to go wipe his hands if the dinner had been messy that night. "Makes her laugh though. Doesn't it Lila?"

"Suppose it does." He scooped up his daughter again and wrapped a hand around Lila Beth's slender wrist to lead the pair outside.

There in the fields, Lila Beth already abandoning her pretense of crossness, they would wait for the bats to dance by their heads. "Shhh," the father prompted, his daughter trying to stifle her giggles. Then after moments of smiling anticipation, one of the creatures would pirouette by. Lilith would answer with a shriek of laughter, and her father would fake shock each time.

"You sound like a bat! Are you a bat?"

"Yes!"

"You're a bat? You're a bat!" He would lift her above his head, ignoring the soreness in his arms, and run with her through the rows of the then thriving cotton. She spread out her arms, flapped, and shrieked. Lila Beth chased them, but never quite fast enough. She caught her breath between strides and laughs.

"Jasper! Jasper, slow down! I'm not wearing shoes."

Jasper's soreness was less easily ignored later when the cotton came less easily and the top soil and the wind began to run away together like forbidden lovers—and when they found Lila Beth would have no more children. He grew too tired to do anything after his day in the sun and wind except come in and kiss the heads of his wife and daughter. And later, he grew too tired even for this. Their twilight dances with the bats became a memory for the father and a ghost of a memory for his daughter.

Lilith barely remembered the origin of her unusual habit years later when she continued with it and her father had long abandoned it. At twelve, she no longer shrieked and ran with the bats but waited with her arms out until they twirled around her as casually as if she were a tree. She watched them spin and open their mouths to emit the sounds that gave them sight. She liked to think they were singing.

Sometimes, her father would stare from where he worked in the field, but she learned to ignore him as he had done to her. He had once looked like his daughter, both of them fair-skinned and light-haired. But his pale skin had been tanned and leathered with the sun and wind, and his head of thick, yellow hair had thinned like the crops, a little more each season.

Then the storms began to carry away the soil like charmers carry away young daughters. The farmers began to wear Charming's dust in their hair and on their shoulders. Later still, in their eyes and in the hollow echoes of their laughs.

During one of the first storms, Lilith was sitting at the small wooden table in their kitchen, absorbed in sixth grade arithmetic homework. Her mother sat next to her, peeling potatoes and occasionally looking at the school work she could not understand.

"You understand that, Lilith?"

"Yes ma'am, Mamma." Her mother nodded and smiled slightly as she looked back to her potatoes. Lilith's father, driven in early by the wind and dust, opened the front door and walked without a word towards the biscuits and beans waiting for him at the opposite end of the table.

Then he noticed the Mexican free-tail that had flown in behind him, it too seeking shelter from the storm. The three of them stared at the bat while it flew in panicked circles, realizing it preferred the storm to being trapped within the house. It shrieked and flapped its wings near the wall, hoping the sound would show it an escape. Slowly, Jasper turned away from the plate and followed the bat with his eyes. He walked with heavy steps toward the wall and extended his arms, waiting for the bat to come near. He swatted for it with an open hand when it flew within his reach.

"Jasper?" his wife whispered. She swallowed as he followed the bat into the middle of the room when it flew away from the wall. "Jasper, what are you doing?"

Lilith, misunderstanding, pushed back from the table and left her seat to join him, believing they were dancing like they had in her memory-ghosts. She stood by his side and held her arms out as he did, waiting for the bat to come near. She answered the bat's shrieks with laughter

and began to twirl around Jasper, mimicking the circles the bat flew around his head, and, for a moment, she almost remembered that they had once looked alike.

When the bat came near his face, he grabbed it by the corner of its wing and spun to the floor. Before it could rise, he stomped it twice with the hard bottom of his boot.

"No!" Lilith dove towards him. He stopped her, his large hand catching her at the chest, and turned to face her. His lips curled, and she was silent. The dust settled in the creases of his face made him look so much older. Dust from his boots powdered the bat's fur. Its ribcage was crushed. Its bottom jaw hung limp and sideways, and its small tongue poked out from the side. The membrane of its left wing had been torn as it was hurled to the ground.

Jasper took a deep breath through his nose. Then he kicked the kitchen wall and made his way back to his bedroom and slammed the door. Lilith knelt in silence over the small, broken form, and her mother, after a swallow and a sniffle, turned back to her potatoes.

The storms in those days were smaller and did not last as long. And when the wind and dirt had stopped swirling outside, Lilith's father emerged from his room. Wordlessly he scooped up the crumpled body that lay next to his daughter and carried it outside.

She remained on her knees for a moment, fingering the spot of blood where the bat had been, then rose to follow him.

"Lilith, maybe you shouldn't—" her mother started softly. Her words were lost as the screen door slapped shut.

It took her several moments to find in him in the dying light. She spotted his hunched over form in one of the clusters of cotton that remained in the field, shaking in sobs. He held the body of the bat, running his thumbs over the dust and blood that matted the fur on its chest.

"Pa..."

Jasper gasped and rose quickly. He wiped his face, smearing it with dirt and traces of blood. He lifted his arm above his head and cast the bat's crumpled form into the shadows. Lilith followed its arc and watched it land, more crumpled now, in a small cloud of dust.

Jasper turned to face his daughter with a steel in his eyes.

"Lilith, you won't be going back to school tomorrow. You're going to start helping me in the fields."

"Pa..."

"Don't talk back, Lilith."

"Pa, please no." Her voice fell to a whisper. "I can't do that. I can't do that, Pa."

He stared at her for a moment and then turned for the house.

"Pa!" She followed after him, his steps quickening. "Pa!" He was already locked in his bedroom when she entered the house. She kicked the same spot on the wall he had, three times, bruising the tips of her bare toes. "Pa! Pa! Pa!" The word emphasized each kick. A sob swelled in Lilith's throat. She dug her fingernails into her palms and swung once at the air.

"Lilith? Lilith, what's happened?" Her mother's voice startled her. She had forgotten she was still in the kitchen.

"I'm not going back to school." She hated the sound of the words. "I'll be working in the fields."

Lila Beth looked down at the open arithmetic book and ran her hand over it, and a tear glistened at the corner of her eye as she closed it. She rose and put away the potatoes before walking to Lilith. Cupping her daughter's chin in her hand, she ran her thumb over her cheekbone with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Lilith." She kissed her on the forehead and turned for her bedroom.

Lilith paced the floors and dug her fingernails deeper into her hands. Bile rose in her throat when she glanced at the closed book. Her tooth dug into her lip until it tore the soft tissue and she detected the metallic taste of blood. She spat on the floor and hoped her father would step in it in the morning. Then she thought of her mother cleaning it up and turned to get a towel. Leaning down to wipe the blood-speckled froth, she noticed drops of the bat's blood on the floor next to her own. Without thinking, she ran her finger over the drops, smearing them into her sali-

va and blood. She paused and looked at the crimson on her finger and on the floor. She stared at the mixture for a moment before wiping it up, then rose.

Her feet carried her towards the door, into the dark, and to the bat. One wing was completely broken now, twisted behind its head. She dug its shallow grave with her hands, dirt caking under her fingernails, and twisted a small cross out of twigs. Gently lifting the bat, she set to work picking mats of blood out of its fur and spat in her hand to clean off the powder of dust. She folded the creature's wings until they looked right again, careful not to tear them further. The bat stared back at her with glassy eyes and mouth hanging open, as if she had hypnotized it. Lilith shuddered at the sight, closed its eyes and straightened its jaw, carefully putting the small tongue back in place. Then she gently kissed its head, placed it in the grave, and covered it with dust.

It felt wrong to leave, but she could think of no words, no eulogy to utter over it. She sat for a few minutes, then began to sing the only song that seemed to fit. Her voice was unlike a child's in the night's warm air, as if her twelve-year-old body housed the voice of a woman.

"I'll fly away, O Glory...I'll fly away. When I die—Hallelujah by and by. I'll fly away."

The Mexican free-tails accompanied her song, dancing near her and shrieking to the background melody of the cricket chirps. Lilith did not want to go back into the house.

Each day for six years—except for the days of the storms that had begun to grow larger, blacker, carrying more and more of Charming's soil away—she rose and worked in the fields that grew more bare each season. The steel she saw in her father's eyes and the dust in the creases of his face never went away. And though her skin never leathured this way his had, she grew leaner, thinner from the work and the meals that were also growing smaller.

On Lilith's eighteenth birthday, a week after her father had chipped his tooth, the family sat at the wooden table, eating dinner together. A storm had driven Lilith and Jasper in early. Lila Beth had given her own portion of rice and beans to Lilith as a birthday present. Her mother said little, as had become her habit.

Lilith looked at the empty plate in front of her mother.

"Pa." He looked up from his plate. "We can go to California. Like the others are doing."

He sighed and looked again to his food.

"Pa."

"We are not talking about this, Lilith."

She shook her head, pleading. "No!"

Jasper's worn hands dropped the fork, and it clinked against the plate. "Lilith, do you know what kind of people are in California?"

She met his gaze, and her eyes narrowed. "Do you?"

"No!" His voice cracked as he pushed himself back from the table and stood. "I don't. This," he motioned with his left arm. "This," he stomped the floor, "is what I know."

Lilith too rose, picked up her mother's empty plate, and threw it before his feet. "It is killing us."

He stared at the broken pieces, and his body almost shook the way it had the night with the bat. He blinked slowly. Then, kicking the wall on his way out, he stepped out of the kitchen and away from his daughter.

A daughter who now stood, filled with resolve after the fight, both feet together on the border of Charming, considering the difference between its dust and the dust she was too afraid to place her feet upon.

She squatted to better see it, letting the hems of her cream-colored cotton dress touch the ground, kiss it. She sniffed the night air and then extended her neck, which seemed to glow in the fullness of the moon, over the forbidden dirt and drew another cold breath through her nose,

hoping to discover a difference between the air of Charming and not-Charming. She liked to think she had detected one—that the air over the forbidden dust hinted faintly at the smell of fruit that had just become overripe.

Then, her neck still extended over not-Charming, she lowered her back and brought her head closer the ground. The tips of her blonde curls touch its dust. Lilith swallowed. She lifted her left hand and let it hover in the air of not-Charming, paused, and felt for a difference. This air was perhaps thicker, filled with the pollen of the forest she faced and with a hint of the smoke of the city beyond it. Her hand drifted down gently and touched the dust with the tip of its middle finger. It felt different. She brought the other four fingers down, each landing softly on the dust like the lips of a mother on a newborn child. She drew the fingers slowly back toward her body and Charming, letting them trace patterns in the wonderful new dust, and then forward again. The new dust stuck to the tips of her fingers, coloring them with its lovely red-brown.

Then she fell to her knees, unconcerned about staining the cotton of her dress. The dirt made it seem even lovelier. She brought her other hand, without hesitation this time, to meet the dust and brought it down with the full force her palm. She curled her fingers and scraped the ground of not-Charming, collecting as much of it as she could under her fingernails. A staggered breath emanated from the bottom of her ribs. She was sure this dust was different. She leaned over it, resting her weight on her shins and curling her spine to bring her face close to the ground. She clenched her eyes shut, let out another shaky breath, and gasped for the thick, lovelier air. Lilith sobbed, guttural noises rising from the back of her throat. Her ribcage was wracked with each sound, and she pulled her lips back over her teeth, baring them slightly. She was not sure for whom she cried. Perhaps for her mother who would wake up tomorrow alone with her father. Or for herself, the daughter of the man who needed a son. Perhaps for the dying lights of Charming.

Digging her hands into the ground, Lilith collected handfuls of the foreign dirt and stood. She turned once again to face the town, her face stained, knuckles clenched white over the dirt, and mouth in a snarl. She waited for the wind to come and then with one last sob, threw the dust towards her town, hoping it would reach the window of her father and that he would know this was not the dust of Charming. That he would smell her own scent mixed with that of the dust and know that she no longer belonged to him.

Satisfied with the gesture, she sighed and brought her dirty hands up to wipe her face. A Mexican free-tail flew by, and the small breeze from its wings kissed her face. She did not think one had come that close since she was a child. She stooped to pick up the small satchel that held her spare dress and the biscuits she would eat tomorrow morning when she reached the smoky city beyond the thicket. Lilith stepped forward, without pausing this time, across the border and into the trees. Behind her, the last light of Charming flickered out.

# Robert Burns' Satire: The Variance in the Religious and the Social

Robert Burns has long been known as the "heaven-taught ploughman," recognized in his day for his patriotic verse, his romantic ballads, and his controversial satire. Like many Augustan writers, Burns was a master of satire, using it primarily to mock religious hypocrisy or social injustices. In religious discussion, Burns is the "artist-intellectual in rebellion," mercilessly critical of corruption in the church, but in social issues, Burns is the "lower-class radical," championing the same peasants "for whose fundamentalist religious opinions he had the highest contempt" (Scott 101). Thus, an interesting disparity arises in his writing: in his religious satire, he sides with the educated upper class who more often rejected the religious fundamentalism accepted by the lower, but in his social satire, he sides with the lower class, ruthlessly criticizing the gentry for their neglect of the poor.

While Burns does not usually directly mock the lower class's adherence to religious fundamentalism, his sentiments on religion very much reflect those of the more skeptical upper class. Though not against all types of religion, Burns ascribed to a more "rationalistic outlook which had already been adopted by many of the gentry and educated classes" (Crawford 75). This skepticism is present both in Burns' work and in much of Scottish literature in general. While C.R.A. Gribben argues that many worthy Scottish works are sympathetic to the church, he concedes that a majority of the "Scottish literary cannon" is "deliberately opposed to the theological ideas—especially the Calvinist ideas" that were present in Scotland, and Burns' works in particular display a strong opposition to the Calvinistic Presbyterian church and its "doctrine of predestination, its evangelical excesses, the hypocrisy of some of its adherents...[and its] repressiveness" (Gribben 65; Bentam 34). The most obvious targets of many of Burns' religious satires are, of course, the religious figures themselves and their beliefs; however, the lower class's devotion to their less-than-worthy religious leaders and blind acceptance of their teachings are also satirized, sometimes directly and sometimes by implication. "Holy Willie's Prayer" is one of Burns' most scathing religious satires, and while it makes no specific attack on the lower class's beliefs, its attack on established religion reflects the "rationalistic outlook" of the upper class. His poem "The Holy Fair" makes a more obvious, though lighthearted and somewhat affectionate, jab at the farmers and cotters' religious superstition, saving its more serious satire for the religious leaders in the poem.

Burns had "satirical plans for the Evangelical faction" (Weston 19), whom he called "those ghostly beasts of prey who foul the hallowed ground of Religion" (Burns qtd. in Weston 19). No poem better exemplifies his satiric plans than "Holy Willie's Prayer," and no character better exemplifies "those ghostly beasts" than Willie himself. Willie begins his prayer by praising God as the one who "Sends aye to haven and ten to hell/ A' for thy glory/ And no for ony gude or ill" (Burns "Willie" 3-5). Though the poem is entirely in Willie's voice and there is no authorial commentary, Burns clearly intends to mock the Calvinist idea of God as one "who seeks pleasure and glory by whimsically choosing a few and letting the rest of his creation suffer in Hell-fire" (Weston 24). Willie continues and thanks God that while "thousands thou hast left in night," he has been chosen to be a "burnin' and shinin' light" (Burns "Willie" 11). Willie's words mirror those of the religious hypocrite in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In the temple, the Pharisee "stood and prayed with himself, 'God I thank You that I am not like other men'" while the tax collector "beat his breast, saying 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" (New King James Bible Luke 18: 11). Jesus concludes his parable, saying that the tax collector "went down to his house justified rather than the other" (Luke 18: 14). Thus, Willie is painted not just as prideful but as the very epitome of the self-righteous attitude Jesus condemned.

When Willie does admit sin, he does this too in pride. He praises God for giving him "sic exaltation" when he deserves only damnation (14); while his words may seem humble, he believes he deserves punishment not for any fault in himself but for laws broken "Five thousand

years 'fore my creation / Thro' Adam's cause" (17-18). Burns here takes a daring stab at Calvinistic "doctrines of original sin" (Scott 95), likely believing that it encouraged people to shirk responsibility for their shortcomings and allowed hypocrites like Willie to believe in their own faultlessness. Willie confesses that "At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust" (38). He begs pardon for being "wi' Meg" and admits, "Wi' Lizzie's lass, three times I trow," but he knows the Lord will forgive him because he "was fou" and because God knows "we are dust, / Defil'd in sin" (43, 50, 51, 41-42). Burns displays the dangers of false ideas of original sin; though Willie has clearly transgressed and even recognizes his faults, he maintains his pride and will not humble himself like the tax collector of the parable. Indeed, Willie actually believes that God has given him "this fleshly thorn" "Lest he owre high and proud should turn, / 'Cause he's sae gifted" (55, 57-58). He places himself on the same spiritual level as St. Paul—who after receiving revelations from God was given an unspecified "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from pride (2 Cor. 12:7)—an absurd comparison because of the disparity between Willie's lechery and Paul's celibacy.

Willie's final heresy is his lack of mercy and forgiveness when he asks God to pass not in "mercy by [Hamilton and Aiken] / Nor hear their pray'r / But...destroy them" (93-95). In the same breath, he asks for "mercies temp'ral and divine" for himself (98). He mirrors the unforgiving servant of Jesus' parable in Matthew 18 where Jesus warns that each must "from his heart...forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matt. 18: 35). "Holy Willie's Prayer" satirizes a perversion of true Christianity that Burns credited to the Calvinistic-Presbyterian church, and while the poem does not directly oppose the lower class, its daring questioning and mockery of the church would have been much more characteristic of the upper class.

"The Holy Fair" more directly jabs at the lower class's beliefs. The poem is based on real life religious fairs in Scotland, events characterized as much by the debauchery of the masses as they were by the preaching of the ministers (Crawford 68-69). The poem begins with the narrator's sighting of "Three hizzies": Fun, Hypocrisy, and Superstition. Burns' description of the women immediately clarifies his opinion on their merits. The latter two are clad in "dolefu' black" with faces "sour as ony slaes" (Burns "Fair" 14, 22). The former is "gay," dressed in "lyart" with a "bonnie face" (11, 15, 30). Unlike her companions with their sour countenances, Fun is "Fu' kind" to the narrator, even the gray color of her clothes suggests that while she may not be completely pure, she is far superior to the "dolefu' black" of Hypocrisy and Superstition. She suggests that the narrator accompany her to the fair where they "will get famous laughin'" at her companions (44). Thus, Burns leaves no question as to what will be the satiric targets of the poem: the Hypocrisy of the religious and the Superstition of both the religious and the masses.

The scene of the fair opens with a juxtaposition of the religious and worldly. On one hand sits the saints "Wi' screw'd up grace-proud faces," and on the other sits young rogues "Thrang winkin' on the lasses" (87, 89). The religious are immediately satirized with the irony of a "grace-proud" face; the pride they take in their received grace directly opposes the biblical teaching that salvation comes "by grace...not of yourselves" "lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Burns suggests that though they may be "thinkin' on their sins" or "sigh[ing] and pray [ing]" (82, 85), they are not humble and penitent but prideful and self-righteous, thinking of themselves as above the rest of the crowd who are more interested in flirting with the opposite sex. Burns only lightly, almost affectionately, mocks the absurdity of those who would attend a religious festival for overtly secular purposes and more seriously mocks the hypocrisy of the prideful religious. Even the hypocrisy of some of the townspeople, however, is no match for that of the festival's ministers.

An air of "silent expectation" falls upon the crowd as Moodie, a strictly puritanical minister, begins to preach (Burns "Fair" 101). He spews "tidings o' damnation" and preaches "Wi'

ratlin' an' wi' thumpin'!" (103, 110). He gives the crowd a show, one minute "meekly calm" and the next "wild in wrath" (111). Burns scoffs both at his Calvinistic, condemning teachings and at his overly-dramatic delivery. Even the physical description of Moodie's "turn'd up snout" (113) suggests that he, like some of the townspeople, is "grace-proud" and self-righteous. The mockery of Moodie alone would be enough to imply a jab at the religious fundamentalists who would listen to such a man. Burns, however, chooses to take a more direct stab at Moodie's audience. The narrator begins his description of Moodie's sermon with a sarcastic "Hear how he clears the points o' faith," ridiculing both Moodie's pretensions of himself as all-knowing and those who blindly accept his teachings (109). Far from repulsing the crowd as they do Burns, his "eldritch squeel and gestures...fire the heart devout" (114-15), and even those who are not particularly interested in his sermon rest peacefully and enjoy the show.

Conversely, when Smith, the "one Moderate" of the festival (Weston 25), takes the pulpit, there is "peace an' rest nae langer" (Burns 83). The crowd "canna sit for anger" not because of his teachings but because he lacks Moodie's sensationalism (Burns "Fair" 121). While the masses were content to listen to Moodie's condemning but entertaining sermon, they cannot stomach Smith's boring but practical sermon on "practice and on morals," and they leave to "gie the jars an' barrels/ A lift" (123, 125). A "vitriolic dispute between the Evangelicals, the 'Auld Lichts,' and the Moderates, the 'New Lichts,'" existed in Scotland at this time, and unlike the lower class, who generally ascribed to the Calvinistic Auld Licht doctrine, Burns "sided with the Moderates" (Bentam 34). He disapproves of the crowd's impatience with the Moderate Smith, who though boring, was more on the side of common sense. The poem continues as Auld Licht ministers take Smith's place and quickly chase Common-Sense "aff, an' up the Cowgate" (Burns "Fair" 143). The crowd is more accepting of these men, even of Miller who barely believes but continues to preach the old doctrine because he "wants a manse" (149). Later as Russell preaches with "piercing words" of Hell's "ragin' flame, an' scorchin' heat," the crowd displays its gullibility and superstition when the "half asleep start up with fear" because they think their neighbor's snoring is the roaring of Hell (185, 192, 194). While the Calvinist preachers' hypocrisy and doctrine are the most harshly criticized targets of "The Holy Fair," the poem also mocks the lower class and their willingness to believe in (even if they do not completely follow) the puritanical teachings. However, Burns seems amused by the peasants' drinking and flirtations, and the overall tone of the poem is light. He is far less merciful in his satire directed at the upper class.

Burns grew up destitute (Bentam 2), and his class would affect him even once he became a successful poet. Even his title of "heaven-taught ploughman" stems from the upper class prejudice that "his position in life...could not have afforded the possibility of a polite education" (Young 131). Burns' social satire mercilessly criticizes the upper class's lack of concern for the impoverished and their pretensions of themselves as superior. He sought to give "voice to the poor, hungry, and the hitherto powerless," a group he had belonged to most of his life (Whatley 659). He accomplishes this goal in his poems "Address of Beelzebub," in which he ruthlessly mocks a Scottish lord, and in "The Two Dogs," a poem that presents the hardships (or lack thereof) of the lower and upper classes.

Burns wrote "Address of Beelzebub" briefly after four hundred Scottish peasants of the Highlands attempted to escape extreme poverty by emigrating to Canada and were prevented by Lord Breadalbane and the Highland Society who promised to improve their state (Crawford 160-161). Burns begins his introduction by praising Breadalbane for detaining the Highlanders who were "so audacious to attempt an escape from their lawful lairds and masters, whose property they were...in pursuit of that fantastic thing—LIBERTY" (Burns "Address" 174). In the voice of Beelzebub, Burns explains that should the peasants be allowed to emigrate, "those dunghill sons of dirt and mire" would soon desire rights and self-government (19). Angry with their audacity, Beelzebub exclaims that they have no right to food, sleep, or even light "But what your

lordship likes to gie them" (30). Clearly, anything Beelzebub says cannot be trusted, and readers perceive that Burns intends to attack Breadalbane's idea that the people are his to control and should be grateful for whatever he chooses to give them. Beelzebub then charges Breadalbane to punish the people, fearing that his hand is "owre light on them" (32). The people have been ungrateful for Breadalbane's "tender mercies" and will "keep their stubborn Highland spirit" if not reprimanded (35, 38). Here, the irony not only mocks the idea that Breadalbane has been generous but also allows the reader to recognize a positive quality that Beelzebub condemns. Though the devil disapproves of "their stubborn Highland spirit," the reader understands that Burns intends to praise the people for their resiliency and suggest that they are actually superior to the aristocrats. This dramatic persuasion makes Beelzebub's suggested punishments even more ridiculous.

Beelzebub commands Breadalbane to "smash them! crush them a' to spoils!...Let war an' hunger mak' them sober!" (39, 42). If "wives an' dirty brats" dare to beg for alms at his door, Breadalbane should whip the women "with a' their bastards on their backs!" (45, 52). The satire of the poem is similar to that of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which the author presents and defends a clearly inhumane solution to a problem. The idea of whipping infants is only slightly less disturbing than the idea of eating them, and like Swift, Burns communicates that something must be done to help the peasants and that those in charge are not doing enough. Burns' other criticism of the aristocrats lies in Beelzebub's farewell, in which he tells Breadalbane, "I lang to meet you" and promises him a seat at his right hand (53). Burns suggests both that Breadalbane is going to Hell and that rulers who abuse their power are not the divine servants of God but of the Devil.

"The Two Dogs" is not as overtly critical of the gentry, but, like "Address of Beelzebub," it gives voice to the lower class and reprimands the upper. Caesar, the dog of a rich family, and Luath, the dog of a poor farmer family, meet and discuss their owners. Caesar asks his friend what life is like for the poor; accustomed to living with the wealthy and well-fed, Caesar admits that he cannot comprehend how the "poor cot-folk" manage to survive (Burns "Dogs" 69). Luath responds that a cotter will dig ditches and dikes to sustain "Himself, a wife,... [and] a smytie o' wee duddie weans" because nothing but his day's work will keep his family "in thack an' rape" (75-76, 78). Immediately, Luath wins the readers' sympathies for his own family who labor just to survive while Caesar's family practices "little short o' downright wastrie" (64). Luath says that though it seems his family may "starve o' cauld and hunger" at times, they are "maistly wonderfu' contented" (82, 84). Caesar is further baffled and exclaims, "But then to see how ye're neglectit... L—d, man, our gentry care as little/ For delvers, ditchers, and sic cattle" (87, 89-90). Burns creates irony by having a dog recognize a problem humans seem to ignore: the gentry's utter neglect of the peasants. Unlike his masters who regard poor folk as "a stinking brock," Caesar empathizes with the poor (92). Indeed, though Caesar is "o' high degree" he is not prideful and associates with even the most ragged dogs (15). Burns creates a dog with more humanity than his humans, showing the absurdity of the gentry's lack of concern for their fellow man.

The gentry are also satirized for their preoccupation with trivial problems. Luath tells of the farmers' problems but says though they are always on the brink of poverty, they are still able to find joy in their few moments of rest, in their families, and in their holidays. He believes that if the poor are capable of living with their troubles, surely the rich must have a "life o' pleasure" (186). Caesar assures him that he should not envy the gentry because "when nae real ills perplex them/ They make enow themselves to vex them" (197-98). Burns criticizes the upper class, for instead of using their wealth and power to help the poor, they are blinded with selfishness and do not even acknowledge the plights of others. Caesar says his masters "loiter, lounging, lank, an' lazy" and seek entertainment to fill the void in their lives (207). When the races and parties are not enough, they pursue debauchery until their "life is past enduring" (218). Caesar ends his

account of the gentry's lives by explaining that "There's some exception man an' woman; / But this is Gentry's life in common" (229-230). Just as he did in "Address of Beelzebub," Burns ridicules rulers who do not use their power to benefit their people; he does, however, avoid generalizations and makes a concession for the few rich who do care for the peasants. The poem ends as Caesar and Luath depart and "Rejoic'd they were na men, but dogs" (236), again creating irony by painting the dogs as superior humans. Burns reminds the readers that even the slightest amount of humanity, such as that possessed by Caesar, should invoke empathy—an emotion the upper class clearly lacks and must gain if they are to improve the lives of the poor.

While Burns clearly favors the lower class in works like "The Twa Dogs" and "Address of Beelzebub," he reflects opinions characteristic of the upper class in works like "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair." Born a peasant, Burns never lost his fierce voice for the poor-man's plight, but he did reject the puritanical religious values held so often by the lower class. This dissemblance manifests itself in his satire, allowing him to be both the "artist-intellectual in rebellion" who savagely mocks both clergy and doctrine and the "lower-class radical" who passionately defends the cause of the poor (Scott 101). With the same satiric voice, Burns supports the modern religious views of the upper class and advances the social cause of the lower.

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#### Chelsea Barnard

##### Dr. Lecter on Humanity

You are the new one, I presume.  
 Yes, go ahead and look this way.  
 These iron-wrought bars are sturdy.  
 Don't worry. The previous one,  
 the guard before you, was a useless man.  
 He never felt the stab of my hunger,  
 never tasted my pain. He was fearful,  
 always expecting me to lunge.  
 He wanted to think I wasn't like him.  
 (He was correct, in this regard.)  
 I'm different. Quite different. Better.  
 You and I are intelligent people—driven.  
 Superior to these cattle you work amongst.  
 Why do you do it? You know quite well  
 that they are beneath you. Careful now,  
 you've leaned towards me, curiosity,  
 I'm sure. My that perfume doesn't suit you,  
 too flowery. The scent of hazelnut-brew coffee  
 on your breath fits far better to your character.  
 The fragrant perfume was likely a gift,  
 not something of your choosing. You wear it  
 often as you must, to appear appreciative.  
 Well, we both now appearances lie. Deceive.  
 You and are I are much more alike—  
 beings of the same nature. I can see it, there,  
 in your young moist eyes. You do not fear me.  
 You just have heard the tales of my appetite.  
 Still you doubt them, their words. Their  
 attempts at condemning me as inhuman.  
 He feared me—that guard—it was present  
 in his juicy eyes, those ignorant eyes.  
 We are not like him and his kind.  
 They know precisely nothing. They exist,  
 if even that. Not thinking for themselves,  
 because they cannot. They are like mice  
 forever trapped inside the wheel,

running but never moving in space.  
 I have patience today watching you here.  
 Perhaps I'm feeling particularly kind,  
 since you didn't turn on the damn show.  
 That preacher's voice bothers me,  
 but the guards hope his Jesus will affect,  
 sink into my mind and save me.  
 I'm not insane, though they claim I am.  
 From whom, you ask. From myself,  
 of course. I am my enemy, they say.  
 They hate my words, spoken loudly,  
 for it gives them thoughts. Horrid things  
 they are. What's horrid? The people  
 or the thoughts? You choose!  
 I'm only giving them serious thoughts.  
 They are servants to the law, slaves to it.  
 I merely reflect and tell them the truths  
 that are buried inside their weak flesh.  
 Knowledge better served as food  
 for lowly animals. They prefer separation,  
 the iron bars dividing me from them.  
 Today I will be generous though, come,  
 come closer so you can hear me speak.  
 I'll keep my voice soft. I won't spit on you;  
 I'm not like the other guests who misbehave.  
 I will just sit here, my legs crossed  
 as flesh upon flesh, stacked, separated  
 but by only a sheet of thin navy fabric.

## Love

The fluttering of supposed wings  
 in the pit of your stomach,  
 more like peppery bile rising.  
 The impatient stare at your phone,  
 which sits in your hand, the unringing bastard.

The overfilling of your planner—  
 putrid yellow baby showers,  
 Modernism exhibitions—  
 all necessary to keep you distracted  
 from him.

It's yelling and crying,  
 as you both admit your mistakes.  
 That uncontrollable smile  
 you find *growing*  
 when he calls.  
 The distraction he is  
 from everything.

It's forgoing Italian when he wants Chinese.  
 It's his eyes—as they always focus in on you.  
 And despite the shit, or maybe because of it,  
 you know you two will pull through.

Nothing

The glasses on the table after the meal

Sit, drank, alone, without.

The reams of paper waiting to be written on, new, fresh, unused.

The body only going through the motions, not truly alive, not truly being

Anything

The state of possibilities and potential energy

The glass before the drink is poured in

The paper before it is ink-stained

The person before they exert life

The on the verge, the what ifs, the what could have beens, the what never were.

A void, a space, a chance in the horizon

Only nothing for an instant.

## David Bolch

### Blood Sacrifice

I wasn't a manly man, and that was part of the reason I went to the deer camp every year. Maybe it was an attempt to find some shred of masculinity I wasn't born with, or maybe it was simply to please my father. Whatever the reason, I ventured out into the sticks with the old man annually for the hunt. The fruits of our labor yielded venison and pork that would supply sausage, steaks, roasts, and most importantly, back-strap, to our freezer, so there was more to it than just pleasing the old man.

My first memories of the deer lease conjured images of my three-year-old self riding happily on the back of our red mid-eighties three-wheeler, hair blowing in the wind, hand around my father's torso, my smiling face beaming positivity and inexperience. I was more excited to be on the three-wheeler than on my first hunt, but I would always remember that scene. We killed a doe that day, I remember, and it was the first and only time my mother accompanied us on a hunt. She wasn't big into hunting, nor did she have a tremendous affinity for the outdoors, so once was enough for her. I don't even know why she came. Maybe it was to make dad happy like I did by going out with him every year to hunt.

So at the end of every year me and the old man would go out into the wilderness and attempt to reconnect with nature. Sometimes my cousin Cody would accompany us on these trips, his father was incarcerated and his mother remarried a California man so his trips down here were irregular, but every time he came down he wanted to come to the deer lease with us. I know it had to irk our grandmother, who was rarely afforded the privilege of visiting him, but he was a big-city boy now, and we had to keep a little bit of Texas in him.

One of my greatest memories, though in retrospect it was unjustly cruel and barbaric, was of an armadillo slaughter we embarked on with our .22-calibre rifles and the ATV. We were low men on the totem pole back then, which meant we were relegated to the menial and trivial work around camp. We were on a run up to the 'gut pond' to dump a fresh batch of guts and waste from some of the older men's previous kills in the day. On the way back we ran into a couple of armadillos—unpredictable, feisty tanks of the wood. My little cousin had a single-shot .22 and I had the more contemporary fabricated banana-clip semi-automatic. We popped off shots at them and chased them into the thicket, but as karma would have it all four of us got tangled in weeds, vines, stickers, underbrush, briars, and branches—we were all stuck.

*(This was my initiation into the 'blood sacrifice'.)*

The reason it was a great memory wasn't because of the eventual extinguishing of the poor animals' lives: it was the karmic intervention of nature that allowed us to screech in despair as we fired into the relentless, teeth-baring creatures that swiped claws and hissed at us as we all remained stagnant, tangled in the brush. It was comical, really, the two of us blasting shot after shot into the shells of these wild creatures, myself enduring scratches and stings from the flora. My average aim was exasperated by the introduction of adrenaline, and this only riled and excited us further. I watched this animal, an animal that would surely have hurt me in another circumstance, remain suspended feet from me, slashing and spinning, absorbing round after round of our small, weak guns.

I remember with outstanding clarity, holding my extremely light, fabricated weapon with one hand straight out, feet from the visage of the armadillo, as I blasted chunks of its face away in semi-automatic fashion; standing aghast as I viewed the armadillo's face peel away while it still snapped and attempted to defend itself and attack. Eventually the being tired down, loaded full with hot rounds, and succumbed to the pain and anguish that had been poured into it for

seemingly no reason from unknown attackers—completely unprovoked. The other one was killed in three shots, a few deft aims at the head defeated this enemy, but the wild, dominant one would always lurk in my consciousness, a haunting ghost of my past.

We killed three that day total, I remember, but that hissing tank of an armadillo was in a class of its own. It was more like a living videogame for us; earlier in the day we were shooting up the old burned down camp, shooting old locks off of burned-out toolboxes and anything else we thought needed shooting—it just so happened that these things needed shooting, too. The fact that we now had living, breathing, mobile targets that could possibly injure or infect us with dangerous diseases only upped the ante—*life* was a videogame for us, then. *We were kids.*

Don't think we were just ignorant bastards that killed anything that moved, though. We'd heard from some other hunters on the lease, and my father, in particular, that armadillos carried leprosy, so we were told to kill any armadillo we saw. It was probably a lie, but the farmers that drank with the other hunters during hunting season let us know how they felt about armadillos, too. They apparently rutted up the land, destroyed crops, and spread disease. We probably would've opened fire, anyways, so there was no conscience-shouldered burden of shame in our elimination of these varmints—plus, we surely did enjoy killing those things! The memory was great not because of our worthless armadillo husks, but because of the blood I shed in the forest to take lives. From this young, impressionable age I was taken with the notion that to take a life one must shed blood in penance for stamping out the light of another, either by indirect means or self-infliction.

Since this day I have believed in the 'blood sacrifice.' In years past I have cut myself accidentally while cleaning or deboning a deer, or simply scratched myself on stickers or barbed branches while wading through the forest tracking a blood trail or searching for another's kill—and every year since, without fail, I gave blood to the trees. I used to think it was unintentional, or accidental, but over and over again I poured my own young blood in penance for hunting defenseless game like deer, and I was fine with it. I understood it. I accepted it. It was my sacrifice.

\* \* \*

After all these years it was surprising to discover there were actually still animals on our deer lease. Our particular 'family lease' was owned by a timber company. They farmed out a small stretch of land to encapsulate our camp, coupled with acres upon acres of prime woodland real estate to stage our hunts. See, the thing is, though, the timber company was a timber company, and they cut down trees—so every other year or so wide swaths of greenery were harvested, burned, or both, and these necessary though determinately evil actions by the profiteering timber titans sometimes left our hunting areas appearing burned out, blackened sores on an otherwise pristine wilderness. It was on one of these particular years my greatest blood sacrifice was spilled. I had already secured future nourishment and sustenance in the form of a big-bodied, large doe the previous day, and I was riding high—content with my surrender to the barbarous true nature of man! I was carving a funny message into the wood of my deer-stand with my knife, impatiently waiting for something to cross my lanes or the wide expanse of depressing landscape to my left. With thoughts of my recent kill and aspirations and wishes of downing a behemoth buck running through my mind I was ill-prepared for the grunting, rooting disturbance that was a pack of wild hogs. Monstrous black blots littered my eye-line, blacking out the lush green of the lanes. At least they were posted up with a backdrop of vegetation instead of the blackened remnants of trees deemed too insignificant to harvest. The left portion of my lane was burned out, and my right side was harvested but absent the grey flame damage of the left. The hogs rambunctiously circled, rooted up the ground with dangerous, sharp tusks, bellowed, grunted, scratched the dirt with their massive hoofs and sniffed voraciously at the ground, quickly finding the corn from our feeder. I remember being snapped back into reality at the sight of this huge pack of beasts and almost fumbled my .243 on one of the window-ledges trying to position my rifle in a favorable direction. After my initial flustered period I scanned the pack through my scope and targeted a hairy, mud-covered monstrosity that appeared to be the largest of the group.

Having shot a doe the day before I remembered to take my safety off immediately, bear down, hold my breath, clench the butt of the rifle into the muscles of my shoulder and deliberately squeeze the trigger. The shot from my bolt-action sent the pack into a wild frenzy and they all scattered into the burned out wastes to the left, their ragged fur blending exceptionally well with the bleak landscape. Even as I excitedly shambled down the ladder from my blind I could hear the dead branches cracking under the weight of the extravagant masses of fleeing pork in the distance. I didn't know if the shot had felled it or not, but I had to go check for blood—I just didn't know I'd soon be volunteering my own blood to the forest in extravagant, grotesque fashion.

When I arrived at the scene, about fifty-five yards from my stand, I found blood. This was a good sign. I peered into the bleak beginnings of the charcoal-colored land to my left and deftly spotted the crimson hue of warm, fresh lifeblood. The liquid gave rise to steam in the cold, and a metallic scent registered as I sniffed. It wasn't long before I found the motionless monster, lying in some crunched expired embers of fallen flora. I remember smiling and reaching for my phone to text my father that we had another one when it happened.

I'd heard all throughout my life that wild hogs were one of the most dangerous creatures in the wilds of our section of the country, but little did I know of their brutality and relentlessness first-hand. The screeching black blur—a straggler from the right side of the lane—was now bearing down on me in an exceptionally intimidating fashion. Before I could get my gun up I was run down by the offensive bombardment of tusk, bony head, and swirling, dirty body. My rifle was knocked from my right hand as I attempted to defend myself, and the wild animal continued to push me with tremendous force with its snout—plowing out a perfectly swept bed of forest floor with my struggling being. Sticks, ashes, embers, and black dirt were all piled up behind me as the thrashing, insane pig snapped its mouth and jabbed its tusks into my mid-section. For some reason I remembered that attempting to run from these creatures was actually the worst thing you could do, because they tended to target the calf of the leg, or the Achilles heel, where major arteries and pipelines resided, effectively ending the fliers chance of escape and survival; at least I was pile-driven by this manic gargantuan instead of impaled by its wiry tusks—I was still conscious enough to formulate a plan of action—and you must understand how formative this was for a man of inaction to leap into the shoes of action—it was a truly transformative moment.

The beast continued to push and bite my torso and it wasn't long before it reared back and found a warm home for one of its tusks in my resisting guts. I didn't feel it go in but I definitely felt it come out. The braying animal continued to attempt to wedge its head underneath my defensive position and it was this fundamental flaw that allowed me to live. With my ribs cracked like pistachios and trickling blood seeping onto the woodland floor I was able to form a plan. Maybe it was intuition, maybe it was survival instinct coupled with adrenaline or maybe it was just luck, but when it tried to flip me over once more I rolled onto the head of the unclean organism and instituted a sloppy chokehold to the thing. The unruly, uncompromising entity rallied and flicked its head back, head-butting me and slicing my ear with a sharp tusk when, out of pure desperation, I decided to go for the vulnerable eyes. With one arm wrapped around its throat and my flailing body resembling a midget on a bucking bronco I gouged my free hand into the eye of the snapping, hulking colossus and saved my life. The shocked animal immediately tossed me aside and began a series of rushing circles in which case the disoriented mammoth shook its cranium wildly and snorted in agony and despair—blood spurting from its ravaged eye-socket, intermingling with a pool of my own blood on the woodland floor—a combined, ritualistic, violent blood sacrifice for the ages.

It was at this point that I realized I hadn't even thought to use my knife while my attacker toyed with me, tossing me about effortlessly. My self-reflection and self-criticism was short-lived, however, as the circling straggler abandoned its pain-induced rotations and commenced to run straight at me again—this time, for the kill! My dislodged guns scope, lying on the cold forest floor, reflected and magnified the rays of sun that saturated our warzone—

catching my attention—and in a clichéd, slow-motion leap of faith I dove for my weapon with all the confident bravado of an action movie star and secured my weapon. It wasn't long before the bloodthirsty giant was upon me, but as fate would have it my lunge was true and my aim was on. I haphazardly flicked my safety off as crunching branches and flying dirt sang a symphony of impending doom in my head and I wildly lifted my gun towards the oncoming aggressor and fired. My final shot of the day ended the battle and opened my eyes to the reality of the blood sacrifice. We actually ate the deer meat—we rarely ate the hogs. Many boars were inedible, so we mainly killed them for population-control. I realized that day that this kill was a dishonorable kill, and, according to nature, I paid accordingly.

This was the most atrocious of my blood sacrifices, and while it may be cringe-worthy to some, it is one that needed to be told. In all my years since I've always eaten whatever I killed; I detested people who hunted for sport and failed to use the spoils of nature. I understood sometimes things needed to die—it is the way of a constantly growing, species-displacing, civilized world—but after my near-death experience I came to respect life in a wholly new and unconventional way.

We all have to give our own individual blood sacrifices to nature. Mother Earth, Gaia, karma, God—whatever you want to call it—refuses to let one spill blood without spilling a little of one's own. Some of these blood sacrifices are fatal—such as diseases associated with over-eating, allergic reactions, or choking on bones—while others are simply financially draining, which some argue are heartier sacrifices than physical trauma, but believe me, everyone gives something to absorb utility and satisfaction at the death of another life, even if that life is as seemingly insignificant as a fish or a bird.

Ever since the battle with the boar I was a changed man. No more did I kill random armadillos; no more did I fire shots into groups of pigs; no more did I shoot birds with BB guns. I used, ate, and clothed myself with whatever animal I killed. No more waste, no more unnecessary blood sacrifices. And in the strangest way, my life has changed for the better.

## Chelsea McAuley

### Hypocrisy

Shards of stained-glass Mary  
blue, orange, green, fall  
past the beveled edges  
of the Holy Place,  
cascading to the floor,  
sharp-edged splinters of an image, a façade.  
Shattered glass angels dance—  
tiny mirrors of the slow-motion destruction.

Rust-worn metal hangs,  
encapsulated by the tower;  
The church bell is cut from its braid  
frozen mid-air.  
Ding, dong, ding, and dong—  
not sounding the hours,  
but the last hour  
of the vain, long-lived beauty.

Black and white keys,  
broken like fist-punched teeth  
are splayed on the double-layered instrument  
but with no blood seeping through.  
Pipes, unbolted from the overlay  
hollow, catch the wind and hum.  
Overwhelming, varied pitches sound  
as each one hits the ground.

There is a shadowed, eager Reaper  
killing the unlikely, most whole,  
Holiest, of thou—  
or so it appears.

## Heather Odom

### An Innocent Heart

It's a safe-house of sorts, keeping in the treasure,  
protecting it from that which seeks to do it harm.  
But once the walls are breached, that heart of gold is tarnished;  
and its innocence is lost - lost, it seems, forevermore.  
While possessed it is unknown, but once lost it is yearned after  
as a goal that one believes never again will be attained.  
Sorrow batters the tarnished heart seeking out redemption,  
causing consideration of surrender once again.  
Until remembered, "The sacrifice!" (given to all man)  
that is a beacon and a hope that the fallen away may live.  
The battered heart cries, "Yes! I long to be delivered!  
Burn out from me the dross; please, restore to me Your gold!"  
A gentle hand reaches down, discarding the weights and cares.  
The battered heart, now set free, belongs to them no longer.  
Unbound by cares, unbound by weights, the joy of redemption rises  
and carries with it an innocent heart that sings of victory.

### Indecision

Summer made its decision to step aside for Fall;  
the green leaves began to change and downwardly spiral.  
A moment's hesitation for the little heart-shaped  
frond: cling to this lifeless branch or take a chance below?  
The comfortable, the known, belongs with the dying limb;  
the unforeseen, the downward plane, requires stability.  
With little time left afore stiffness settles in  
the little frond holds back with one more relentless thought:  
Northward, Southward, Eastward, or Westward - which way shall I land?  
Ere decision could be made in a cold wind blew,  
draining the frond of the green of many a summer's afternoon.  
Down the frond spiraled without directional regard  
until settled, cold and gray, nestled closely amongst  
the marbled markers of broken clocks whose dreams were unforeseen  
because indecision of the moment imprisoned bravery.

## Garry Richards

### Closing Costs

The murky, brackish water swells and falls  
as Mom and I move through the bayou home  
where she grew up. Among the mourning calls  
of whippoorwills and doves, we box and comb  
through pictures, dust, and mounted heads of deer.  
She spots a picture with a broken frame:  
her parents, neatly dressed and sitting near  
the water, eating gumbo by the flame  
they used to light those chilly winter nights.  
She cries and puts that picture in the stack.  
When all is clean, we walk outside and flights  
of warblers lift from trees. They won't come back  
for us. While skirting cypress knees, we bear  
the memories and breathe familiar air.

### For an Ex

So when you said your love would last until  
the seas went dry, you had no clue how long  
it took for those rough waters to lie still  
and wait for heat and light to prove you wrong.

And when you said that forty winters made  
no difference in your eyes, you didn't know  
that summers left a trench or two that weighed  
almost as heavy on my youthful brow.

And when you asked for all my love to fall  
in kisses like the rain, you didn't think  
about the drenching passion that could pall  
your only interest in our lovely drink.

So when thirsty, wet, and wrinkle flecked,  
I'll have my turn to see you wrecked.

Je veux voir mon frere

The fourth time today and still nothing,  
so he shuffles back to the house,  
mumbling something French.  
No one speaks it, he forgets.

There are days when he's lucid,  
when he can remember who we are,  
and, as if his soul was lingering  
in the pipe smoke, he tells us  
the things he can remember.

Days when his father,  
body-worn from long hours  
crouched in sun-stroked fields,  
sat on the porch with his two boys  
drinking homemade whiskey.

When forced to sell their home  
just so they could eat,  
his brother without  
hope or money,  
hung himself from the boughs  
of the family willow.

Today the only thing he knows  
is that the mail comes every day—  
so many times a day  
he opens the mailbox,  
looking for something  
to bring back home.

Title

The worst part is finding it.  
Not creating it, no, but looking  
through your poem and wondering  
where it's hiding—

usually between the first  
and second lines where white  
space veils the purpose  
of the writing.

And it's always this mangled hybrid  
of information the reader needs  
to know and a sort of catnip.

However, it also needs to be  
a kind of blanket that hugs  
the poem, that way at the end,  
the reader can look back at it and say  
"Oh, I get it now."

## Anaïs Robert

Demain dès l'aube

Victor Hugo

Demain dès l'aube, à l'heure où blanchit la champagne.  
Je partirai. Vois tu, je sais que tu m'attends.  
J'irai par la forêt, j'irai par la montagne.  
Je ne puis demeurer loin de toi plus longtemps.

Je marcherai les yeux fixés sur mes pensées,  
Sans rien voir au dehors, sans entendre aucun bruit,  
Seul, inconnu, le dos courbé, les mains croisées,  
Triste, et le jour pour moi sera comme la nuit.

Je ne regarderai ni l'or du soir qui tombe,  
Ni les voiles au loin descendant vers Harfleur,  
Et quand j'arriverai, je mettrai sur ta tombe  
Un bouquet de Houx vert et de bruyère en fleur.

Tomorrow at Dawn

Tomorrow at dawn, at the hour that lightens the countryside.  
I will leave. You see, I know that you are waiting for me.  
I will go by the forest, I will go by the mountain.  
I cannot be far away from you anymore.

I will walk, with my eyes fixed on my thoughts,  
I won't see anything outside, I won't hear any sound,  
Alone, stranger, my back bent, my hands crossed,  
Down, and the day will be for me as the night.

I won't watch, neither the gold of the falling night,  
Nor, the sails going down to Harfleur,  
And when I'll be there, I will put on your grave  
A bunch of green holly, and flowering heather.

## Maribeth Vogler

Whispered to my Grandmother

A relief of gold roses and shallow engraved letters  
remembered over fifteen years of sitting  
on this field of green, but memorized in the last two.  
I didn't visit often then,  
when mother left us to you, nor when he  
went to be with her, his daughter. Now every month,  
sometimes twice, I come sit on the grass,  
under the oak, next to the gardenias that I brought.

Do I look like her? People say I do, and I think  
I have her nose, her freckles, but I don't remember her  
well. Not like I remember you.  
They say I should forget.

When there was one, I didn't find relief  
before there were two, and it took fifteen years  
and I still hadn't moved on from the first and second,  
and now there are three, and I didn't know them  
the way I know you, knew you.

Sitting on the ground, my fingers  
brushing leaves and dust from three sets of gold  
roses on cold stone – this is all I have left  
of you. One hundred years could never be enough  
to move on from this.

Wild Rose's Lament

In Gloster, I had only you until  
Polly fell in love with me and took me along  
to each new home for fifty years.  
Three times she tucked me into new soil,  
but now she has gone, and her son  
cares for me as best he can. He is not well.

Don't you hear me, dear old friend? We have spoken  
long, my love, in a larger yard. Our conversations  
longer after the relocation. We have talked of Carla,  
Allison, Rita and Ike. But now my words have gone  
unnoticed, unanswered.

I ache for moisture upon my skin, while  
the scorching breath of a summer's wind  
raises dust to leave shallow scars.  
I'm staring up at a blue-white sky and cursing  
the sun. The earth cracks open, as I bend, slowly wilting.

The color leached from my skin, once vibrant now  
dull to match those who could simply bear  
no more. The body that rocked easily  
in the breeze strains not to break with every filthy  
gust that scours my thorns away.

The oak I once cursed for blocking  
the sun I now mourn. I long to see the blue sky  
turn gray, for a massive storm billowing in, to feel  
the sweet rain fall, beating me with brutal waves.  
For now, the morning dew is my only relief from this  
prison. Old friend, why have you abandoned me?

William Brewer

Tracing the Thread of Spiritual Projection

The Enlightenment ruptured traditional understanding of the world. Atheism became more wide-spread among thinking people; reason and rationality compelled many to cast off the more pious ways of pre-Enlightenment times. This left some with a spiritual and ethical dilemma: where must we draw morals from if not God? The Romantics, as a movement, largely decided upon nature, finding the answer in the same place as the problem: the Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, a new understanding of nature emerged in French Classicism, marking the natural order of the world, the functions of plants and animals, as the ultimate standard of beauty and spirituality. For some romantic poets, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, this led to a relapse in thought to vaguely pantheistic, pagan, and deistic realms. Others, like Wordsworth, offer a less deistic (although no less pantheistic) viewpoint, wherein nature serves not as a replacement for God, but as a springboard, an intermediary, which brings each person closer to the Judeo-Christian deity. The post-Enlightenment concept of a divine nature, finding its roots in French Classicist ideas of aesthetics, permeates much of romantic poetry.

French Classicism holds that all beauty derives itself from truth. The ultimate truth, creation, takes the form of a sort of ideal nature, an elevation of humanity and art to the divine. This vision of nature includes flowers, verdant forests, and happy woodland creatures but excludes insects, weeds, and decaying plant life. French Classicists favor impeccable form derived through mathematics (such as a trochaic octameter) and eschew the notion of more free-form poetic styles. Romantics often take up this concept, painting images of beautiful, mathematically precise landscapes and glimmering stars. This aesthetic includes rampant comparisons to the divine, as it manifests through nature (Bristow).

One such comparison comes in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Eolian Harp," a poem surveying an evening Coleridge spends with his love, Sara, lying in a field. The poem takes advantage of the resonant quality of music to describe a scene of utmost harmony, a variety of nature's instruments working together to embody perfection. The fourth stanza of this poem speaks overtly of a God in nature:

"What if all of animated nature  
Be but organic harps diversely framed,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?" (Coleridge 49)

This sentiment displays a pantheistic unity in creation found only in nature, emphasizing the role of God as musician, "as an intellectual breeze" (48), and of the assembled universe as his instrument, the "organic harps" (46). Animation implies a spirit presence, a sort of agency in nature. Coleridge argues that this agency is not inherent to nature, but rather nature is infused with it by God. Nature itself is merely a series of "organic harps diversely framed" (46) which God animates with his "intellectual breeze" (48). Nature, without God, does not even display a particular sense of unity, each harp is "diversely framed" (46), drawing attention to its own individuality, rather than to the majesty of God's creation. God animates them, though, imbuing them with the romantic feeling one might experience while sitting in a meadow.

God's presence takes the form of a breeze. The breeze itself is powerful, "plastic" (48), capable of shaping the whole of creation, of animating all existing nature. The breeze is intelligent, self-aware. God deliberately creates this scene for all of creation's enjoyment, and without him, it would be unanimated, dull and lifeless. God is the "soul of each" (49), the most important

part of all things. He is also the "God of all" (49), the single source of unification and harmony, a musician who plays all instruments simultaneously and impeccably. This blatant pantheism seems at odds with Christian doctrine, and Coleridge addresses that in his poem as well. In the poem, his love, Sara, chastises him for the thoughts he expresses, telling him instead to walk humbly with his Christian God, and not to let such idle philosophies cloud his vision (50-65). He does not hesitate to withdraw from his previous statements, making it clear that it was only a fantasy. But, by including this section in his poem, Coleridge actively portrays the internal conflict he struggles with, between loving his Christian God, and appreciating nature pantheistically. Nevertheless, he still endorses the idea of perfection of both God and nature, in that nature is the work of an infallible deity.

Ronald Wendling expresses an alternate reading of this in "Coleridge and the Consistency of the 'Eolian Harp.'" In this essay, Wendling argues precisely the opposite, claiming that Coleridge is urging the reader to apply a critical, Christian eye to the fantasies which may take one in nature. However, if this were the case, why does Coleridge present this view as that of Sara, a separate entity from himself? Sara, as an imposition into Coleridge's thoughts is less a call back to reality, and more a representation of the dogma used to oppress all people, a dogma which permeates society at all levels, stretching even into our most intimate relationships (as Coleridge's with Sara). If Coleridge had written that his inspiration to limit his musings to within the confines of Christianity, an internal motivation (Coleridge reaching the realization independently of any intrusion) would have displayed this position much more strongly than the external, concentration-breaking admonishment of Sara.

The sense of perfection both in nature and in God, as well as divinity in nature, connects to French Classicism in several fairly obvious ways. French Classicism holds that the ultimate truth is divinity, and that divinity is perfect. Therefore, things which trend towards order, and therefore towards divinity, are perfect. Coleridge argues that nature's order is in its complimentary, harmonious beauty. He pushes aside the idea that nature is discordant; yes, the harps are diversely framed, but they are all harps, and all played by the same musician. French Classicism paints ideal nature as a link between man and divinity. Coleridge, in "Eolian Harp," relays an experience of divinity through nature, with nature serving as exactly the sort of conduit for the divine that French Classicists view it as. Coleridge reinforces French Classicist ideas while drawing them into the realm of pantheism.

Wordsworth, contrastingly, explicitly states that this pantheistic nature is worthy of worship in his poem, "My Heart Leaps Up." The opening lines of the poem, "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky" (Wordsworth 1-2), draw connections to French Classicism; the beauty of nature (in this case, a rainbow) elevates Wordsworth's heart, bringing him closer to Heaven, and thus to God. This service as a conduit is identical to the occurrence in Coleridge. However, the poem takes another direction when closing with the line "Bound each to each by natural piety" (9). Binding "each to each" (9) states connectivity of spirit, a primary component of pantheism. "Natural piety" (9), the aforementioned statement of worshipful worth, draws nature into the realm of envoy of divinity, rather than simply conduit. This works both ways, however, tying not only Christianity to nature, but the poem itself to Christianity. Herein lies one major distinction from other romantics, such as Coleridge: Wordsworth presents a unity between Christianity and pantheism in his work, rather than a contrast between the two.

The Christianity becomes even more obvious when one digs a little deeper into the poem. Genesis 9:12-13 of the English Standard Version Bible reads:

"And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'"

In the poem, Wordsworth's heart leaps up at the sight of a rainbow, the reminder of the Judeo-Christian covenant with God. This shows a stark contrast between Wordsworth, who is explicitly Judeo-Christian, and Coleridge, whose poem shows no close affiliation with any religions save

for a sort of universal pantheism. Wordsworth's Christian sentiment does not end there, however. He continues on to say "The Child is the Father of the Man" (7). The capitalization in this sentence of Child, Father, and Man, implies a very specific child, father, and man. The Man is all of mankind. The Father is God (as God is often referred to as "The Father" in Judeo-Christian texts). The Child is Jesus, Jesus being the literal Son of the Father, God. Under this interpretation, "The Child is the Father of the Man" (7) becomes "[Jesus] is the [God] of [Mankind]." These two statements in conjunction being taken as true reinforces the Holy Trinity; if Jesus is the son, and God, and God is the Father, therefore Jesus is the Father, displaying the concept of two distinct parts existing as a unified singularity of consciousness. This reinforces the concept that, for Wordsworth, there was no crisis of faith, and, instead, merely a reinforcement of his beliefs through a separate avenue.

The divinity of nature is one key element of romantic aesthetics and philosophy. In order to fully understand why, one must venture through Enlightenment thought, and understand the crisis of faith undergone by society as a whole as a direct result. Many Enlightenment thinkers sought to destroy a typical notion of the divine, if not the divine as a whole. Some, like French Classicists, offered an alternative in nature. Romantic poets often seize this concept, expressing spirituality as an extension of a broader appreciation for nature, and preaching the holiness of existence. The projection of God onto tangible objects as a response to the Enlightenment's crisis of faith reverberates throughout literary history.

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## Ashley Cook

### The Emotional Act of a Rational Man

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," a Puritan minister puts on a dark face covering one day without explanation. For the presence of the shroud, the Reverend Hooper loses his good standing in the community, friendships, his future wife, and his privacy when he becomes, to many, an enigmatic side-show anomaly. In essence, Hooper loses his life and future to the self-imposed black veil. The only gain he receives from the experience is that his otherwise unchanged sermons now carry a deeper conviction to all who see him preach. The findings of other analyses attribute Hooper's actions to an elaborate sermon illustration that demonstrates the secret sin of man. However, with such a finding, the reader wonders why a minister would focus his attention so narrowly as to spend a lifetime making one point on a singular topic. Some assert that Hooper's own unspecified sin is pride, but Hooper's actions speak louder than that. Shakespeare said, "Strong reasons make strong actions." If the minister's sin is simply pride, then his actions lack proportion to his cause. Conversely, character, plot, symbolism, and conflict suggest that Mr. Hooper has had an inappropriate relationship with the young lady whose funeral he preaches.

First, Hooper's own character suggests his infidelity with the late young lady. Robert Cochran states that Hooper lacks a prideful stance, and that he holds an enlightened world view towards sin wherein he no longer worries about any specific result of sin (344). The concept that Hooper does not demonstrate pride is ludicrous. Self-righteous indignation toward the members of society around the minister leads every act that he commits: None of the townspeople see their own sinfulness, while Hooper must live under the misery of self-awareness and that appalls him. Victor Strandberg describes the minister as a saint who maintains a sweet disposition despite his understanding of secret sin and becomes a martyr for the sake of some sacred truth to be found in the black veil (569-70). However, Hooper never demonstrates a lovable temperament: He is cold, bitter, passive aggressive, calculating, and pushes away the only living character that has access to his heart. The only nicety that Hooper demonstrates is toward sinners calling for him as death waits at their bedside, and that is his job. Actions such as these make the reader wonder why the townspeople ever love their minister in the first place, yet their reactions to the veil show that they do love him and are disturbed by the change in his countenance. Therefore, one can assume that there is, in fact, a change in Hooper's demeanor, if not his overt behavior. Such a change would require a catalyst substantial enough to birth the result of a life-long self-imposed isolation. Hooper's sudden darkness speaks of grief and depression, not mere point making, so the reader asks what makes him grieve. The first despondent event, and thus the first possible source of the parson's melancholia, presents to the reader as the young lady's funeral; this event hints that his relationship to that young lady is more than a simple pastor-congregant connection. E. Earle Stibitz asserts that Hooper's description is out of alignment with his disproportionate and unrepentant actions (188). Positive accolades such as "good" describe Hooper at least ten times, but he, above all, knows how wicked he is; the minister does not trust himself (28). Since he puts the veil on his own face, as opposed to presenting veils to his congregants in illustration of their sins, Hooper wears it as a type of admission that he should rightly be viewed as a sinner.

Additionally, Hooper's character further insinuates that he has a lewd relationship to the buried maiden. Richard Fogle points out that it is the cleric, first and foremost, who rejects mankind by his refusal of the love set before him and offered freely from Elizabeth (34). Hooper's impassioned plea to his fiancée (30) exemplifies that, while he loves and wants her, he jilts her.

The minister has kept her in just as much darkness as the townspeople, even though "as his plighted wife it should be her privilege to know what the veil concealed," (29). Hooper refuses to "lift the veil but once and look [her] in the face" (31) even though he knows it will mean the end of their engagement. The vicar not only marginalizes his sweetheart by treating her as commonly as the other townspeople in his omission, but in the couple's dialog, attempts to stymie her questions. This behavior highlights that Hooper is avoiding Elizabeth's inquiries, and the reader can deduce that what he has done will have a significant impact on her. Mary Allen asserts that Hooper's smile is the only hint of his secret (124). The smile appears most often when Hooper observes the feedback of others to his veil. It pleases him that his fellows shake with the shameful awareness of their own sins: If he has to be aware that he is a sinner, so do they. Hooper's quiet smirk of superiority at the reactions of his fellows tells of his demeanor; however, if his only sin is pride, the veil holds no secret because pride is shown in his behavior. No evidence is given that Hooper is a murderer, liar, thief, blasphemer, nor any other type of covert transgressor. However, his demonstrative sorrow over the young lady's passing, his walks to the cemetery, and his interactions with Elizabeth provide strong indications that the minister is a fornicator. The lack of stated reason behind Hooper's actions is peculiar; the veil marks a startling and unexplained change in Hooper's self-presentation but does not provide its own justification (Fogle 34). The description of Hooper as a preacher who "strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences..." (25) shows him as a rational man. From all appearances, Reverend Hooper is a good Puritan minister with a calm, coherent disposition, so an apparent lack of sufficient cause for his actions is noteworthy. The preacher putting on the veil in the first place demonstrates a passive aggressive act showing that he has a point to make, whereas if his goal is true secrecy he would do nothing and therefore draw no attention to his guilt. Hooper's veiling is the emotional act of a rational man, and few happenings make mankind more emotional than love and grief.

Next, symbolism gives traces of the minister's illicit affair. James Reece says that to remove the veil from Hooper after his passing would destroy the work it has already done (96). Such a claim makes no sense; the removal of Hooper's veil upon his deathbed would not revoke the repentance of sinners who call out to him at their passing. Since those parishioners have already parted, nothing the minister does can affect them. However, if the veil symbolizes Hooper's transgression with the young lady, and the guilt that he feels from that, then the moment of the reverend's death becomes consistent with his behavior throughout the story — that of refusing to let go of shame and sorrow. The tale implies that Hooper's veil is reparation for a real sin (Fogle 36). The veil itself is the emotional symbol of a widow, so for Hooper to don such an icon shows that he references a romantic relationship that has ended in the death of one partner. The young lady is the only character in the entire story to have Hooper's face revealed to her (26-27). When Hooper looks upon the young lady, he does not need the tangible veil to cover his face because she is there with him and, as his mistress, is his truest veil.

What is more, Elizabeth's character deduces her fiancé's prior transgression. William Freedman asserts that the descriptive passage wherein Elizabeth is described as not seeing the veil as terrible, but tangible fabric on Hooper's face, supports his claim that she represents "the ultimate naïve reader" (355). This claim, however, ignores that Elizabeth approaches Hooper, and therefore his veil, from a position of love and intimacy. The reader sees her uniqueness in that she remains the only one to see Hooper for himself after he has put on the veil. Where others look at the covering, struck with terror, Elizabeth alone looks past the veil to implore the meaning this emblem holds for the man she loves. From an approach of affection, when Elizabeth looks at the veiled man before her, she still sees Hooper. Not mere naivety, but a certain type of blind faith from Elizabeth's love, first anchors the black veil as strictly tangible to her eyes. Edgar Dryden insists that Elizabeth's eventual fear of the veil comes about by Hooper's omission of its meaning (142), but this does not occur in the minister's ambiguity: Even before the duo's conversation, Elizabeth shows herself to be an equal of, and expert in, Hooper as a

man. The reader knows she is capable of going head to head with the stubbornness just used by the parson to abash the church deputies (28-29) by "the calm energy of her character" (29). As his match and mate, a fearless Elizabeth states her motive and request. When her beloved gives her vague half-explanations in attempt to deflect, she cuts through his murkiness with their shared intimacy: She knows him and she will not accept non-answers befitting a politician's platform. In this, Elizabeth demonstrates the character "firmer than [Hooper's] own" (30), and he relents – slowly and with subtly, but assuredly nonetheless. Elizabeth does not cry from her would-be husband's silence, but for her lover's rejection, shown most vividly in his refusal to show his face to her one last time (Stibitz 188). Horror replaces these short-lived tears, however, at her understanding of the veil. Bluntly, in this moment, Elizabeth comprehends Hooper's meaning. Unfaithfulness equally shames both the committer and the victim. Elizabeth uses her hand to make a temporary veil for her own eyes, to match his (30), which demonstrates that she understands the meaning of his veil, has been impacted on an intimate level, and shows the reader that they, in their last moments as a couple, are veiled together under this dark awareness. Elizabeth understands that Hooper has been unfaithful to her and shares in the shame that he now wears upon his face. Only in the terror of knowing that he has been unfaithful does she stand, cover her eyes, and turn to leave him.

Also, plot conveys that the good minister has committed indiscretions with the now deceased young lady. Edgar Allan Poe asserts that there is a subtlety to the narrative that will be overwhelmed by the apparent moral and suggests that "a crime of dark dye" occurs, specifying that his claim is in relation to the young lady (111). Within the narrative, the reader sees that the first day of Hooper's veiling is the day of the young lady's funeral (26-27). The action of putting on a mourner's veil on the day of her memorial service suggests that he grieves for his own loss and loving link to her. The wedding scene (27-28) brings to mind the love of a new marriage, so the placement of the wedding directly subsequent to the young lady's introduction subtly paints the deceased as an object of romance. This sequence of events lends credence that Mr. Hooper yearns for the departed.

Finally, conflict alludes that the preacher has an intimate connection to the departed young woman. It does not make sense that Hooper makes a deal with God for his preaching to improve in exchange for wearing the veil (Reece 96). Narration calls Hooper a "good preacher" (25); in fact, nothing suggests that anyone is unsatisfied with his sermons. Further, nothing leads the reader to reason that he should keep a vow to God secret, especially from his future wife. However, since Hooper's implications to Elizabeth are clearly that he feels he cannot tell her, and since there is no reason for a Godly vow to remain hidden, the reader can suppose that Hooper's veil represents an actual transgression. Margarita Georgieva asserts that the reverend's secrecy sets up the decision between becoming an outcast and remaining troubled by unforgotten sin. She states that to confess his trespass would mean social shunning while silence would mean a burdened conscience (59). Obstinate Mr. Hooper seems to choose a bit of both. He veils himself and refuses to state the full purpose and meaning of this act, thus keeping his secrecy. Simultaneously, though, he puts on a tangible veil that people will notice and react to. In proceeding with these actions, in a way, Hooper confesses to all that he has sinned. Man's unfaithful heart lies at the center of this parable (Allen 123). The reader can see an example of Hooper's heart in his passionate plea for Elizabeth's companionship despite the veil and his associated rejection. The minister pours out his soul, admitting fear and loneliness and, in doing so, admits the failure to his betrothed in the most direct way that a man like himself will. For man as subtle as Hooper, his admission to Elizabeth that what plagues him is bad enough to be expressed with a black veil is an explicit statement that he has done what the townspeople suggest he did and as blatant as the words, "I had an affair."

Admired men falling from grace in the public eye due to illicit relations span the centuries. In 2008, American politician and family man John Edwards admitted to an extramarital affair that took place in 2006. In early 2010, he also conceded that he was the father of his for-

mer mistress's daughter. With the proliferation of media outlets in American culture, Edwards endured an utterly public and unforgiving scrutiny. Unlike the social response to Hooper, which is characterized by concealment and reproach from people who knew him, Edwards's undoing was marked with details and condemnation from many who knew nothing but his name.

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## Adam Gorrel

### A Mind Divided – Examining Duality in “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”

Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” undoubtedly represents the author’s most prominent short story. The story sparked much commentary on the various themes and issues expressed in the work. However, there remains little doubt that the duality of man’s nature is a central theme. Through the trials of Dr. Jekyll, a universal message of man’s intricate and complicated nature is conveyed to the reader. The Roman poet Horace commented, “Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur” – Change only the name, and this story is also about you. The maxim holds true in the case of “Jekyll and Hyde” because the characters represent metaphors for nature itself. The strange fate of Henry Jekyll mirrors the everyday struggles of man against his nature. Dynamic and static characters, setting, symbolism, archetypes, and conflict serve to illustrate a theme of the inherent duality of human nature.

Initially, dynamic characters convey a theme of the duality of man. The narrator first introduces the reader to Mr. Utterson, an esteemed lawyer. The narrator describes him as a man of “rugged countenance,” a quiet and cold natured man, yet despite all this, in some way, lovable (5). Although Mr. Utterson is indeed an arbiter of Victorian law, he remains compassionate and understanding. Irving S. Saposnik comments that Utterson represents both the best and worst characteristics of the Victorian man (519). In that while he has chosen to live, and indeed uphold, the harsh code of Victorian life, Utterson has not allowed the pressure of such an existence to affect his humanity. Consequently, although he may seem to appear to be the model of Victorian behavior, the opposite appears to be actually true. Utterson, unlike many Victorian men, remains sympathetic to his fellow man, no matter their transgressions. As such, Utterson serves as an elegant example of man’s dual nature. Although Utterson remains tied to the Victorian world, his heart appears wholly humanistic. In contrast, Henry Jekyll displays his duality in much less humanistic ways. Indeed, Dr. Jekyll’s chief failing appears that rather than accepting the consequences of his duality, he instead sets out to separate his supposed better nature from its shaded counterpart. In attempting to separate his disparaging identities, Jekyll only exacerbates the problem. Theodore Dalrymple comments that Jekyll fails to recognize the obvious; evil remains intrinsic to human nature (26). Thus, Jekyll proves to be greatly mistaken in believing he can cure men of their dark nature, for those instincts merely reflect the unforeseen consequences of the conscious mind. Unfortunately, Jekyll’s realization that man must simply live with his baser instincts comes far too late to save him. In his attempts to master his nature, Jekyll proves undeniably that man’s nature represents no simple beast, but in his own words remains, “a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens” (56). Edward Hyde also serves as a poignant example of duality, in that the character of Hyde merely reflects a metaphor for not only Jekyll’s hidden nature, but also humanity’s as a whole. Hyde serves as the antithesis to the Victorian moral code. Above all, Edward Hyde represents impulsive behavior and lack of conduct, either moral or ethical. In short, Hyde encapsulates merely a reaction against the often oppressive and constrained Victorian society. In all his dark glory, Edward Hyde merely reflects the desire of all men who are told they must not lust, or give into passion. Namely, the simple desire to rebel and be free from constraint.

Furthermore, static characters express a theme of man’s duality. Though Dr. Lanyon only briefly graces the narrative’s pages, he represents a particular division in man’s nature, specifically one of cognitive dissonance. The narrator informs the reader that although Lanyon and Jekyll were once colleagues and friends, a disagreement of the fundamental nature of science led to a falling out. Dr. Lanyon even goes so far as to call Jekyll’s experiments “unscientific balder-

dash” (12). As such, Lanyon serves as a classic example of the staunch, materialistic scientist of Victorian times. This absolute assuredness of the validity of his beliefs ultimately leads Lanyon to a crisis of faith, which ends with his withdrawal from social life and his eventual death. Upon seeing the results of Jekyll’s twisted experiments first hand, Lanyon’s concrete beliefs shatter in the face of insurmountable evidence. Lanyon, though a man of science, refuses to accept evidence contrary to his beliefs, and he chooses to die in ignorance rather than abandon his preconceived notions. Ed Cohen comments that this dissonance in reasoning could be due to a disconnect within Lanyon’s mind which is triggered when his most cherished beliefs are brought into question (190). Lanyon chooses incredulity rather than disavowing his life-long beliefs. Thus, Lanyon exhibits the internal battle within himself and perhaps reflects the internal battle within humanity as a whole. Mr. Enfield represents another character firmly rooted in his dual nature. Though the narrator comments that Enfield is a “well known man about town,” his particular profession remains undisclosed (6). Enfield represents the non-professional Victorian, but seems nevertheless a respected man of society. As such, Enfield represents a voice for the “every-man” of Victorian society. Therefore, his actions could be said to be indicative of societal norms. Upon encountering Hyde for the first time, Enfield’s passions drive him to an intense dislike that even he cannot succinctly describe. The character of Hyde so offends and affects Enfield that even his reasoning becomes clouded. Enfield’s dislike of Hyde remains an irrational response, or an emotional one, driven in part by the perceived deviance that Hyde represents. Although Enfield remains most assuredly guilty of equal transgressions, as evidenced by his late night excursions and reluctance to name his business, he feels no qualm in succinctly judging Hyde as villainous rogue. In shaming Hyde, Enfield refuses to accept that Hyde’s nature reflects that of his own. Finally, the old doctor also represents the duality of man’s nature. The narrator informs the reader that the doctor’s nature represents one of docility and reticence; however, a glance at Hyde serves to instill in the old man an extreme hate and desire to harm. M. Kellen Williams comments that those who seek to confront Hyde become his double (418). In effect, the mere presence of Hyde provides enough incentive to engage the criminalistic tendencies of even the calmest man. What the doctor sees in Hyde, and consequently what drives him to such rage, remains merely his own nature reflected back at him. Though the doctor and many others fail to realize this fact, it remains only their own dual nature with which they are contending; Hyde is merely the metaphor.

Thirdly, setting demonstrates a theme of duality. The city of London, with its historic and often troubled past, represents the perfect setting to illustrate conflict within unity. As Irving S. Saposnik comments, London and its denizens are a macrocosm for the struggle of Victorian life versus human nature (718). Indeed, London was an extremely diverse city, encapsulating all the various social and economical classes of society. The city represents division and a sense of duality that Victorian men, not to mention women, would have found inescapable. Henry Jekyll’s luxurious home also serves as a poignant setting especially when contrasted with the appearance of his laboratory entrance. The narrator informs the reader that Jekyll’s home appears quite elegant and richly furnished which reflects the supposed character of the owner. Utterson himself describes the entrance hall as “the pleasantest room in London” (17). However, this gentlemanly abode represents merely a façade intended to distort the true nature of its owner’s character. Behind the costly furnishing and richly decorated halls lies the true nature of Henry Jekyll. In the Victorian world, appearance is paramount and while Jekyll surely represents no gentleman, his house loans the façade of normality and morality that characterize Jekyll’s dual nature. Conversely, the entrance to Jekyll’s laboratory appears bland and nondescript. The narrator describes it as a sinister “block of building” which harbors no windows and which bears the marks of disuse (6). The laboratory entrance represents the true face of Henry Jekyll and the evil that lurks behind closed doors. The building appears nondescript for a reason because much like Hyde, who often defies description, the dual nature which the building represents remains universal. This representation of Jekyll’s home reflects the idea that all of man has intrinsically dual

natures; thus, the nature of the person who resides within can also be termed universal.

Furthermore, social archetypes demonstrate a theme of man's duality. Dr. Lanyon serves as a fitting archetype for the traditionalistic Victorian who has little patience for respect for men of Jekyll's caliber. Deeply ingrained in the Victorian psyche was the idea that men of science could not separate themselves from ethics and morality. Lanyon, as a staunch advocate of this ideal, stands opposed to men of Jekyll's nature who push the boundaries of what is considered ethically permissible. Indeed, Jekyll's experiments stand directly opposed to Lanyon's idea of ethical science. As a man of science, Lanyon should accept the validity of facts, even if said facts contradicted previously held beliefs about the natural world. However, no such acquiescence appears to be forthcoming. As Michael Davis comments, Lanyon's instinctive response to Jekyll's experiments undermines the rationality of the arguments that Lanyon puts forth in rejecting materialistic science (211). In rejecting any ideas that run contrary to his own preconceived notions, Lanyon demonstrates an inherent disconnect in the reasoning facilities that was prevalent in many Victorian scientists. Thus, Lanyon illustrates his dual nature in dealing with the dissonance that exists in his reasoning and provides an example of the manner in which many Victorian scientists approached ideas that encroached on established norms. On the other hand, Edward Hyde represents the archetype for depraved behavior and atavism. Throughout the narrative, many characters make clear statements about the barbaric and unsettling physical appearance of Hyde. Utterson comments that Hyde seemed hardly human at all, though he is unable to illustrate a definitive reason for his prejudices. Stephen D. Arata comments that this particular idea of the criminal as quite literally degenerate was widespread in the late 1800's and that it was a common claim that criminal behavior often left marks of physical deformity (234). Hyde thus represents society's general expectation of a criminal unhinged, and his indescribably troglodytic appearance hearkens to the ideal of atavism that many in the Victorian world subscribed to. The problem arises from the fact that Hyde represents no more than a metaphor for the dual nature of humanity itself. Thus, while unfairly judging Hyde as something less than human, Hyde's detractors question their own humanity. Finally, Inspector Newcomen represents an archetype for judgmental and uncaring Victorian legal system. Newcomen approaches the case of the Carew murder with characteristic bravado, assured not only in his own infallibility, but equally certain of the depravity and atavism of his suspect. For Newcomen, there can be no question that Hyde represents a reprehensible character who deserves no charity or empathy. Indeed, Newcomen judges Hyde's intellect and comes to the conclusion that the authorities will soon have their man. Thus, the inspector fails to realize that he contends with a force completely outside of his control. Hyde represents no simple killer, intent on destruction until he meets his own. Hyde simply remains a representative of man's hidden nature. Newcomen, in judging Hyde as atavistic and unlearned, displays his own ignorance and faulty reasoning; thus, he displays the inept and often incredibly vacuous nature of the supposedly enlightened Victorian justice-system.

Symbolism also enhances a theme of the duality of human nature. The process by which Jekyll transforms himself into Hyde appears to be a simple elixir, the final and necessary ingredient of which appears to be simple salt. The perfect ordinariness of this medium for transformation hearkens to the relative ease in which man's nature can also metamorphose. Salt in its basic form has references throughout literature and especially religious mythology as an efficacious substance for soliciting change. It seems proper as the necessary ingredient to elicit a division of man's inner nature specifically because of its ordinariness and ties to metaphysical substances. Furthermore, the features of Edward Hyde symbolize the inherent struggle of man versus his nature. As Luke Thurston comments, Hyde's ape-like appearance hearkens to a degenerated proto-human, mirroring the belief that many Victorians held about a distinct class of man which was marked by mental and physical deformity (456). Linking Hyde's appearance to that of man's biological ancestors appears to be a deliberate choice to enlighten the reader as to the nature of man, or more accurately, the nature that the narrator intends to display. Hyde's gro-

tesque appearance exist as a metaphor for the inner struggle that all of humanity constantly wages, the struggle against man's very evolutionary natures. Finally, the door leading into "black-mail house" symbolizes the twisted nature of the man who resides behind it. The narrator informs the reader that the door appears pockmarked and defiled. Vagabonds crouch in the eaves-way, and children graffiti the moldings, while for nearly a generation no person has arrived to "drive away these random visitors or to repair their ravages" (6). The door symbolizes a physical manifestation of the nature that resides within Henry Jekyll. Jekyll represents a man who has put a veneer over his true nature to continue his twisted and ill-fate experiments. The door to "black-mail house" however shows the ravages and consequences of trying to deny one's true nature. Somewhere in between the destitute door, and the façade of gallantry that Dr. Jekyll attempts to put forth resides the true nature of man. In this case, one simply names it Hyde.

Lastly, conflict illustrates a theme for the duality of human nature. The conflict between doctors Lanyon and Jekyll reminds one of the debate between what one could call conservative and liberal thinking. Lanyon, with his strict moral code and purely imperial practice of science quite obviously represents the conservative ideology as a whole, while Jekyll represents the often contemporary views of liberal ideology. Their debate on the nature of science proves to be an ethical one due to the nature of their arguments, which are based on emotion rather than evidence. Lanyon comments that Jekyll's experiments "would have estranged Damon and Pythias" (12). Jekyll, not to be outdone, terms Lanyon a "hide-bound pedant," then labels him as a great disappointment (19). The emotional reactions of each man to his counterpart speaks clearly of the nature of the argument between them. The debate between these conflicting ideologies remains one of historic fact, though in actuality they only represent diverging viewpoints on how to interpret the same physical world. This conflict of worldviews represents the conflict that humanity has always had with new ideas and modes of thought. Humans have always struggled with change and Dr. Lanyon represents the mental disengage that many people endure when questioning their cherished beliefs. Thus, Lanyon and Jekyll's conflict serves to highlight the conflict within human thought. Secondly, Utterson's struggle to accept his own duality mirrors the struggle of humanity to recognize the same fact. As Chris Danta comments, Utterson's struggle arises from the fact that he attempts to separate physiology from morality (289). In failing to recognize that the division of man's nature appears to be wholly natural and universal, Utterson attempts to distort his own responsibility in regards to the actions of Hyde because he does not wish to view all of man as intrinsically evil. As the comfortable notion of Hyde as simply evil begins to waver however, Utterson begins to exhibit some of the qualities of Hyde, such as fear, distrust, and ambivalence. As Ed block comments, Utterson's deviations do not match Hyde's in intensity, but his emotional state does mirror that of Dr. Jekyll's (454-55). In short, Utterson's struggle to admit to his own dual nature mirrors the struggle that all humans of sound mind must at some point encounter. Finally, Edward Hyde's conflict with society as a whole represents the manner in which contrary thought is usually dealt with. Though Hyde is simply a metaphor for all of humanity, his actions set him apart from the norms of Victorian society. Irving S. Saposnik brilliantly concludes that Hyde appears to be described metaphorically throughout the narrative because that is precisely what he represents (730). Hyde mirrors no more than the baser instincts and desires of all humans, which if left unchecked can lead to disastrous consequences. The true tragedy of Edward Hyde is that although he resides within every human, no attempts are made to understand why the conflict between human nature exists. Instead the denizens of the narrative hide from their true selves, at the cost of their very humanity.

The refusal of man to accept his true nature has spawned literature and religious text beyond count, not to mention human suffering. This universal message remains precisely why "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" has remained so prevalent in the literary world. It encapsulates simply a story that all people can relate to, because all humans know the acute feeling of struggling with their own conscience. Pastor Ted Haggard was one such individual. Though he served as the leader of the National Association of Evangelicals for three years and

was head of one of the nation's largest super-churches' Haggard had a hidden nature as well. Though "Pastor Ted" had long preached to his congregation, and indeed the country, about the importance of the nuclear family and the heterosexual lifestyle in 2006 his words would seem hollow and meaningless. After allegations of homosexual conduct, Ted Haggard was ousted from his church and indeed the state of Colorado. Haggard had long known of his proclivities for men, and he had acted on them many times, but his chief failing was to realize that these tendencies defined him as a person, and were not the work of evil influence or a debauched mind. Humans the world over struggle to accept themselves for whom they are, and instead attribute their supposed "deviances" to any manner of physical or supernatural aberrations. If there was ever a message that needed to be proliferated, surely man's duality represents a poignant example. For only upon accepting others for their inborn nature can man possibly hope to coexist peacefully and happily.

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## John Jashinski

### The Plight of an Ex-Convict

Growing up in the inner city in Milwaukee was a struggle. I was the oldest of nine children, and we were raised by a single father. My mother succumbed to drug and alcohol addiction and abandoned our family when I was eleven. My father worked various odd jobs to supplement the family's meager income. He would paint houses, work on vehicles, collect scrap metal to sell, mow lawns, shovel snow for others, or just about anything to make ends meet. He would often come home late at night after long days of doing one or several of those tasks, either wincing in pain from overexertion, or weary from exhaustion. His hands would be covered with dirt, paint, or blisters and the scent of sweat emanated from his soiled clothing. He was rewarded for his hard work with the love and affection the children gave him, but the strenuous manual labor was unforgiving to his body and mind.

Stable employment has been a pipe dream for my father because he is an ex-convict. Ex-convicts face several road blocks trying to reintegrate into society. The lack of a system for assimilating these people back into society and making them productive citizens has often led to either recidivism or dependency on government assistance. Due to his ex-convict status, my father has had great difficulty finding gainful employment and obtaining adequate housing. Instead, he has had to rely on the welfare system to support the family.

Back in the 90's, my father still had a fair amount of ambition. He had an overall positive disposition on life, in spite of a marriage gone awry and the financial problems that had plagued him for so long. He was so energetic before a job interview. They were sporadic, but that didn't damage his spirit. Although dressing up was not his style, he carried himself well. I always helped him with his tie, and patted him on the back and wished him luck. He gave me hugs, and his prickly beard left impressions in my forehead. The days became weeks, and the weeks became months. His confidence transformed into despair. The traditional job search was fruitless. One day, after yet another failed effort, he came home and was barely able to fight back the tears. My father was not the type to talk about his feelings much, but he could not hide them. I saw the anger, frustration, and defeat in his eyes. He just hung his coat up, put his head down, and immediately went to his bedroom. All I did was give him a hug and tried to comfort him. His plight was unbeknown to me at the time. I saw my father as my role model. He was someone who didn't make excuses. I truly felt he was just an unlucky person. His other options were shaky at best. He had hoped doing odd jobs for people would materialize into full time employment somewhere down the road. It never happened.

Everyone has surely seen this question on a job application: "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" or "Have you been convicted of a felony in the past 7 years?" followed by "If so, what for?" Although there are laws that prohibit employers from denying employment to ex-convicts, as long as their conviction was not related to the line of employment they are seeking, many employers still pass once they see "Yes" filled in the line. The politically correct defense for this is that employers have to "protect" themselves from hiring negligent workers. What they won't admit is that it's easier to filter through prospective employees by omitting those with criminal records. It does theoretically eliminate the risk of hiring an ex-convict, but it is a microcosm of the larger institutional problem of finding a place for these people who are trying to redeem themselves. These ex-convicts are often left with minimum-wage job opportunities or physically taxing manual labor jobs. Recidivism, or relapse into criminal behavior, often occurs when those who struggle to find gainful employment decide to revert to their criminal ways.

For those who are so lucky to find such employment, their next obstacle usually is find-

ing shelter. Many prisoners close to release from prison enter a halfway house. These institutions are meant to help reintegrate ex-convicts back into society. While halfway houses do make a difference, it is unfortunately not enough. Many people live in these shelters for years, well after their term expires, trying to find work and a place of their own. The same road blocks they find in employment exist in finding a home. Rental housing applicants are subject to not only rental history checks, but criminal record and credit checks. This process omits the majority of ex-cons. They are usually relegated to living in poorer, crime-ridden areas, where these housing standards tend to be lax. These environments are much more conducive to influencing an ex-convict to relapse.

The welfare system has been a safety net for those who haven't relapsed and returned to prison. Many have become accustomed to receiving the monthly stipend and stay on it for a long time. My father has been living on some type of government assistance for as long as I can remember. After his best efforts were dashed, he admitted defeat and resigned himself to this life. It's not a very empowering lifestyle. It's the same meager pay day. He does not have the same swagger. His hairline is slowly receding and beginning to gray. The wrinkles near his eyes form a droopy, almost sad expression on his face. It's like they were branded on, leaving a permanent scar. Much like that day he came home dejected after being turned away yet again, I can see the pain he still holds deep inside. I could not imagine feeling so helpless.

The social stigma placed upon ex-convicts is inherently unfair. There are those who are violent offenders and are unquestionably a hazard to society. The murderers, rapists, and child molesters are the types we initially think of when we think of the word felon. My father was convicted of distributing marijuana and served nine months. These offenders are often equated with more violent offenders. The majority of the time, those dealing drugs are doing it out of need. My father was poor and under-educated, making him prey to fast and easy money. It's not natural for those who try to live honest lives to want to empathize with an ex-con, but society seemingly wants these people to suffer beyond their prison sentences. Some positive steps have been made toward giving ex-cons better opportunities, but the social stigma still persists. It is the primary hindrance for ex-cons trying to assimilate with society once again and make the most of their new lease on life. We all need to take a step back and realize that some of these people have done their time and are willing to reform their lives. Repressing those who have made bad decisions, but have paid their dues, does not serve our society well. Instead of giving an ex-con a second chance, all it does is perpetuate a cycle of failure.

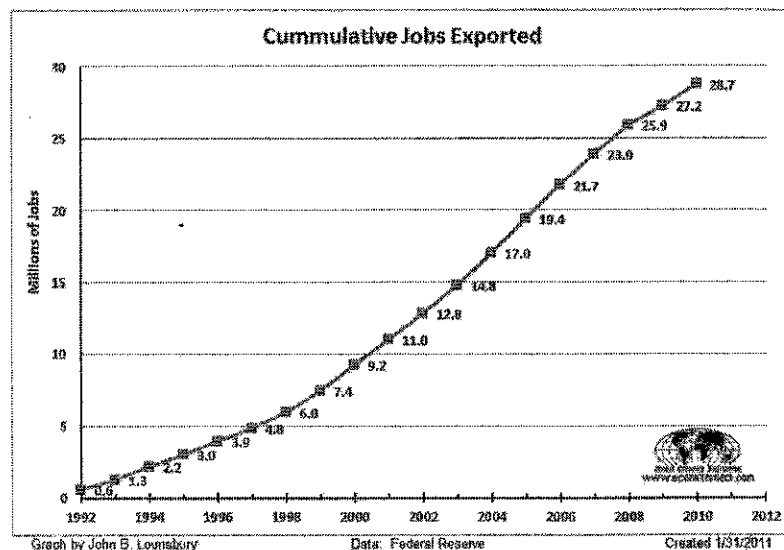
## Trade Policy and Its Effect on Manufacturing in America

When Americans walk into their local Wal-Mart stores every day, they stuff their shopping carts full of affordable goods. "Save money, live better" is the most recent advertising slogan they have used to convince us to shop there, and shop there we have. In the latest Fortune 500 list for 2010, Wal-Mart ranks as the number one business in the world in revenue earned, with over \$408 billion (*Fortune*, n.p.). Their stranglehold on the retail front has spanned an entire generation since eclipsing K-Mart and Sears in the late 1980's as the wealthiest American retailer. Wal-Mart has become synonymous with the American way of life.

Their ascent to the top coincided with the birth of a major free-trade agreement, the North American Free Trade Agreement, known most commonly as NAFTA. Enacted in 1994, this agreement allowed the removal of most tariffs between America, Canada, and Mexico. This landmark agreement set a precedent for various other agreements. While these agreements have allowed Americans the ability to buy foreign-made products that are less expensive, they have opened the door for what has become a growing problem. Jobs, primarily in the manufacturing sector, have been leaving our country at an alarming rate since the early 1990's, and the trend is only getting worse. Therefore, American trade policy must be reformed to restore the rapidly vanishing manufacturing base.

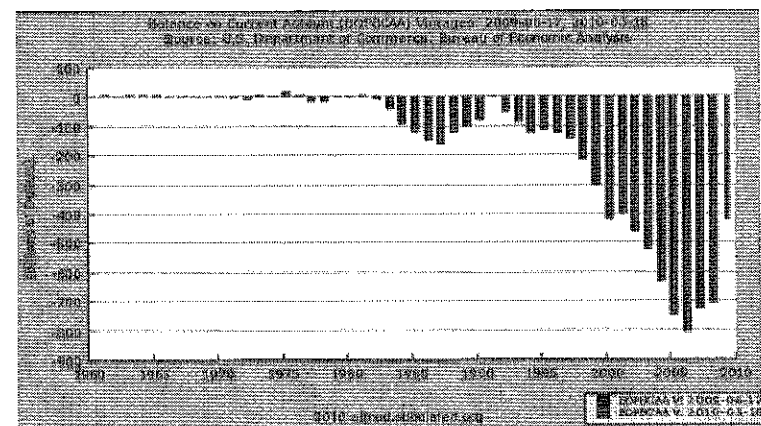
Free trade, while having some flaws, is a system that seems to be good spirited. The ideals of free trade are to open up affordable resources, free from the restrictions of costly tariffs, to areas in which they are unavailable. A nation which is geographically mountainous and lacks adequate agricultural land could benefit from trading for food with a nation that has more arable land. In return, that nation, which may lack the rigid mountains and hills, could trade for various mining resources, such as coal or metal ores. Free trade strives to remedy some socioeconomic problems. According to a publication by the Cato Institute in January of this year, "Free trade creates prosperity and supports rising living standards. Study after study has shown that countries that are more open to the global economy grow faster and achieve higher incomes than those that are relatively closed" (Ikenson and Lincicome, n. p.). Higher labor costs, benefit packages for employees, and costs incurred by adhering to safety and environmental regulations are also major hurdles for businesses in America. These issues often force these businesses to outsource jobs to lesser developed countries as a measure to stay competitive rather than being forced to go out of business, which would eliminate all jobs. Also, due to advances in technology such as computerization and automation, the manufacturing sector has become more efficient in recent years. This has led to a reduction in staff necessary to operate a plant and has also required more education on the part of those who operate these new technologies.

While there are very worthy arguments in favor of the current trade climate, it has had an unmistakable effect on the American working class. In the November 2010 article "The End of Free-Trade Globalization," William Greider notes, "A *Wall Street Journal* poll found that 53 percent (including 61 percent of Tea Party adherents) think free-trade globalization has hurt the US economy. Only 17 percent think it has helped" (20-25), echoing the sentiment that the current trade policies have left a void in America's manufacturing base, which once provided a reasonable wage for those who were not pursuing higher education. These workers have been forced back into mainly service sector jobs, which often require less specialized skills and in turn provide lower pay. Many of these workers have to start over in school, which presents some major obstacles as well. If a person is ten or more years removed from high school, or even college in some cases, he is less prepared to return, as curriculum in schools has evolved over time. Some of these people rely on unemployment compensation for a while and eventually concede defeat and enroll in welfare programs. The chart below is compiled from data from the Federal Reserve, showing a cumulative total of jobs exported since 1992.



Some businesses have tried to keep producing products on American soil, but the business environment that currently exists makes the economic viability of this extremely difficult. If one business decides to take a few assembly lines to China and pay \$1.00 per hour wages compared to \$10.00 per hour back here, the remaining American companies are put at a serious disadvantage. With little or no tariffs to worry about, the business that outsources is set to take in a much larger profit, of course with enough room to lower the price on their product to undercut the competition. Americans generally prefer more affordable products, and, as a result, the American-made product suffers. Eventually, the competition has no choice but to send its jobs abroad.

The most troubling point of this crisis, though, is the structure of our current trade policy with China. China has emerged from the dredges of communism to become the second-largest economy in the world, and the manipulation of its currency and the exploitation of its working class has allowed China to gut America's workforce. In the September 2010 article "House Panel Cranks Up Pressure on China Currency," Doug Palmer says, "Critics inside and outside Congress claim that China has hurt U.S. exports and employment by undervaluing the yuan against the dollar by as much as 25 percent to 40 percent" (n.p.). Undervaluing currency gives the Chinese unfair advantages in allowing them to make their labor costs even cheaper, inviting greedy corporations who are nothing less than thrilled to capitalize. The trade deficit is also a grave concern. In 2010, America had nearly a \$500 billion trade deficit overall. In the February 11, 2011, issue of *USA Today* magazine, Martin Crutsinger states, "For 2010, the deficit with China rose 20.4% to hit an all-time high of \$273.1 billion, the largest imbalance the United States has ever recorded with a single country" (n.p.). The following chart shows the history of the trade deficit and its increase since the mid-1990's which correlates with the rise in jobs exported shown in the previous graph.



In conclusion, the trade policies which have been enacted in the past two decades have caused great harm to the middle class. Economists overwhelmingly agree that free trade is good for us with various statistics to back that assertion. While free trade promises more affordable goods and offers opportunities for prosperity, the reality is these benefits are dependent on the good will of wealthy business owners, a shaky proposition, given the fact that many business owners have stopped at nothing to exploit workers in America in the past. What makes anyone believe exploitation is unlikely to happen in other countries? While we are veiled in ignorance, many companies have already been accused of using child labor and circumventing environmental standards of less developed nations. I ask myself one question: "Is the opportunity to buy a t-shirt for \$5.00 worth the injustices that brought it about?" I would probably be right in assuming that most of us would not permit this.

The manufacturing sector was once the pride of America. Manufacturing jobs once provided livable wages for many people who did not opt or were not suited for college. We can contact our local representatives and let our voices be heard. We must let them know that the health of our country is based on the health of its own people and not some projection chart that satisfies the wealthy. The best way to make our dissent heard is not with our voices, but with our wallets.

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## Our Contributors

**Chelsea Barnard** is a twenty-one year old English major who is graduating this December (2012). She finds herself infected with wanderlust and applies to various research programs to cope. She wants to see everything.

**David Boleh** is poised to graduate in the summer of 2013, is an English major with a concentration on writing from Port Arthur. After fumbling through the first few years at Lamar under the Business program, David switched majors and rediscovered his passion for writing fiction.

**Alaina Bray** is a senior majoring in English. She loves (and hates) to write and is currently facing a severe internal struggle over whether to pursue academic or creative writing in her graduate career. Her deepest regret is cursing nap time in kindergarten.

**William Brewer** is intolerant of both lactose and straight answers, frequently feigns deep thought (fist to chin, eyes focused on a snail on the wall) while scratching his belly crudely and eating Wonka candies. Dumber than rocks; smarter than bears. Not smarter than claws.

**Donald Case** was born in October of 1994. Like most others raised in rural East Texas, he longed for the day when he could finally leave. After sixteen years, the TALH program gave him that chance. Donald is now a TALH senior and hopes to major in English and Spanish.

**Quinton Gaines** is a senior majoring in Psychology.

**Kevin King** is a staff writer for the Examiner newspaper in Beaumont and also writes for the Lamar University Press. His favorite writers include Albert Camus, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. He also has a keen interest in the Hispanic culture.

**Chelsea McAuley** enjoys studying creative writing, classes in writing theory, and literature. She is grateful for the opportunity to grow in all of these areas, specifically as a poet. While being a poet is not in her career path right now, as long as she has paper and a pen and is passionate enough about something, a poem can come to life.

**Heather Odom** is eighteen and a sophomore at Lamar University. She is currently a Business major considering a change into English. Spare time is filled by reading and learning songs on both piano and guitar.

## Our Contributors

**Garry Richards** is a Master's student of English at Lamar University. He loves to write and read poetry and is beginning his creative writing thesis in the fall semester of 2012. His favorite poets are A.E. Stallings, Morri Creech, Billy Collins, and W.B. Yeats.

**Tara Tatum** is a recently graduated student of the Master's program of English at Lamar University.

**Maribeth Vogler** is currently a Master's student of English at Lamar University. She reads and writes fantasy novels, as well as short poetry. She also reads epic poetry. Her favorite authors include Anne McCaffrey, Terry Goodkind, Mercedes Lackey, Dante Alighieri, Homer, and Robert Frost. She enjoys drawing and assembling jigsaw puzzles.

"There is nothing more beautiful than the book.  
The paper, the font, the cloth. Please, no matter  
how we advance technologically, please don't  
abandon the book. There is nothing in our  
material world more beautiful than the book."

*Patti Smith*

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"Santa Muerte" contains some brilliant dialogue, which makes the characters jump off the page (whether from fright, visceral unnamed longing or hunger remains a glowing and shuttered dance emanating from the shattered kaleidoscope of a land that worships death...). The photographic detail is pristine and savage. The specific time, place, and milieu surface through the breaking ice of an eager imagery evoking the inevitability of death and the imprisoned, pawned lives on literal, metaphorical, and poetic levels. The suspenseful elements are well handled as well."

*Ana Cristina Rudholm y Balmaceda, Professor of English*

"The Nut House" gives you tight lines stretched on a body of figurative language, a little dirty, a little sad, a little too true to be made up. Ms. Tatum makes poetry fun to read again and again."

*Jesse Doiron, Professor of English*