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# Pulse

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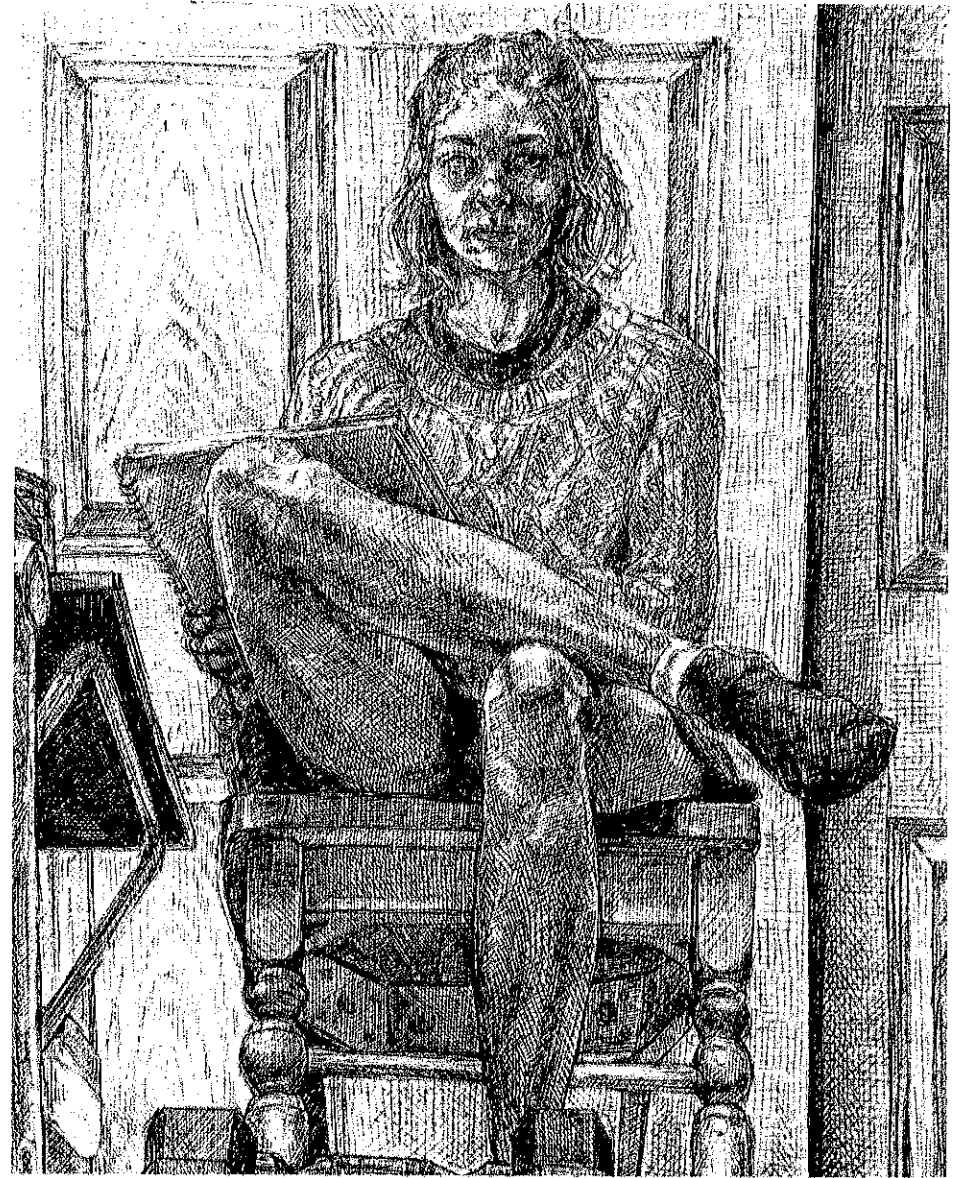
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Commandment #1 'You Shall Have No Other Gods but Me'

Ciara Broussard

Your claim  
to fame?  
It's just the same.  
Trying to make a name  
For yourself in Hollywood? It's a game

Built on the backs  
of women and children, who's got the biggest sacks  
of Money  
It's honey,  
Sweet  
The place to beat  
Your husband, child, or wife  
and hide their strife  
while you threaten their life  
behind dazzling smiles  
It goes on for miles

and miles

*And miles.*

It's all built on sex  
Who's got the best pecs  
Who's got the biggest chest  
Lives made and ruined via text.  
"It's for the best"  
They attest  
to children that have yet to rest,  
it's a test.

because they don't want it,  
she didn't want it  
but They sold it  
so, he owns it

She was havin' sum kinda fit"  
His friends laugh at that, every bit,  
making jokes about her developing tits  
and zits.  
It's  
not fair,  
but the world doesn't care,  
even if it's more than she can bear,  
because he has this 'certain flair,'  
even if she *still* feels his hands *everywhere*.  
So, they'll hide behind their dazzling smiles  
and it'll keep going on for miles

and miles

*And miles.*

because they sold it,  
he bought it  
but she owned it  
*she owned it*  
so, truthfully, he stole it  
*he stole it.*

It's all on the wire  
so, there 'aught to be ire,  
in uproar, it's dire  
our situation, on fire

our politics  
It's all like this;  
Our leader's a crook, a thief, a liar  
A three in one  
*'But it's all in good fun.'*  
so, we keep raising him higher

And higher

*And higher*

On his pedestal, he calls  
Tweeting about inevitable downfalls  
And talking about balls  
he sees us as clowns,  
wearing his gilded crowns,  
when will we see, finally wearing frowns  
at his actions, and simply,  
once and for all  
let him fall

fall

*Fall*

Never again heading to that damnable call.

So we fight,  
we Write,  
and riot  
Drumming a different beat  
So history doesn't repeat

And repeat

*And Repeat*

La Hacienda  
Jacob Melancon

*Chilaquiles* and a cup of joe  
Greet me on the terrace with a smile  
Hammock swings and crashing waves below  
The salty, sour scent of sea for miles

Orange adobe shines in Latin light  
A temple glorified with glass and stone  
Crafted by the gods with aged delight  
Bricks and clay, dried and laid with bone  
*Este es para mi gente en viejo México*  
History roars and speaks to modern day  
*Y en la hacienda, yo no conozco*  
How any fool could dare to curse his stay

I drink and gaze as Western waters cry  
Fishermen cast their nets for another try  
I eat my breakfast hoping they survive  
And if not, let fate return me when I die

The Legend of the Cherry Blossom  
Jacob Melancon

The story starts as tiny seeds  
Planted among thorns and reeds  
Growing into mighty trees  
Into something beautiful

Fourteen days feels short and sweet  
When spring reaches its peak  
The blooms are kept by the creek  
As long as it's beautiful

They remain by the troubled shore  
Hoping, searching, something more  
Must surely lie beyond the bore  
And it must be beautiful

Its limbs reach for love and grace  
But writhes in pain and stays in place  
While tears crack the broken face  
And longs to be beautiful

Cherry flowers start to fall  
And death dares to have the gall  
To take majesty from us all  
Even though it's beautiful

But look, past the violent cold  
A dream of flowers, bright and bold  
Resurrected tales of old  
Of when we were beautiful

So, let the piper play his fife  
And murder beauty with his knife  
For it matters not the length of life  
As long as it is beautiful

I Am From  
Yvonne Annabel Oyeka

I am from computers  
From long walks and lonely nights  
I am from a place where rules do not matter  
I am from a plant that wants to flourish  
Whose dream to bear fruits is still strong  
I am from roller skates and school uniforms  
From Mom and Dad  
And from discipline and obedience  
From high expectations  
I am from a Catholic community  
From noodles and fried rice  
From the day I graduated  
And from earning my badges as a girl scout  
Storybooks

I am from the moment I wake up  
From the time I start my day  
I am from a place with dim lights  
And from an era with unlimited opportunities

Occupying My Brother's Room  
Ashley Erica Thibodeaux

The space remains,  
A light that strains,  
Not him, nor I,  
Can seem to fly.

The door that creaks,  
A shirt that reeks,  
The musk of air,  
No sense of flair.

Chewed gum lines  
Walls that confine.  
He remains, red-eyed,  
And tries to hide.

My brother sits  
Alone. He quits  
His life, no dreams.  
His tears in streams.  
6 years must pass,  
And I, alas  
Must keep the peace,  
The room, I lease.

Yet see this space, now bright with light,  
Both lives with hope, we prep for flight.



The Soldier  
Ciara Broussard

Forever marching,  
rhythmically.  
His every step,  
wordless.  
The only sound heard;  
the rattling of his gear  
against his pack.  
*Tic, tock*

Unyielding and unquestioned.  
Strong and silent.  
The only orders he follows  
are from high above.  
*Tic, tock*

Stubborn.  
Centuries of warfare have made him so.  
He yields for no earthly means.  
That's what we believe.  
*Tic, tock*

No bargaining, no pleading  
could cease his advance.  
In Their greater schemes.  
*Tic, tock*

Those that attempt to deny him  
never stood a chance.  
*Tic, tock*

Days turn into weeks,  
weeks into months,  
months into years.  
Until centuries pass him by.  
*Tic, tock*

Supposedly  
healing all wounds.  
Although  
some broken-hearted  
might disagree.  
*Tic, tock*

A medic, a warrior, a father, a mercenary.  
A newborn child, an old man,  
forever marching alongside Death,  
his faithful companion,  
scythe in hand.  
*Tic, tock*

There are no civilians.  
No limitations on the draft.  
All must fall  
into the steady,  
hypnotic rhythm  
of the eternal drum.  
*Tic, tock*

Daisy  
Texie Freeman

Dear Daisy  
You grew up too fast  
Your roots didn't have  
A chance to settle  
Yet, here you are  
The prettiest flower in the garden  
But that isn't all you are  
I see you  
Daisy  
You are courageous,  
Selfless,  
Brave  
And brazen  
When they try to stomp  
On you  
You don't stop growing  
Dear  
Daisy  
I see you  
And I know  
You are  
The purest  
Flower  
Although they tried to push you back  
Into the ground  
You grew wild  
And wide  
So pure  
So soft  
And so fierce  
The best flower  
The kindest flower  
The toughest flower  
You taught me how to grow  
How to shine in a shadow

How to let it all go  
Daisy  
You are light  
You are love  
You are everything

Ace  
Letha Matthews

Eggplant is disgusting, but  
*aubergine* is a perfect color for me.  
Pair it with grey, as you would pair a  
medium-rare ribeye with mushrooms and Malbec  
so that meat and earth and bitter mingle  
on your taste buds in a riot of flavor.

Dab black onto the palette,  
pepper on the steak of my life,  
because black is an accent  
rather than the focal color.

Black is the adjective in my  
life sentence, modifying  
my purple pronouns.  
But the grey verbs brighten  
with the blue-steel of  
your eyes.

Mud and Marble  
Letha Matthews

When She planted my garden, the walls were not yet built.  
Instead, it sprawled across acres,  
shoots and sprouts mingling with carefully cut grass in  
a verdant cacophony.  
Wrinkled fingers pressed into the soil, creating impressions  
before sprinkling love over the wisdom planted therein.

I built the walls out of slate and polished obsidian  
to protect the understanding that blossomed.  
When I stand inside those walls,  
sometimes I am caught by them. I run my fingers  
over the smooth silkstone of the slate, feeling  
the weather-worn satin of it  
before turning to the glass of the obsidian  
and noting how cool and smooth it is.  
Under my hand, the glossy surface fogs  
and the prints my fingertips leave sink  
into the black, reinforcing the barrier anew.

But You.

You built the path out of jagged slabs of  
marble. The white stone catches the rays  
from Vincent's suns in the east corner,  
and reflects them back until each stepping stone  
blinds me.

Your path scares me.

I will walk beside it, hearing my shoes  
squish in the mud near Claude's lily pond  
and feeling the way I sink, ever so slightly, into the ground.  
My shoes were once as white as those stones,  
but the mud has turned them  
dirty brown, disgusting.

Without you, I take them off.  
Without you, I walk on bare feet,  
everywhere.  
Everywhere  
but Those Stones.

Without you, the mud squelches  
between my toes  
instead of under my soles.

It  
tickles me,  
cools me,  
grounds me,  
anchors me.

But only  
Without You.

## The First Firmament

Jacob Melancon

### *Trial 1: The Egg*

Genesis, Consciousness

The first task, the threshold

The barrier between me and the life I was meant to live

Thrust! Crack! Shatter that suffocating shell

Stone cannot contain my destiny

I wince at the blinding light, but it does not matter

For I am free, I can see

### *Trial 2: The Vomit*

Hunger, Thirst

I require nourishment, I look to Mother

I open my mouth to receive my meal. Instead she gave me hers

I devour the sick, consume the bile

The putrid mix, the horrid vile

My daily bread for weeks, but it does not matter

For I am full, I am strong

### *Trial 3: The Wings*

Trial, Error

I am called to the sky but fear the ground

The dizzying heights seem too arduous, I watch as brothers and sisters

Attempt the flight, but to no avail fall to their deaths

Yet Mother pushes me, and I face the depths

The smallest mistake leaves broken bones, but it does not matter

For I am not afraid, I have wings

### *Reward: The Sky*

Glory, Finally

My whole life I've dreamt of this day

I feel the wind pick me up above the clouds

I taste the milk and honey beyond that fierce horizon

The first glimpse within the firmament

I look to the endless blue before me

And I swear, I see Heaven

## The French Press

Jacob Melancon

*Historical Revolutionary Theory suggests that revolutions do not start with the first defiant action against the state, but rather the mingling of the lower class around cups of coffee . . .*

Extra! Extra! *Révolution!*

A magic bag of beans, pummeled by mortar and pestle

Reduce it to dust

Place its powdered remains into its glass coffin

Drown it in boiling water

Now a most arduous task.

Wait.

Flavor intensifies along with impatience

With glory in sight, one final push is all that is left

Press. Pour. Dress if you dare.

And marvel at the fuel of human defiance

Friends gather around to share

Matters of state, the product of thought and rage

In a crowded parlor, lit by withered sconces and bright minds

Steam rises from their cups

The sound of conversation fills the temple

Ideas flutter around the room on wings of action

This place of the lowly, an asylum of thinkers

You don't need money to cure the world of tyranny

For revolutions begin with a bean and an idea

## A Lullaby in Cotton

Jacob Melancon

A t-shirt, blue jeans, aviators and a smile  
Clothes so simple it returns to elegance  
Mother is a home soul, but longs for adventure  
A Nashville novelty, a relic from a concert  
A pair of pants with memories ripped into the denim  
It is the ensemble of a queen, an outfit of majesty  
It is stained by experience and exploration  
The stretched fibers allow her to bend to her knees  
The world calls her casual, labels her as informal  
But fashion is second to comfortability  
She wraps me in her arms so tight it forces a tear  
I feel the soft cotton on my hands as I return the embrace  
She sings "send me an angel, that flies from Montgomery"  
And I grew wings, and fell asleep.

## I AM . . .

Mercedes Roth

I am a child of dreams,  
A trail of starlight follows me.

I go where the light dare not tread,  
But with my departure is glows from the wishes I have left.

I soar high above the mountains,  
Screaming my challenge to the wind.

I am a dreamer on land,  
A constant wave to be chased.

I am starlight made flesh,  
Wishes granted breath.

OLD ROOM  
Mercedes Roth

As children we imagine these walls as prisons,  
As adults we recognize them as the roots sustaining our growth.  
The posters hung on the walls are proof of passing fancy,  
Of adolescence made visible.  
The layers of paint depicting moments of youth,  
Each color representing a different path we almost took.  
We saw our homes as places to sleep and eat,  
The walls as restrictions stifling our dreams.

Now we look back with fondness,  
Realizing that they were our safe havens,  
The cocoons that allowed us to emerge in wondrous symphony of  
colors.  
Now we recognize that the walls we once thought as prisons were actually  
the realm that  
started our dreams.  
Between the roots of four walls we were safe and we were free,  
We dreamed big and lived happily.  
If we could go back in time,  
We would paint the walls white,  
Because in the space between them,  
Our universes were created.

The Lost Jar  
Leatha Matthews

John parked his car just in front of the straight, concrete walk up to the front door and got out, moving to stand at the edge of the walk as he took in the simple house. White siding complemented the varied reds and pinks of the brick walls, all of it tied together with a dark roof and the deep green of hedges around the house front. A large magnolia tree provided shade and littered the walkway with pods, making the house look a little less neat, but still quaint.

John turned to his car again, getting a casserole dish out of his back seat, and nudged the door closed with one foot before walking up the path. Knocking was a little awkward with his burden, but he managed, flat brown eyes noticing the collection of dust on the edges of the door. But when it opened a few minutes later, he smiled gently, his brows drawing together in a look of sad concern. The woman on the other side of the door stared at him blankly, then struggled into a shaky smile of her own, reaching for the CorningWare dish even as she greeted him quietly.

She turned away without inviting him in, but the door didn't close behind her, so John stepped inside. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Richards. I couldn't believe it when I heard the news." Emily Richards looked back at him for nearly a minute before she nodded and turned toward the kitchen, ducking through the arch to set his dish on the island. "It freezes, if you already have something?" he prompted, as she paused to dither between the counter near the oven and the island near the fridge.

She cast him a grateful look, setting the dish on the island and turning to the freezer. When she opened it, John saw other casserole dishes and carefully packaged bags of easy-to-heat foods. He couldn't quite erase his smile as she nestled his dish—now her dish, for he had no intention of returning for it—among the others. By the time she turned back, though, the smile was gone, and he was all sympathy once again. "How did you . . ."

"Know Livy?" She flinched as he used the pet name, her arms winding around herself, and he reached out to set one hand against skin dusted with the hint of years tanning. He could feel her shake under his hand, and he let his thumb brush over the fine hairs of her arm, feeling the bump of a mole that she might consider having examined, if she could ever think again. "She's in my Chemistry class." He guided her to the



ouch in the nearby living room. Her eyes were dry, but she still reached for a Kleenex, holding it between two hands and winding it around her fingers. "I'm John from her study group."

"Oh yes," Emily nodded distantly, staring at the Kleenex instead of at John. He sat down near her, his eyes locked on her. He noted the small movements of her hands, and the helpless slump of her shoulders. With her eyes on her hands, he was free to stare at her, taking in the tiny details of her day-to-day struggle in this dark hour. Her hair was flyaway: brushed, but with no care taken to make it neat. She'd twisted a band around it, keeping it out of her face, but without her normal attention, it was already escaping her binding. He was tempted to get up and go to sit beside her, to reach out and smooth his hand over her hair. He could do that for her. She might even welcome the familiar touch. No doubt Mr. Richards was solitary in his mourning. But John stayed where he sat, hands folded in his lap and eyes traveling down over the swell of her breasts. They sagged, but then, she wasn't the type to get a boob job just to look younger.

His eyes slid lower, over dark jeans and down to the floor. She wore odd socks. They weren't even expectedly odd. She hadn't mistaken navy for black in the dim light of morning. Instead, her socks were blatantly different, one fuchsia with stripes, and the other covered in slate and blue checks. "I can't even imagine what you're going through, Ms. Richards," he noted, eyes drifting back up to her face to watch it crumble. "Have they ... found anything?"

Her eyes flashed with a sudden hint of the fire she must've once possessed. In that moment, she was beautiful. "She'll be home soon," she informed him, sharp as a razor's edge. Oh yes, helpless fury made her so lovely.

"Of course!" he assured her, and this time, he did rise and move to sit beside her, taking one of her hands to sandwich between his own, patting it gently. "I didn't mean . . . no, of course she'll be home. I just meant, do they have any idea what happened?" And the fury was gone. She shuddered, squeezing his hand with hers, and didn't resist when he tugged her closer, releasing her hand to curl his arms around her protectively. Mr. Richards may be solitary in grief, but Emily was a mixed bag.

For a while, John simply held Emily, his arm curled tight enough to offer the impression of a hug, but loose enough that it would take only

a slight lean for her to be free. As his hand rubbed along her upper arm, fingers feeling cool skin and exploring the slight bumps scattering her arms, his wrist kept grazing against her breast. She tensed every time, but grief and manners kept her still and quiet.

She didn't cry. She held the Kleenex in both hands, worrying at it with a single-minded focus, but it, like her eyes, remained dry. "Close your eyes, Ms. Richards," John suggested softly. "I've got you." His words, half promise and half encouragement, helped her sag against him that little bit more.

"My sister ran away," John noted when the silence had taken on the weight of something more. The words were random and gentle. He'd pitched his voice a little lower than before, making the words a tiny bit breathy. Emily's hand fluttered, patting against his arm. "I was fourteen back then. It was a rough time. I think it was probably rougher on my mom, though. I mean, she still had me to deal with. She couldn't just grieve. She had to be strong."

John looked down at the crumpled white mess in Emily's hand. When she started to pull back, he tucked her tighter against his chest. "For a long time, it was like I was an only kid." His gaze shifted away from Emily to the nearby wall, drawn not by the framed Kinkadee prints, but by the picture next to them, lovingly held by a frame of similar design but a different wood, so that it stood out in the room. In the picture, Emily stood next to a solid man. The softness of her skin was contrasted with the weathered bark of his own, and their cheeks picked up a ruddy cast from his worn, plaid shirt. Mr. Richards wasn't like his wife. John wondered if she was remarried. The children, after all, favored her.

"What was her name?"

John tugged his attention away from the impish eyes of her younger daughter to look at Emily herself. "Sorry?"

"Your sister," Emily whispered, and he could hear the wet of all the tears she hadn't yet shed in her voice. "What was her name?" As he watched, she pulled a little away from him, starting to gather her composure once more.

"Cady. Well, Cadence," he murmured, letting her pull away with a last brush of fingers against the soft skin of her arm. Stoic Ms. Richards was almost as lovely as furious Ms. Richards. "But she was Cady to her family." He shifted back against the arm of her couch, and she moved further away from him. "One day, my aunt came to us with a package. She

gave my mom a casserole, then she took me aside and told me to take the jar in her bag and bury it in the yard."

Emily looked confused. "The jar?" John caught her eyes and held them until hers dropped away to the ragged Kleenex in her lap.

"It's an old family belief, apparently," he nodded, injecting a touch of warmth into his voice. "So, I went and got the jar. It was filled with old buttons and odd socks, with keys that had no locks, and change dusted with crumbs. I did just what she said, too. It was heavier than you'd expect, looking at it, but I guess jars hold a lot more than you ever think they do, 'cause of the shape." She nodded absently, taking her Kleenex and shaking it out a bit before starting to fold it in her lap.

"It didn't take long to bury it in the yard. I didn't know why I was doing it, but you didn't say no to Aunt Fannie." Her lips curled in a faint smile. "When I got back in the house, she was saying to mom, 'I brought the lost jar.' I asked her what it was, but she didn't answer, because right about then, mom broke down. I got shooed out, and when I got back later, Fannie was gone. Mom didn't talk about that jar ever again, except once."

He paused, waiting until Emily looked up at him before smiling at her. His eyes crinkled with the expression, and she relaxed a little bit. "A week after I buried it, Cady walked in the door. She was crying, and apologizing for being stupid, but all Mom said was, 'You were just lost.'"

"The jar brought her back?" Emily whispered, a sudden, painful hope flaring in her eyes. John didn't have to pay attention to make his eyes crinkle a second time.

"I hope you don't mind. I'd like to bury something in your yard."

For long seconds, Emily didn't speak. He doubted that she even breathed. She trembled, but he only knew because of the way errant hairs hooked against her cheek. When she finally responded, it was only a jerky nod.

"I brought my own shovel. After that, though, I have to go. I just wanted to do something for Livy."

"Will it really bring her back?" Emily whispered, searching his eyes. He let his take on a gentle, sad look.

"Doesn't hurt to try, wouldn't you say?"

He rose from the couch, making his way to the door without waiting for her to follow. Without looking back, he stepped out of the house and shut the door behind himself, his long strides eating the ground to the trunk of his car. Once there, he pushed his suitcase aside to reach

for the jar in the back, noting how dark the swatch of red cloth at the bottom looked. It was a biggish jar he hefted out, and the smell of pickles still hovered near the mouth of it. Once he'd carried it to a corner of the house, he went back for his shovel, carting it over to the corner he'd chosen and using it to cut around a small section of turf. Once that was out of the way, he dug down, shifting dirt to one side until the hole was deep enough that the jar would be fully covered, and large enough that he could set the jar in comfortably.

It took a little work to lift the jar and place it into the cool dark of the hole. The move was awkward, because he didn't want to get his slacks dirty by getting down on them, but he managed. He'd prepared himself for the weight of it. With it in the hole, and dirt nearby ready to fill in the space around it, he unscrewed the lid one last time, dipping his hand in far enough to shift the buttons at the top out of the way. A smell like pickled meat wafted from the jar, and his fingertip brushed against the cold meat of Livy's heart within.

And John smiled, whistling as he closed the jar and filled the dirt in around it.

Vacation  
Jamie Dixon

"You can't keep spoilin' that boy like that, Vivian! He a grown ass man that can take care of his damn self without you babying him all the time." I hear Daddy yell at me as soon as I walk through the door and I roll my eyes. I walk into the kitchen and see my mama and daddy sitting at the kitchen table. As usual Daddy is smoking his pipe and reading the newspaper, while Mama is using the sewing machine to patch up a hole in one of her old dresses.

"Desmond, you leave that girl alone. She too old for you to be telling her what to do," my mama tells him. "But ya daddy is right, Vivian. Alaric too old for you to be cleanin' up after him."

"He's too old period, Sylvia. He's old enough ta buy the apartment, he's old enough ta work, and he's old enough ta clean it. I'll be damned if I let my momma clean up after me when I was his age."

"Not now, Daddy. I have to make dinner for Oliver," I say as I bend down to look for my Dutch oven to make the smothered chicken I promised him and the mini Dutch oven for the rice. I groan when I straighten up, listening to my body pop in places I've grown used to over the years. I put the Dutch oven on the stove and pour in the peanut oil from the shelf above the stove and turn on the fire so that the oil will start heating up.

"Oliver needs to cook for himself every now and then too, Vivi. I keep telling you that you're not as young as ya used to be. You need that vacation, baby girl. You're running yerself ragged," Mama says as she holds up the dress to the light to see if she got the stitching right.

I sigh and pull the chicken out of the refrigerator and to the sink. "And, Momma, I told ya that I'm not ready for that vacation yet. My family still needs me." We always have the same conversation when they come to visit.

As I wash the chicken in the sink, I stare at my hands, taking in all of the wrinkles and dark spots on my once smooth hands, the hands that cared for my husband of forty-nine years and cared for our three children and now our grandbabies, the same hands that have worked two and three jobs cleaning houses and serving children food to make sure my family had clothes on their backs and shoes on their feet.

"Baby, they don't need you anymore. Ya keep babying them they

won't be able to handle it when you leave," Daddy says, taking a puff from his pipe and turning to the next page of the newspaper.

"I'm not babying them. I'm just doing what I was raised to do as a married woman and a mother like y'all taught me," I snap, grabbing the steak seasoning from the cabinet above the sink to season the chicken.

My mama cut her eyes and as usual I can't help but tense no matter how old I am. "You watch your attitude now. Ya ain't too old to be beat now, ya hear me. Keep tryin' me."

"I'm sorry, Mama," I grab a hand full of chicken and step over to the stove to dump the chicken in the now hot oil. I was in the middle of my second trip when I hear my front door open.

"Mama?" I hear my eldest, Valerian call out.

"I'm in the kitchen Vale!" I say after dumping the last of the chicken into the pot and then turning back to the sink to wash my hands.

"Hey, Mama," I hear Vale say from behind me, and I hear my little four-month-old grandbaby fussing up a storm. When I turn around, Vale kisses my cheek, being careful not to squish Marleigh between us.

"Hey, sweetie," I say and then take Marl from her. "Hello, my sweet baby. How you doing? You behaving for your mama?"

"Good Lord, that baby is growin' like a weed," Mama says with a smile on her face while adjusting her glasses. "She's every bit of her daddy though. She got our good looks but that big head is all her daddy's people."

"At least she's behavin' for me unlike your other grandbaby," Vale says while pushing me out of the way and grabbing the flour for the chicken.

I can't help the smile that crosses my lips and I sit down at the table, rocking Marl gently. "I can cook my own food."

"I know, Mama, but you can't do everything either. You look like you're about to fall over on your feet. Besides, I need to tell you about that Sonya."

"That Sonya sure is givin' you the blues, ain't she?" I say as my daddy starts playing with Marl over my shoulder, making her laugh.

"When is she not? That girl makes me mad enough to chew bricks and drive me to drinking. She don't listen, she always has an attitude, and good luck getting her to pay attention at school. She's smart as whip, but her fast tail too busy chasing boys."

"I don't know why you so mad. You used to do the same thing to

me when you were younger. They not lyin' when they say be careful what you pray for. You gave me so much hell that I prayed that you would reap what you sow and get a carbon copy of yourself. And you did but she's to the fifth power compared to you."

"You wasn't a treat yerself either, Vivi," said Daddy, "I had ta keep my shotgun by my chair to keep them knuckle headed boys off my porch and outta my house."

"Hush up, Daddy," I whisper to him with what I know is a pout, but I refuse to admit it as old as I am.

Vale looks over at me with a look in her eyes I couldn't really describe. Like she was hurt, scared, or upset. "You okay, Mama?" she asks in a small voice.

"Of course I am, Vale. Why ya lookin' at me like that?"

"Did you take your medicine?"

I suck me teeth and roll my eyes. "Yes Valerian. I'm not a child!"

"I know, Mama. I'm just checkin' on ya is all," she says with a small smile.

Vale stayed for another two hours talking and helping me finish the chicken, rice, and corn until Oliver called, asking me about dinner. "Alright, Mama, I'm gonna go ahead and head out. I have to pick up Alden from school and make sure Sonya ain't got a strange boy in my house," she says while taking Marl from me,

"Alright, Vale. I'll see you later."

After Vale leaves, I start moving around the house picking and cleaning up, my usual routine that I've done almost every day. Lord knows Oliver isn't going to do it. All he does is supervise at his job, but he comes like he worked a fortyhour shift at the plant. While vacuuming the living room, I start to feel a little winded, light headed even, and I sit down on the couch.

"Good Lord almighty," I rub my hands over my face and lean back against the couch. I look at the clock on the coffee table and see it's only a few hours until Avalyn shows up. I'll just close my eyes for a little bit.

Just as I close my eyes, Mama comes to sit beside me and puts her arm around me.

"That's it, sweet heart. Just close your eyes," I hear her say as I lean against her.

"Hey, Mama . . ." I say, my words slurring. "I can feel you . . ." My words trail off again as I feel my daddy sit on the other side of me and grab

my hand. ". . . I can feel you too, Daddy." I glance down at the couch where Mama is sitting, but it's like she isn't really there.

"That's right, baby. It's time to go on that vacation," Daddy says as he grabs my hand.

I can't help but hum in agreement as I start to drift off, and I feel my body go numb. Just as I feel myself let go, I hear Avalyn's voice.

"Mama, I'm here! Wait till I tell about what Robert said to me. We've only been married for two years, and he thinks he can talk to me any kind of way . . ." I hear her trail off.

". . . Mama . . . Mama? Mama?! Mama! Wake up! Mama, please wake up! Mama!"

I open my eyes and see my baby girl crying and shaking something. I think she's shaking me.

"I can't go now . . . Ava needs me . . ." I try to lift my head off Mama's shoulders, but she holds me tighter.

"It's time for them to stand on their two feet for now, Vivian, for a little while, and it's time for you to rest yours," Mama says while she strokes my hair. "You need this vacation because once they see you again, they are going to have so much to tell you."

## The Effects of Mental Health on Single Parents

John Le

In the novel *About a Boy*, the author Nick Hornby illustrated key social issues in today's society. Nick Hornby illustrated many social issues by the use of three main characters: Will, Marcus, and Fiona. The one key issue the book gave hints to is mental health. As the reader examined, the character who has dealt with mental health was Fiona, the mother of Marcus. Hornby illustrated mental health by the use of Fiona as the main subject. In the beginning the reader learned of Fiona's failed relationship which caused her to cry in the mornings. As Fiona began to cry in the mornings, Marcus her son would notice that she used to cry at night but now it is in the mornings; one later learns that she attempted to take her own life. By learning about Fiona one can understand that she is self-centered, because of her ignorance of others needs, her relationship with Marcus before and after suicide, how mental health has affected those around her, and how relationships with others help support herself.

Due to Fiona's self-centered personality, the reader can see she only cared for herself, like how she ignored Marcus's problems at school. One can read that Fiona notices only her own negative issues and not others. In the beginning the reader quickly learned of Fiona's failed relationships with Marcus' father Clive, and Roger, her most recent boyfriend, which lead Fiona to be depressed. Fiona's son Marcus realized that she began to cry in the morning. This caused him to worry about his mother: "Morning crying was something new, and it was a bad, bad sign Marcus never said anything when she cried. He didn't know what to say" (Hornby 28). The reader understands Fiona has joined a social group called Single Parents—Alone Together (SPAT), and the reader is given background of the group through the perspective of Will. One learned that Fiona has not attended but allowed Susie to care for Marcus when there are social activities. An article written by John Cairey stated, "The demands of being a solo caregiver of children is also ... to limit contact with friends in social setting and to limit participation in voluntary social organization. This social isolation ... produce feelings of distress" (Cairey 443). This article indirectly gave one a view of why Fiona did not attend social events; it was because she was depressed. One later learned that Fiona attempted suicide while Marcus was on a SPAT trip. It is evident that the isolation Fiona showed during the social event lead to

reshadowing of her attempted suicide when Susie cared for Marcus.

Nick Hornby showed how Fiona overlooked Marcus's problems because of her ignorance. One saw this occur when her son is bullied at school. When Marcus mentioned it to his mother, she told him to try and avoid them. When Marcus tried he could not because of his appearance. The novel later explained that Marcus is dressed by his mother, his hair is cut by her, and he liked what his mother liked such as music and food. When Fiona does not see Marcus's problems, he is forced to find someone who will care for him like Will. When Will began to take care of Marcus, he began to become more aware of modern day culture such as music and fashion. When Fiona learned that Marcus is being cared by Will she became furious, and she stated, "Now what the hell are these little after-school tea parties about . . . Why would a grown man want to hang out with a twelve-year-old boy day after day?" (Hornby 128-129). Fiona does not allow him to maintain this friendship with Will even if it helps Marcus's well-being. By understanding Fiona's action toward Marcus and not helping him with his personal problem, it is clear that she is ignorant and believes that everything she has done is right. She believes that Marcus's problem can be fixed by himself even though she remains unaware of what is happening at school.

In the beginning of the novel the reader understood Marcus and Fiona's relationship was weak when she ignored his problems at school and also her little involvement in social activities. It is apparent it is weak because Fiona had little interaction with Marcus. On the day of the SPAT trip, Fiona did not attend, which left Marcus to have social interaction with two strangers. The other relationship issue one saw was Fiona being unaware of Marcus's problem. As explained, when Marcus tried to tell his mother, Fiona, about his problem, she openly told him to try and avoid them. Like the other advice given to him, he has already heard this from administrators from school. All these problem would change after Fiona's attempted suicide. The day after Fiona arrived home from the hospital, Marcus confronted her about the suicide note she left for him. When Fiona tried to explain that she was not expected to be confronted of the note because she thought she would be dead. It showed her relationship with Marcus was weak. From that point Marcus would be worried that his mother would try to attempt suicide again. Marcus explained how it would be beneficial if they added another member to the family. He stated, "if someone dropped of the edge, you weren't left on your own . . . how could

you make a family grow if there was no one around, to . . . help?" (Hornby 75). His purpose was so he could go to school and not have to worry about his mother. This is an example of Fiona losing Marcus' trust, as Marcus stated, "He has always trusted his mother But for him, things would never be the same again" (Hornby 75). Before Fiona attempted suicide she had little social contact with other people. As mentioned earlier whenever there was a social event Fiona did not go for an example the picnic or meetings. After her attempted suicide she came to realized that she need to support Marcus. One learned that Fiona's mental health affected her relationship with her son. When Fiona began to understand the problems of her mental illness, she sought help by socializing with people at meetings.

The effects of mental health not only affected Fiona but also those who came in contact with her. Her mental health affected Marcus and Will. When Fiona could not care for Marcus, he was forced to find someone who would care for him while his mother dealt with her mental health. When Marcus could not look up to his mother as a parent, he had to look somewhere else. He began to look up to Will, a friend he met through SPAT. Marcus began to regularly go over to his house and they would build a relationship. As Will started to understand Marcus's problems at school, he began to help resolve them. Will eventually started helping Marcus as he witnessed Marcus being bullied. Like a parent Will took Marcus shopping and bought him a pair of new shoes which would be stolen later. Will would help Marcus become more confident in himself; Will helped him become knowledgable in modern day culture. Will also helped Marcus make new friends such as Ellie. One clearly sees Marcus's ambition to help his mother when he mentioned to Will that he should take his mother out on a date. One sees the affect of Fiona's mental health on Marcus when he could not find a parent-figure in his own mother so he looked up to Will. As Will began to care for Marcus, it showed that Fiona was incapable of caring for a child; one sees this problem when Marcus began living with his father Clive for a short period of time.

*About a Boy* showed how Fiona began to rebuild her relationships with others such as Marcus, Will, and Susie. She began to rebuild her relationship because she wanted to be supportive for Marcus. One sees this action when Fiona became more attentive to her actions. After her attempted suicide she became more helpful to Marcus with his problems at school and tried to be a more caring and loving person towards Marcus.

Her relationship with Will began rough because she did not like the fact that Marcus was over at a grown man's house after school everyday. Once she realized how helpful Will has been in Marcus' development, she came to accept him as a friend. As she began to accept open friendship, one reads that her depression is manageable and that she does not cry in the mornings like she use to. An article written by Hannah Turner stated, "found that a confidante relationship with a friend was related to reductions in sadness and tension" (Turner 485 ). This article that was written helped the reader understand that with a strong friendship one can manage sadness because they would have social support to talk about their problems. Whenever Fiona needed something she would ask Susie and she would help. It is shown that Susie cared for Marcus at the picnics and meetings and also wanted to be supportive for Fiona.

In the novel, Nick Hornby illustrated many key social problems in society. The main one he wrote about is mental health in single parents such as Fiona. When Hornby wrote about Fiona, he gave key characteristics to her such as being self-centered, ignorance of others needs, and weak relationships with others. Each situation caused by Fiona's mental issue was a struggle for those who came in contact with her. Marcus was affected because he had to find a parent figure to help him guide through being bullied and having no friends. It is evident how Will is affected because he had to be a caregiver to Marcus because Fiona could not. She also indirectly made Will be a father figure when he did not want to be. One must understand that mental health is a serious issue and one must seek help, unlike Fiona.

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## Realism, Romanticism, and "The Lady with the Dog"

Emily Tassin

Anton Chekhov hardly restrained from documenting the dreary aspects of life during his writing career. Noted as one of Russia's most prominent realist writers of the late 19th century, Chekhov's work ranged from critical issues concerning the mental health system in "Ward No. 6" to illustrating the tiresome cycle occurring for ordinary people who sense incompleteness within their dull, normal life in "The Lady with the Dog." "The Lady with the Dog," in particular, portrays characters of Chekhov's facing an unreachable desire: Gurov and Anna. This desire emulates two contrasting forces represented by the double-lives the couple lives, one being that of realism and boredom, and the other of strict passion and romanticism. Gurov and "the lady with the dog" are a metaphor for the disparity between realist and romanticist ideals, presented through Chekhov's classic realism technique.

Married to a "staid and dignified woman" whom he does not agree is intelligent, Gurov often fancies extramarital affairs (Damrosch 896). Extramarital affairs came naturally to Gurov because "there was something attractive and elusive which allured women and disposed of them in his favor" (896). From lack of endearment towards his wife and the irritation of "every intimacy . . . [appearing] a light and charming adventure, inevitably [growing] into a regular problem of extreme intricacy" an unattainable desire is then created in Gurov (897). A desire to redeem wholeness to his life, wishing to escape the dull nature of ordinary, "an obstinate desire to snatch from life more than it could give" (898). Gurov perceives this desire "just as though one were in a madhouse or a prison" (902).

Likewise, "the lady with the dog," Anna Sergeevna, who visiting Yalta alone finds herself "tormented by curiosity" upon Gurov's alarming interest in her, laments she "wanted something better" than her "flunkey" husband (899). Of course, the two instantly connect in Yalta and begin a secretive affair consequently causing an "impatient passion" to blossom within. Romance, adventure, and a "sweet delirium" are Chekhov's preferred description of this relationship between Gurov and Anna (900, 903). Moreover, this relationship forms to satisfy the couple's shared desires to nullify the "threat of ultimate dreariness [which] seems to hang over even the happiest moments" (896).

"The Lady with the Dog" is eloquently written in realism techniques to instigate the dilemma of contrast between this "sweet delirium" and "uninteresting, uneventful days" (900, 902). Realism philosophically "relies on accurate, detailed descriptions of everyday actions . . . within the world and it does not focus on idealistic values" such as passion and adventure (Adams). "Representative of middle-class lifestyle," Gurov is guided by Chekhov's words to "show the audience the lives of ordinary [and perhaps unsatisfied] people" (Adams). Chekhov meticulously writes at length about the grueling small-talk of Gurov and Anna while meeting the first time:

"They walked and talked of the strange light on the sea . . . talked of how sultry it was after a hot day" and discussed employment and birth-places (897). After departing from Yalta, Chekhov details Gurov's dreary life of "children [having] breakfast and getting ready for school . . . entertaining distinguished lawyers . . . walking his daughter to school" (901, 905).

Realism wishes to "revolt against the exotic subject matter . . . and for this reason it is also commonly referred as bourgeois realism." One finds this aspect of realism as well in "The Lady with the Dog" in which "bourgeoisie affairs" occur throughout the story: the expensive vacation trips to Yalta, visiting the Opera, and the trips the couple embarks on back and forth to meet (Adams 900, 902, 905). Despite perspective negative, Chekhov writes these qualities as almost lovely when describing Gurov's Moscow home: "When the first snow has fallen . . . it is pleasant to see the white earth, the white roofs, to draw soft, delicious breath, and the season brings back the days of one's youth" (901). Regardless of this life, having "a good-natured expression and are nearer to one's heart, near them one doesn't want to be thinking of the sea and the mountains [of Yalta]" (901). Realism invoking bourgeois Russian society is the opposing force against Gurov and Anna's intense relationship in a seemingly endless battle.

If the ordinary public lives of Gurov and Anna are considered the realism, then what exactly is considered the double-life of this couple? The "two lives: one, open, seen . . . full of relative truths . . . and another life running its course in secret" (905). In this double-life, "everything that was essential, of interest and of value . . . was hidden from other people" (905). To Gurov and Anna, the most valuable asset of their lives is this affair, anxiously having to stay hidden in a way that echoes the "civilized man's nervous anxiety that personal privacy should be respected" (905).



Written with impeccable fragility, the two view this delicate double-life as though they were a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages" (906). Utilizing this affair the couple perhaps wishes to 'save them from the hopelessness of everyday banality" (896).

With the notion of their personal life representing realism, the double-life must convey aspects of romanticism based on the tragedy that their genuine love must eternally practice in secret; "was their life not shattered" by this impending doom "that it was bound to have an end someday" (905)? Similar to the "undying physical attraction and love felt by Edmund Spenser and John Milton," Chekhov intends this secretive romance an ultimate weapon or cure against the definitive ordinary life (Simons). A love strong enough to convince Gurov that "Anna followed him about everywhere, like a shadow and haunted him" when separated (901). Gurov and Anna's relationship signifies a life-changing new experience, prompting the idea it is the "quintessential 'Romantic' form of progressive universal [literature] as a story of the new" (Simons). Such as when Gurov is in Yalta and he perceives the beauty of nature, a common romantic theme, possibly for the first time:

Grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings- the sea, mountains, clouds and open sky. (900)

Chekhov intends this affair to seem different than anything the two have experienced: "[Women] loved in [Gurov] not himself, but the man created by their imagination but he had never once love; it was anything you like, but not love" unlike what is shared between Gurov and Anna (906).

"To the nineteenth century, love was a magical and spiritual passion . . . edifying or terrifying . . . but always a force implicated in moral good or evil" whereas Chekhov glorified the unfiltered reality for his audience, objectively without definitive good or evil, even if it were nonetheless mundane (Simons). Henceforth, the "force implicating moral good and evil" is reflected in the affair itself, beginning after their first encounter in Yalta. Anna, obviously shaken by her lack of virtue towards her marriage, appeared "somehow peculiar, very grave, as though it were her fall musing in a dejected attitude like the woman who was a sinner" in an old-fashioned picture" (899). Chekhov highlights Anna's morally

wrong romanticist experience writing: "There was about her the purity of a good, simple woman who had seen little of life . . . yet it was clear she was very unhappy" (899). She continually finds herself extremely distressed with the persistent affection she feels for Gurov: "Here I have been walking about as though I were dazed, like a mad creature . . . and now I have become a vulgar, contemptible woman whom any one may despise" (899).

"How could they be free from this intolerable bondage?" Unfortunately, it appears Gurov and Anna may never escape the dreary ordinary life and end up together. The couple's refusal to reject their desires and assimilate into ordinary life leads Chekhov to sentence them to an eternity of simultaneous tragedy and happiness. Chekhov weaves the tale of two unsatisfied adults with an agenda of "depicting subject-matter in its most natural state," (Adams) (896). In this situation, Gurov and Anna's desires and fear of reality is naturally their fall, namely for the fact Chekhov's philosophy of realism was that his writings should present life as it truly was.

Overwhelmed with the concept that one must face life as it truly is perpetuated with Chekhov's techniques of realism, Gurov and Anna succumb to their fear and search for romanticism; the symptom a grand, whirlwind affair which appears superior than their lives before. Gullible to their desire to satisfy the double-life, Gurov and Anna feel "as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new splendid life would begin . . . they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most difficult part of it was only just the beginning" (906). The reader might find themselves disliking Gurov and Anna for searching for something greater than the both of them, something connected to the grand, mysticality of romanticism. From the author's mentality, this story encompasses the majority of Chekhov's philosophy, executing the consequences of searching for the impractical, grandeur beneath the surface of an already beautiful reality.

Considering Chekhov's place in literature as a modern realist writer, our conception of the war occurring in "The Lady with the Dog" favors realism. "The Lady with the Dog" is a modern approach to the fierce competitive nature of realism and romanticism claims that one will never truly be satisfied running away from accepting reality. Modernity shines in this work by encouraging the reader to notice the double-life, imploring Chekhov's modern philosophy endorsing the realism of the mundane,

ordinary life led by the couple without each other. "The Lady with the Dog" remains a work transfixed on the influence of romanticism and realism in a modern society, a classic Chekhovian story to highlight his philosophy and the realism mindset of the modern Russian.

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## A Literary Analysis of *Beowulf*: Survival, Interpretation, and Intention

Jenny Wilson

In literary analysis, even the most scholarly of interpretations are simply well-educated guesses without concrete evidence. Even then, a literary work does not survive 1000 years because it gave up its secrets. Instead, it resurfaces to allow its sacred pages to be explored by new generations of thoughts and ideas. The Old English poem *Beowulf* can be categorized as one of literature's greatest mysteries due to the myriad complexities that hinder modern interpretation. Among the many secrets *Beowulf* hides are the authorship, date and year of composition, and most importantly to me, intent.

*Beowulf* defies specific genre categorization due to the various poetic structures that can be found binding together the once oral poem as a written legacy. Though lacking in some constructs, there is a consensus that *Beowulf* does reflect a heroic epic. Scholars have found elements of Skaldic poetry, allegory, elegy, and folklore seamlessly integrated into the poetic structure. Was the deviation from the traditional elements of the heroic epic purposely done to enable *Beowulf* to stand out among the pages of history? Were the words and memories of the original oral poem so valuable, that when transcribed by unknown quills centuries later, their meaning was hidden beneath and woven between culturally acceptable motifs for preservation?

To consider what the author may have intended to convey with his work, there is a need to have a clearer understanding of the culture that would have surrounded both the author and his audience. By studying the history, language, mythology, and culture of the Viking Age, this paper will offer an analysis exploring the position that *Beowulf* was intentionally written to record the history of the Anglo-Saxon's ancestral pagan culture that was slowly surrendering to an encroaching Christian influence, and whether survival is an overlooked theme.

Beyond the quest for riches and fame lay an enduring need for survival during the 800 years comprising the Middle Ages. Viking raids, tribal warfare, and the ingrained desire for battle-brought glory was a way of life and a measure of a man's worth against a heroic code that shaped the Anglo-Saxon pagan culture. In order stay within the strict confines of the code, a warrior must be dynamic enough to survive constant battles,

protecting not only his life and reputation but also the life of his overlord. In turn, an overlord must be ruthless, intelligent, and fierce in battle to ensure the continuous victories needed to accumulate the treasure hoards to reward his faithful. This give and take of life, loyalty, and worldly treasure that was the basis for the pagan heroic code that clashed with the Christian ideals of forgiveness and peace. As each ideal was repeatedly brought face-to-face within the political hierarchy and cultural value system of medieval Britain, Christianity slowly began to carve its place beside ancient pagan images in the stones, artwork, crosses, and literature of the Viking Age. As the preeminent chronicler of the early medieval age, the Venerable Bede was in the position to shape Anglo-Saxon history in that he "adopted an approach to history that reflects his own devout Christian faith . . ." (6). By choosing to record the region's accounts of life through a religious filter, Bede neglected the still-prominent heritage of the Germanic culture, and the pagan and tribal roots surrounding him—abandoning local versions of what was true. Taking this into account when reading *Beowulf*, the reader should question if the remnants of pagan influences could endure a Christian church trying to assimilate Viking culture into the fold, or were the runes and symbols of the motherland were deliberately recorded under Christian overtones and possible linguistic and mythological codes to avoid the scrutiny of a papacy an ocean away?

Because "Scandinavia was the last retreat of paganism in the West of Europe . . ." (Herford), the idea of pagan themes found within the surviving literature holding more significance than originally interpreted is not beyond the realm of possibilities. When today's reader sifts through the strange wording and foreign imagery of *Beowulf* they are unconsciously using both their own cultural expectations, and modern understanding of the words in the text as a guide. Unless you are sorting through *Beowulf* in search of pagan 'flags,' as I will refer to them, you have no cause to question the footnote explanation or definition. For example, line 141 reads, "the heathen keepers of hell-runes wander." In modern times, the word *heathen* has come to mean "a person who is uncivilized and not religious. An example of a heathen is a person who lies, cheats and does other immoral things." Yet, the meaning of the word *heathen* is of Germanic origin meaning 'inhabiting open country,' from the base of *heath* . . . and usually a person who had yet to convert from their pagan roots. It is easy to see how cultural relativism can easily twist the intention

of the text. Runes were first developed by the Germanic people as both an alphabet and "a pictographic symbol of some cosmological principle or power, and to write a rune was to invoke and direct the force for which it stood" (O'Donoghue). One translation of the word *rune* is 'secret,' and it was believed that runes also contained magic and the essence of a god or goddess inscribed in it. In Norse mythology, the goddess of the underworld was Loki's daughter, Hel. Also, spelled Hell, it was with her that ghosts resided, so hell-rune could also be considered a rune symbol for her ghosts.

So, to further analyze lines 140 and 141, "No man knows where on the misty moor / the heathen keepers of hell-runes wander" could also be translated as no man knows where on the misty moors the heathen keepers (or guards) "of hell-runes" (ghosts) wander. Or, "where the ghosts that guard the heathens wander." The Christian-inspired footnote defines the line as meaning, "those adept in the mysteries of hell, the translators are taking the liberty of suggesting that demons such as Grendel are familiar with runes." Whether this could be proven true, the idea that a pagan flag was lost to an intrusive scribe begs the reader to wonder, what else was lost in translation?

Fodder for perhaps the greatest leap of creative interpretation can be found in lines 60-71. Hrothgar is mulling over the creation of the greatest mead-hall in history and decides that it shall be the highest of houses, and he shall name it Heorot. A Christian scribe etched out a mead-hall, granted by God, where tales of the Almighty could be sung. It is possible the original oral poetic tradition designed the mead-hall in a more pagan tradition. Hrothgar summoned the greatest craftsmen from across Middle-Earth, a pagan idea, and built the "highest of houses" (line 71). In Norse mythology, *Valhalla* also translates to "highest of houses." In Anglo-Saxon, *Heorot* translates to "stag" and as the text states it was adorned with horns. The Christian interpretation suggests that, in addition to providing a place of safety and fellowship, Heorot functions as a hunting lodge. Yet, if we take into consideration the Norse mythological connotations, we could also interpret the mead hall to be "Valhalla, highest of houses" and instead of the stag designating it a hunting lodge, we could instead see it as Eikthyrnir, the stag in Norse Mythology that stands upon Valhalla, the highest of houses, whose horns were a symbol of protection. The songs sung by scop within the hall could also be recounts of "tales told of times past" (line 83) and "life breathing in all

creatures" (line 89) referencing Odin as the life-breather. Once the reader understands that the *interpretations* of literature are not *limitations* of literature, research and insight can open a new generation of possibilities.

Among the topics that scholars of *Beowulf* have exhaustively concentrated on, are the underlying themes that shape the poem. The most noted themes range from loyalty, envy, revenge, hospitality, heroic code, and Christian vs. pagan. From there the road divides depending on the context, religious or pagan, that you are reading *Beowulf* through. To stay within the pagan context, the little mentioned theme of survival can be seen. Survival can be defined as 1. The state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances and 2. An object or practice that has continued to exist from an earlier time. The theme of ensuring the survival of one's lineage was not only an element of oral poetry and epic poetry as seen in the recitation of *Beowulf's* parentage, it was also a tradition of Icelandic "saga-writing was motivated by the desire of the Icelandic aristocracy to maintain or reconnect links with the Nordic countries by tracing the ancestry of Icelandic aristocrats to well-known kings and heroes to which the contemporary Nordic kings could also trace their origins" (Miller 2009). Survival of the past ensured a memory in the future.

Each of the characters in *Beowulf* are faced with the responsibility of survival on multiple levels. Every nuance of the heroic code, from strength, courage, skill, and generosity creates both a bond and an invisible obligation to act in a manner that safeguards the survival of those bonded to you. *Beowulf* faces Grendel and his mother to secure the survival of Hrothgar's thanes and the sanctity of Heorot. *Beowulf* stands down, refusing the offer to succeed as king to allow for the rightful heir to take the throne ensuring the survival of the line. In the end, as *Beowulf* descended into the pagan dragon's cave, he cemented the survival of both his glory and of the pagan heroic code. Though his death meant the end of the Geats, had he resolved to adhere to the Christian value of peace, both his legacy and the subsequent detailing of pagan funeral traditions would have been erased.

Literature can survive for 1000 years by remaining endlessly explorable, but also because "literature does not exist in a vacuum" (Pound). The fact that literature is not shielded from outside factors within a vacuum, that it is vulnerable to the influences of culture and society and not just defined by the imagination of the author as Ezra

Pound suggested, is a missing link in the appreciation and understanding of literature, especially in archaic poems such as *Beowulf* whose language, history, and themes have been twisted since its original transcription under the quill of an intrusive scribe. Yet, 1000 years ago that scribe sat at a rough-hewn table, the tip of his quill etching the memories of a people into paper, sealing the voices that alone carried the intention of words into the ink. The candlelight flickered its death spasms as the waxen pillar curled into itself, exhausted from the responsibility of bearing sole witness between the hooded figure and the manuscript. For in that moment lies the only true interpretation of *Beowulf*.

Now, it is the student scholar's silent obligation to study the history, language, culture, mythology, and folklore of the Viking Age to gain a deeper understanding of the shifting culture. By developing a working knowledge, student scholars may offer new insights into decoding the pagan undertones hidden in Christian overtones in Scandinavian works such as *Beowulf*, thus ensuring the survival of Norse traditions.

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## The Psychology of Southern Literature: Genetic Memory, Attributions, and Grits

Jenny Wilson

I hate grits. I have never tasted them, but I know I hate them. A land substance dumped into a bowl from a wooden spoon that has wreaked the rears of three generations and topped with a yellow pat of butter makes my stomach churn. And yet, I can smell them in ghost memories. My mouth instinctively waters as part of me desperately wants to eat and savor them as my grandfather, great-grandfather, and generations of Southerners before me have. Is it a cultural predisposition to enjoy grits ... or is it something deeper—something encoded in the memories and history of my people?

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung theorized that we are born with a form of "genetic memories" to help understand how we humans know things we have never been taught. Jung's theory of a Collective Unconscious describes genetic memories as being a way to define his even broader concept of inherited traits, intuitions and collective wisdom of the past: "memories and learned experiences of people with common ancestors or histories that are built up over centuries and passed on through our DNA strands" (Jung 126). Nobel Prize-winning neurobiologist and psychoanalyst, Dr. Eric Kandel, proposed "the idea that stimuli could change the way DNA is expressed . . ." (Kandel) and began conducting groundbreaking research involving a sea snail, learned fear, and classical conditioning. Researchers in the emerging field of biological epigenetics at Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University conducted research that expands on the idea that memories can be passed through DNA. Using classical conditioning, mice were repeatedly exposed to the scent of a cherry blossom, then administered a mild electric shock. Soon, the mice began to exhibit fear at the smell of a cherry blossom, regardless of whether a shock was administered or not. Researchers found that fear towards the smell of a cherry blossom was passed down through DNA strands to the offspring, as the pups exhibited fear at the scent despite never being shocked themselves (Eastman).

For Southerners, it is not the limbic system that regulates our emotions and memories . . . it is our stories. Anyone who has ever listened to a Southerner tell a tale knows three things: 1. it absolutely, without a doubt, 100% happened kind of like that, 2. only half the people in the story

are being described accurately, and 3. there will always be a hunting dog involved in some way. What is it that keeps the stories of our people, our living history chronicled in well-preserved drawls, the same generation after generation?

When a writer can craft words that use all five senses to connect the reader so deeply to their story that it pulls memories from their DNA, they are using a tool I have termed sensory nostalgia. Southerners truly are a nostalgic people, not for an old South culture, but for the warmth and sense of place recorded in our genetic memories. There is a breed of Southern writers that could be considered part of the same literary family tree, in that they each might contain the same literary DNA. Mark Twain, Robert Ruark, and Rick Bragg each emerged from a different period of both time and literature, yet sensory nostalgia is a central theme that could bind their works together to form one memory, told by three different family members. Ernest Hemingway gave Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the credit for the creation of modern American literature. If Huck Finn was the Big Bang of Southern literature, do we derive our literary DNA from there? This paper will offer a rocking chair to sit and explore the uniquely southern cadence, and the use of sensory nostalgia as a writing tool, in the books *The Old Man and the Boy* by Robert Ruark and *My Southern Journey* by Rick Bragg. By showing the rich connections their stories have with Southerners past and present, this paper will attempt to answer if, through genetic memory, our Southern literary DNA has been altered to survive and preserve our cultural attributions in an increasingly modern world.

While Southern writers would never shock helpless mice, through sensory nostalgia they can use the smell of a cherry blossom to evoke powerful memories recorded in a literary DNA that can be traced back to one single novel. Ernest Hemingway once wrote that, "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before." Prior to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Southern writing tended to lick the wounds the Civil War gave by glorifying a lost culture of slaves, feudal hierarchy, and chivalrous nonsense using European literary forms. Mark Twain would give Southern writers a new strand of literary DNA to evolve from, as he himself evolved, his travels taking him from his narrow southern roots to the wide-open spaces of an entire world of perspectives and people.

Newton's third law of motion states that a body in motion stays in motion. What was true for the realm of physics was also true for Mark Twain. He was a man in constant motion, crossing the boundaries and borders that fenced in the opinions and values of most Americans. Through his constant motion he saw the changes in society and human nature in fluid time. It was because of his experiences and interactions with an array of people that he grew to "condemn his section's backwardness" (Levy 216), and the literature that glorified it. An older, more cynical Twain dipped his pen into the Mississippi River, and created *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of the first American novels to use authenticity to typeset each word onto the page. Twain gave every sentence the drawl and diction of the people within both the pages and the physical region, blurring them together to form one seamless piece of living literature. It was this authenticity and language that both Robert Ruark and Rick Bragg seemed to have inherited, enabling their words to pass on the genetic memories and attributions of the real South.

Scholars and literary elite have tried to be kind to the southern genre, giving it nine lofty themes to define itself by: "a focus on common history, the significance of family, a sense of community and one's role within it, a sense of justice, religion, racial tension, land, a sense of social class, and the use of southern dialect" (Flora, MacKethan, and Taylor 37). Writers who inherited the evolved literary DNA from the Huckleberry Finn Big Bang, like generations of Southerners before them, "rigged up" their own criteria. The sections of *My Southern Journey*, by Rick Bragg, are divided into what can be considered the true criteria of nostalgic Southern literature: Home, Table, Place, Craft, and Spirit. In 1957, fifty-eight years before *My Southern Journey* was published, Robert Ruark wrote *The Old Man and the Boy*, a book whose every chapter can be categorized by those same five words. Is it that every family, hunting dog, and town are so carbon-copied, so generic that they have no choice but to fall under Home, Table, Place, Craft, and Spirit? Or is it something more?

Bernard Weiner, building on a psychological theory introduced by Fritz Heider in 1958, constructed a framework to understand the how's and why's of human behavior entitled Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory is "a general approach for describing the ways individuals use information to generate causal explanations for behaviors and events" (Roeckelein 57). Two ways attributions can be formed are externally and

internally. External attributions, or situational attributions, occur when we attempt to interpret someone's behavior as being caused by the situation that the individual is in, rather than personal causation. A perfect example of situational attribution can be found in *The Old Man and the Boy*, in which Ruark writes of his favorite uncle coming home for Christmas "fried to the eyes":

He fell into the Christmas tree, toppled it over, busted the decorations, and set fire to the drapes. We used candles in those days. Uncle Rob pulled himself up out of the mess, scraped some tinsel off one ear and glared mistrustful at those around him. "GOSH DOG IT Santa Claus!" he said and staggered off to bed. (Ruark 201)

Uncle Rob brilliantly took the blame away from the amount of holiday moonshine he had consumed, and forever put it on Santa Claus for ruining the tree, his coat, and Christmas in general. We can only theorize that the tradition of blaming beloved Christmas figures for tragic mishaps and Grandmas getting run over could have originated from this single situational attribution.

A second form of attribution, internal attribution, is where we assume the cause of the given behavior "is due to the individual's characteristics such as ability, personality, talent, or attitude" (Roeckelein 57). Here, situations and circumstances have little to do with the outcome because we assume it is determined by, as my grandfather would say, a person's "innards." Rick Bragg seems to agree with both my grandfather and internal attribution theory when describing his brother, Mark, in the excerpt "My Brother's Garden" from *My Southern Journey*: "He knew the secrets of the dirt. He reaches down and pinches a false blossom off a squash. I don't know how he knows it's false. When I ask him these things, he just looks at me puzzled and says I've always knowed" (Bragg 22). It was not science, or a farmer's almanac that taught his brother, it was an attributed ability to speak the language of the dirt. The talent of both Ruark and Bragg to use sensory nostalgia as ink to write of the past, and its ties to the future, could come from keepsakes, attributions that are handed down from generation to generation, and from the secrets of our people encoded in our genetic memories. Bernard Weiner may have given Attribution Theory its framework, but Southerners invented the process.

Sensory memory is the shortest-term elements of memory. It is our ability to "retain impressions of sensory information after the original

stimuli have ended" (Gazzaniga 267). Sensory memory is the first step in the process of encoding long-term memories and, while sensory memories are only seconds worth of stimuli, perhaps sensory nostalgia creates a biological epigenetic change in Southern storytellers. The startling honesty, and the beautiful simplicity, of both author's words are the language of a people whose words and stories have passed down recipes, memes, and immortal hunting dogs in a time where literacy was optional.

It was those details, delivered in a soothing cadence, that could very well cause the sensory memory function of all southerners to have evolved into a higher, more sustainable memory process.

I have learned to never read anything by either Ruark or Bragg on an empty stomach. Both writers' use of sensory nostalgia to describe food is done with such finesse that I feel as if I am a shadow at the table with them. One such meal was a breakfast Ruark described as being the favorite of The Old Man, himself, and every cold duck hunter prior to the mid-20th century in the chapter, *A Duck Looks Different to Another Duck*:

The old man laid out the eggs on the fried bread, with the yolks broken and soaked down into and bubbling up from the bread, which wasn't crunchy like toast, but was part of the egg and bacon grease, and he put the bacon strips across the eggs and poured the coffee. I don't know of anything that tastes as good as eggs cooked that way when it's cold as sin outside but warm in the room. (25)

Ruark is passing down not only the recipe, but the taste of the food, the smell of the coffee, the feel of the air, and the subtle sounds of a simple cold-duck hunt breakfast. He is using our potentially evolved senses to imprint those minutes into our genetic memories. Bragg sums it up perfectly when he notes that, "something as simple as a wooden spoon can seem like a magic wand where ancestors stir something extra into recipes passed down for a 150 years" (82). For Southerners, food is a concept deeper than the vats of Crisco countless Mamas dipped into for biscuit making. It is a recording of lean years, births, deaths, and traditions. A full stomach helps us display some of the attributions we are famous for—humor, honesty, simplicity, and most importantly, *manners*.

We are a polite people, welcoming both strangers and ghosts into our homes knowing each will leave an invisible footprint on the grounding element of every Southerner—their sense of place. It doesn't matter if the place is a piece of red dirt, or a nailed together structure, because the

home holds the family and the red dirt holds their ancestors. Together, the land and home create roots so deep that the past and the present are held together firmly in one place. Robert Ruark and his grandfather, the Old Man, found home in nature. It was in the rivers they fished, the woods filled with legendary deer, and under the covey of quail they, with immortal hunting dogs, hunted. The land is where the Old Man preached to the boy about life, respect, and family. Ruark details, with reverence, a lesson on humility and nature that his grandfather gave him in the chapter, "Summertime and the Livin was Easy":

In my brain I looked at all of it- the trees, the grass, the moss, the bugs and birds, the ferns, and flowers. The setting sun and the rising hatch of flies. I felt the dark creeping in and saw the first shining speck of stars as the swamp noises mounted. I felt cold in my bones from the rising miasma of the mist as the air cooled. Then he spoke you ain't said much. What do you feel like? I feel like I been to church. I feel like I got that word you said. Humility? The old man asked gently. (131-132)

The Old Man knew that while wisdom can be preached to a young boy, sometimes adults must sit back and let the land, and the places we call home, offer their own silent wisdom. There is an awful lot of knowing that must be passed down to the children who will carry on our stories, genetic memories, and our attributions.

"Mama, you sound like a book when you talk sometimes." I could not tell if my teenage daughter was rolling her eyes at me, or at the phone in her lap, so I resisted the urge to get the wooden spoon. It is true. There are times my sentences become crowded with adjectives and imagery. In a world filled with cell phones that enable teenagers to scroll through life, instead of interacting with it, my words do paint pictures of our past and homeland with a sense of urgency. My daughter does not know it yet, but she inherited the literary DNA that I inherited from my grandfather. She is the descendant of a strong and stubborn people, long gone save for the memories we resurrect them in daily for one more story, one more ball game, or one more cast into the cool water. I see the ability to pass on a memory through sensory nostalgia in her as we sit around the fire. She talks about the stars scattered in glittering chaos against the black as sin sky. She pokes at a log that has just caught, to hear it pop indignantly, as the almost burnt-out wood shifts underneath it with a resigned hiss. Pumpkin seeds that never sprout give her fits because, according to a



hand-me-down attribution, since she is Southern, she should be able to make it grow. I have seen her stop mid step and sniff a ghost scent, wondering if anyone else smelled it.

When Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he did so out of frustration at a genre of literature that no longer represented the true South. Twain gave Southern literature a new voice, complete with her own drawl and diction, creating a Big Bang for a new lineage of Southern literary DNA to evolve from. Robert Ruark and Rick Bragg are two examples of the line of writers that used sensory nostalgia to paint memories with all five senses. Our genetic memories, attributions, and cultural stimuli are passed down as keepsakes through our stories bearing the authenticity Mark Twain infused into *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the cadence found in both *The Old Man and the Boy* and *My Southern Journey*. As we are becoming further isolated due to the technology of an increasingly modern world, our literary DNA has evolved, allowing us to carry on. I am passing on sensory nostalgia so that long after I am gone, my children can find warmth and their way home in their genetic memories. It is also so that when this world gets too big, they can find comfort in the five themes Mark Twain, Robert Ruark, and Rick Bragg “rigged up” to define true Southern literature: Home, Table, Place, Craft, and Spirit. Unfortunately, I cannot pass along a taste for grits.

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As soon as you enter,  
you hear sounds of Nina  
as Professor Hughes  
quotes Dr. Angelou  
*Black bird, Caged bird\**  
Someone's in the corner  
reading Langston  
but that's cool.

The Professor is some relation,  
at least that's what I heard.  
They say he received  
a DNA kit during Kwanzaa.  
He found out he was African,  
well eighty-eight percent,  
but I believe that's passin'.  
Now instead of slaves  
he teaches we are kings.  
He says Africa is our root,  
not American things.  
Yet America is our extension.  
That's what makes us unique.  
We're rich with history  
and a lot of mystique.  
So day in and day out,  
he unravels the mystery.  
He bridges the gap  
and establishes his legacy.  
He's not exactly a poet,  
but he puts rhythm in knowledge.  
This is the pedagogy  
of a Historically Black College.

\*reference is to Nina Simone's "Blackbird" and Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird"

The Dread  
Maegan White

The feeling that someone is watching when you're all alone,  
The prickling feeling that someone is in your home,  
That panic when you hear the floor creak,  
The way your heart pounds when you hear the door squeak,  
The breath that you hold for as long as you can,  
The sudden realization that you should've ran,

You hear footsteps grow closer to your bed,  
All you can do is bury your aching head,  
The footsteps stop. You're filled with dread.

In the Trashcan  
By Maegan White

A tiny noise  
A tiny "clink"  
A tiny chirp  
A tiny "tink"

What's in the trash?  
What's inside?  
Your eyes are curious  
Your eyes are wide

Over the edge  
Just on top  
A little creature  
Suddenly stops

Its eyes are wide  
Its fur is grey  
Its tail is pink  
It's cute, in a way

With little hands  
In blackened gloves  
Munching away  
Trash is what the possum loves.

Eidolon  
Jorge Ortiz

*Officer Alvarez*

He stood there at the edge of the bridge looking at the rushing water underneath him.

"Dispatch, this is Officer Alvarez en-route home," I said as I pulled over. "I've got a possible 10-96 on Willow River Bridge. Going to check it out."

Another suicidal civilian. Just what I needed on my way back to base. I took a long drag of my cigarette as I stared out at the figure standing by the bridge's railing. Suicide bridge, the townspeople called it. Haunted by a ghost who made people do strange things. At least, that was the tale. That was what everyone always said to scare the kids. But the statistics added up, and that's why everyone chose to avoid this route. It was an abandoned road with only the suicidal making their way here to enter their eternal sleep. Twenty or so a year jump off this bridge. That was enough to keep townspeople a mile's distance from this place. No one wanted to get sucked in by the voices calling out to them. Me, I didn't really care for such nonsense.

After a final drag of the cigarette, I open the cruiser door. The damn rain would extinguish it, and I had just lit the damn thing. I had to act fast with this guy. I didn't know who he was; the rain blurred his image, even with the headlights shining on him. The lights alerted the man staring down the bridge. He stared, and as I drew near I could hear a faint mumbling.

"Sir," I said. "I'm Officer Alvarez. Step away from the railing."

"War. Death. Bombs. Bullets," said the man to himself, not acknowledging me but staring past me toward the cruiser. "Bill. Dead. Death. My fault."

A distant siren sounded, causing the man to go into a frenzy. He thrashed on the ground, as if the sound of an incoming siren was his cue to completely lose it. Pounding the ground with his fists, he couldn't take it. The noise. The lights from my cruiser. The rain. It was all too much for him, and his panic forced me forward. I rushed forward while he was distracted. Until I recognized him. His behavior.

"Charles" I shouted over the man's panic, acknowledging his episodic behavior. "Charles, it's alright."

I drew near him and inspected him for injuries but found none. I knew his trauma. His pain. His trigger. The rain and the lightning brought back the demons: the images of the war. And then I wondered what he was doing out here, miles away from his home. So far away from our neighborhood. After all, he lived four houses down from me, and that was no walking distance from here.

"Charles, listen to me," I said as I looked up and noticed the crashed railing where Charles had been standing. I rose to my feet and followed a car's tracks that crashed into the bent railing on the bridge. Looking down, I managed to catch sight of a pair of tail lights before they disappeared under the surface of the water.

"Oh God, Charles! What did you do?" I said. "Dispatch! I need backup and paramedics at Willow River Bridge!"

"Charles, where's Nancy?" I yelled back to the man rocking back and forth on the ground. "Charles! Listen to me! What happened?"

More sirens sounded in the distance, and the scene became infested with officers. Charles was removed from the scene, too distraught to say anything. There was no more we could have done. We searched for the submerged vehicle, but it was too late. I was too late.

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*Two months later: Charles*

The memories came back to me. The rain pounded on the roof. I cradled myself in bed. And the memories jolted back. Death! War! My fault! Bill! The memories began taking control of my body. My emotions. My mind. I grabbed the only solution that helped. The only thing that drew them back. And I chugged the bottle, drowning the thoughts. The liquid warmed my insides and calmed my nerves. But I could still see him! Bill! Standing beside me! His figure. His face. The blood.

"D . . . ad," I heard a voice say but ignored it.

The last thing I needed. The last thing I wanted to worry about. The child. He couldn't see this. Couldn't see Bill. Couldn't know what I had done. Or hadn't done. *Go away Bill! Leave him alone! Leave him!*

"Go to sleep!" I managed to say without stirring, fighting to keep the memories at bay. Fighting the urge to explode. Fighting but losing.

"I can't," he responded.

"Force yourself," I shouted as the memories made another attempt

to infest my mind.

"I'm scared," he continued.

"Deal with it," I responded, forcing the thoughts back to the depths of my unconsciousness. *Bill! No! I'm sorry! Leave!*

"I'm hungry," he pestered.

I couldn't take it. I couldn't control it. It took over. The pounding. The thundering. Bombs. Bullets. Death.

"Da . . ." he began as I forced myself out of bed, the darkened room hiding his fragile figure.

A lightning rod illuminated his figure, and the outline took that of The Demon. The bastard. The fucker that did it. Bill! Dead! My fault! *Kill him!*

"It was you!" I said, charging at the figure by the door.

He stepped back, attempting to escape. He killed Bill. It was him. I saw him that day. The day I couldn't stop him. But I had to stop him! I had to end it! My hands clutched his thin frame. He waddled, attempting to escape after what he'd done. He cried out for help. But there was no help. Not anymore. He was alone. And I would kill him. *Kill!*

I lifted up an arm to strike him as another lightning rod lit his face. A different face. Not The Demon's face. A boy. Crying. A boy. Screaming. My boy. I loosened my grip as he sprinted away from me, running towards the door to the house. *Bill! Why? I can't!*

What have I done? The memories. They continued. The virus spread. And the cure didn't exist. There was no cure. Only the pain reliever. *My* pain reliever. I grabbed another bottle and forced the liquor down until everything spun. Until I didn't stand. Until I was not conscious. Unable to hurt him anymore. Unable to cause him any more pain. Until Bill was gone.

\*\*\*\*

*Officer Alvarez*

I didn't want to talk about it. For the last two months my wife had pestered me about Charlie. I didn't know what else to do for him. He didn't want to leave his dad. He still cared. But was also scared. I didn't know what to do about any of it. Of Charles' condition. Of Charlie. Charles was already unbearable for the neighborhood as it was before Nancy's death. He was a racist prick before, and the death of his wife only added

his poisonous condition. His drinking got worse. His neglect of Charlie increased. And he refused any help. From anyone.

I walked out of the house to clear my head. Another thunderstorm day. Another bad day for both Charlie and Charles. I needed a smoke to clear my head. I wanted one. But gave it up, smoking. Ever since Nancy's passing, I hadn't touched a single cigarette. Hadn't had the desire for one. I got into my cruiser as a heavy rain washed our neighborhood and decided to take a drive instead. I stared down the driveways to the ill-kept home. Before driving off, I decided to walk over and check on Charlie. The home was dark. The porch light was off, which always meant Charles was either inside too drunk to do anything or was not home. His truck was parked halfway on the road and halfway on the sidewalk, his usual careless parking.

I stepped out of the cruiser and walked to the home, pondering what more I could do: how else I could protect and serve. Being neighborly was not enough. Nancy's death could have been prevented. I could have saved her. If I would have headed straight to base instead of stopping for my addiction. I could have avoided Charlie all of this pain. All of this injustice.

The once pampered and flowering home allowed itself to wither: no grooming, or rather lack thereof, its decaying wooden frame, and its weathering fence. All of it, saddened by the passing of its once lively owner and keeper. Nancy's passing showed.

Charles was going, fast: losing all touch of reality. I understood. I got his trauma. The war was tough. Nam did a number on all of us, and most of us chose to not talk about what we witnessed. The horrors that plagued us day to day. And worse for Charles, his best friend . . . there was nothing he could have done, died in his arms. That was not something any of us could have easily recovered from. I didn't blame him. Only pitied him. And sympathized for his son's pain.

Charles was already disliked by our neighbors for his racial remarks and hatred, but ever since Nancy passed, his hatred towards the Hispanic community had worsened. He despised us more than ever. I thought it was our fault, well my fault, his wife was dead. Because I couldn't save her. And I could have. If not for my addiction. I could have done something. But instead I remained a constant reminder of that night to him. Of the day he lost his wife, his better half.

As I reached the house, soaked from the rain shower, I noticed a

boy sitting on the front steps, Charlie. He was crying. I let out a sigh, angry at not being able to help any more than I did. Unable to bring his mom back. Unable to fix his dad. He lifted his head out of his lap and faced me, clearing his tear-stained face. I opened the crumbling gate and walked toward him. He did not say anything as I approached him. He just remained still, staring up at me as I drew near.

"Hey, *Mijo*," I said to him. "Where's your dad?"

He didn't say anything, only pointed behind him toward the door. "Is he drinking?" I asked.

He nodded his head slightly. I had seen how Charles got when he drank too much, which went from a weekly to daily routine. He lost touch with all reality, and the one who took the blows was usually Charlie. Blamed it all on Bill, usually said that Bill told him to do it. That Bill wanted justice. That Bill deserved justice.

"Why don't you come over?" I said. "Let your dad cool off."

I pulled him up and began walking back toward the gate. As I did, a crash came from inside the house and a shadow lurked near the door of the house until the front door slammed shut.

Immersion  
Jorge Ortiz

"I told you to stay away from them Wetbacks," I heard Charles say from outside.

I dried my soapy hands on my apron and rushed toward the door. Not again. I couldn't stand it. Not my Charlie. Not today.

"Charles," I shouted as I pushed on the screen door.

Only, Charles had placed my flower pot in front of the door, preventing me from running to my boy's aid.

"Charles," I shouted, as I struck the screen door with my hands.

"Stay out of it, Nancy," he responded without even turning to face me.

The two stood out in the gracefully colored front lawn, adorned with my flowers, lawn ornaments, and bird feeder. Charlie stood with his back facing the street, his eyes watering as they called out to mine. Charles, belt in hand, did it once more. Again, and again, the leather truck my boy's delicate back as his father scolded him for having different friends. They were only boys. He didn't know any different. I didn't raise him to hate because of the color of one's skin, a parenting choice opposite his father's. Charles didn't understand. Ever since he was young, Charles has had a problem with colored people, a trait forced upon him by his own father. I knew his past. His father's abuse on him for doing just as Charlie had done. A cycle repeating itself.

"Charles," I shouted once more, pushing desperately on the door. Stop!"

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Charlie cried himself to sleep in my arms. I held him close, allowing tears to escape my own eyes. Charles in the next room, our room. With another woman. Their moaning and groaning trespassed the thin walls, each noise biting away at my soul. The man I once loved. The one who swore to love and protect me. With another woman. In our bed. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't take his infidelity. But what more was there for me to do? What else could I do but remain strong? For Charlie.

I refused to sleep in that room. In that bed, ever again. And Charlie grew more scared each day. The only thing that made him happy, the only

relief he had in his life, was his friend. A good friend. And a good family. A family I wish we were. The home stilled, all sound drowning in the boiling thunderstorm cooking outside. The calm sent chills down my body until the clicking of heels and slamming of the front door signaled the beginning. It was happening again. And I had to stop it. I knew what I had to do, knew what I would go through. And as I kissed Charlie's puffed up red face, I built up enough courage to do it.

I set his head down on his pillow, carefully as to not wake him. I crept to his bedroom door, locking the door from the inside before stepping out. One final look at his still body on the bed and I walked out, closing the door behind me. I then turned to our darkened home. My home. My life. A life I didn't desire. Didn't expect to have. Nothing but sadness filled my hallways. My room. And I accepted my fate. I was being punished for my own disobedience. My failure to listen to my parents. To my family. To my friends. They warned me, but I didn't listen. I was in love. Blinded by Charles. And I fled. Left the loving home I had with my parents. Left my friends for a life of misery. I deserved it. I deserved this punishment. But Charlie didn't. He deserved happiness. And I would ensure he obtained it. I mustered enough courage and stepped forward.

"Charles," I spoke as the bedroom door creaked open.

The storm drew strength outside. The wind pounded the window. The rain splashed sporadically on the roof. It was happening. His episode. It was happening again. And they were getting worse. The more he drank, the more he relied on the liquor to numb his pain. His trauma. I didn't know what to do for him. All I could do was love him. To hug him tightly and talk him through it.

"Charles," I whispered into his ear as he clutched onto my arm.

I knew I would have a bruise in the morning, but I didn't care. I was used to it. I had to help him. I had to endure whatever pain he caused me. If not, he would lose all control. He would begin to see things. Things that haunted him and urged him to injure those close to him. To injure me. Injure Charlie. And I couldn't let him do that. I couldn't let him continue to harm Charlie. Charlie hurt so much already. He didn't need more pain. I couldn't let him hurt anymore. So, I endured the pain. I protected him. I did all I could to keep Charles away from him, causing my own soul to wither. To dissipate more and more each day. And I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to Charlie when Charles succeeded. When Charles finally killed me.

I had to leave. I had to get Charlie out of here but couldn't. We were stuck. No family. None willing to take us in. None willing to put our family drama behind us. None willing to take in Charlie, a disgrace after his daddy. And so, I endured the pain. Endured it until Charles passed out. Only this time . . . he didn't.

"Bill," he called out as his head rose from my lap.

He stared out before him, his eyes darkening. I was too late. And before I got the chance, a heavy hand smacked me in the face. I fell to the ground, dazed by the blow. I crawled forward, but a foot on my back stopped me.

"Ch . . ." I tried to say before another blow to the head followed and the darkness consumed me.

"Kill," was the last I heard before completely letting myself go.

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My head pounded, my vision blurred, and my body was drenched. I felt my body, soaked. I made an effort to open my eyes but couldn't open them. They were swollen shut. I felt around me, the ground was wet. And a continuous rain pounded my body. My hands moved about, shaking from the fear that encaged me.

"Ch . . . Charles!" I managed to say.

I tried to get to my feet but couldn't. I forced my eyes to open, managing to slightly open my left eye. I could see the car. Our car. The headlights to the car. A bridge. Charles. Where were we? What happened to me? My body was bruised. My legs ached. My clothes torn off me, spread out leaving my body exposed.

"Charles!" I shouted as I attempted once more to get to my feet.

He looked down. Down the bridge at the rushing water below. Muttering to himself. He was gone. He was no longer Charles. A dark shadow loomed around him, and that was no longer the man I once knew. His head cocked slightly in my direction, a murderous grin forming on his face. That was it. It was happening. Bill had taken control. Bill had gotten to Charles. And there was no stopping him.

I looked for a way out, the only safe option being the car. The driver's door opened. And I thought no more of it. Charles was gone. I had to save myself. Had to save Charlie. Where was Charlie? Was he safe? I had to get to my boy. I ignored the pain, the nausea, the headache and

pushed myself to my feet. Charles stood at the bridge, his body completely facing my direction. I stepped forward, and each step I took drew Charles to me. Each step I took toward the car, Charles took one himself.

"Charles! Stop!" I pleaded as I limped my way to the car.

Our bodies met at the driver's door, mine stepping into the driver's seat first. I felt his heavy arms clutch on to my neck, and their force clamped down, forcing my face to ache even more. I ignored the pain long enough to get ahold of the gear shift and force the car forward. The car plunged forward, Charles' clutch not loosening. His force grasped me, and the life began to leave my body. My body tired itself, my mind unable to process anything. And the last I recalled was a heavy crash, my body slamming against the car's interior, and a rush of water consuming me. And Charlie's still body. His face. His smile. Still in my mind. Still enough. Enough for a final attempt. Before the water consumed the drowning car.

Solace  
Jorge Ortiz

"Hey, *Amigo!*" my father said to Miguel. "Speak English! You're in America!"

"Bye," Miguel whispered to me.

Miguel turned from my father and walked back toward the lewalk. We didn't expect him to be home; he never was. We had just been taken out of school, and usually at that time of the day, he was at a bar or with some whore. We tended to avoid my father as much as possible. I knew he didn't like Miguel, but Miguel and I had been friends since kindergarten. Our friendship had endured all of my father's shit from kindergarten until middle school, and he was still somehow my friend. I sometimes thought it was out of pity.

My mom had liked his family. She always talked to Miguel's mom, behind my father's back as well since she too didn't want to set him off. I didn't see the problem in hanging out with him. My mom had understood my father's dislike but never explained it to me. She just said that he didn't know them and was cautious.

"Why do you have to do that?" I asked my father as Miguel took off.

He laughed, took a deep drag of his cigarette, and continued to harass anyone that walked by our house. Our neighborhood had been 'ainted,' as he liked to call it, by immigrants over the past several years. We lived here our whole lives. Well, he had with Mom. She died in a car crash about a year ago. My father got worse after her death. It should have been him instead of her. He was the drunk. The asshole. And the one responsible for her death. As far as I knew, they were both dead.

"Ain't I told you not to hang out with them Wetbacks?" he said to me.

"He's not! Stop calling him that!" I said. "That's why no one likes hanging out with me. Because you're such a . . ."

"Such a what?" he asked as he stepped in my way.

I stopped on the second step of our mold-covered porch. I knew I kicked up but didn't care. I was right. He was being an ass, and that wasn't right. I stared past him, knowing I could out-manuever him to the front door. His wounded leg, hurt in the Vietnam War, would prevent him from catching me. And I knew I was in for it unless I somehow got past him and

locked myself in my room.

"You gonna tell me?" he asked.

"No," I said, pushing past him and reaching the screen door. I opened it and said, "such a *puto.*"

I thought he wouldn't understand me. He never did. Never cared for learning or speaking "their" language unless it was to insult them. But I was wrong. Somehow, he found his army strength and pulled my ass back outside before I got a chance to run inside. Yanking me by my shirt, he dragged me down the steps and flung me on the dried patch of front lawn. For everyone to witness, he undid his belt right then and there, and I knew better than to run; it would only make it worse.

"You ain't a Wetback," he told me. "You gonna speak right!"

I covered my head with my hands and closed my eyes as he swung, the belt buckle striking my back. A sharp pain arose throughout my back as he swung over and over again, all while school kids and parents watched as they walked by on their way back from school.

"*Por Dios,*" I heard a woman say. "Ay! Estop!"

"Mind your business, Maria," my father shouted at the woman. "Ain't you got some houses to clean?"

I opened my eyes and noticed Mrs. Alvarez, Miguel's mom, standing by my front lawn. She pushed past our tattered gate and walked inside. It was then that I realized my father didn't even bother turning to see who had spoken. He hadn't cared.

"Why you people will walk past any border, won't you?" my father said as Mrs. Alvarez came over and pulled me away. "Get off my property!"

My father didn't even care that she took me with her. He had done his job. He had exerted his power over me and over everyone who watched. That was all he wanted and ever cared about. He always liked having his little bitch to boss around.

"Is alright, *Mijo,*" Mrs. Alvarez said to me as she caressed my back and checked its bruises. "*Alejandra, ve por tu Padre!*"

Miguel's younger sister took off running towards her house in search of her father. Mrs. Alvarez continued to rub my back as other concerned mothers walked over.

"You, okay?" one asked me as a group of them began murmuring in Spanish.

After a while, Alex came running back with her father behind her. After all, they only lived four houses down from ours. Her father, a



well-known and respected police officer in our neighborhood, marched behind her. I always felt safe when he was around. He was also a veteran. He didn't become an egoistic bastard like my father. Either way, my father always told me to stay away from him. "Damn, Beaner, taking our backs," he would say even though I never saw my father lift a finger unless it was to strike me.

"*Que paso?*" Mr. Alvarez said as he reached us.

"*Mira,*" said Mrs. Alvarez as she turned me around for Mr. Alvarez to look at my bruised back.

Mr. Alvarez leaned down to examine my back. He always had me pull over my father, some sort of military rank I never understood, but at my father could never let go of. But my father had something over Mr. Alvarez too. My father always reminded Mr. Alvarez saying, "*La Migra.*" Mr. Alvarez was curious to know exactly what that was about but never wanted to ask Mr. Alvarez about it. I didn't want that to come between our friendship somehow.

"What happened, *Mijo?*" Mr. Alvarez asked.

"My . . . dad . . ." I answered.

Mrs. Alvarez spoke, but it was too fast for me to catch. The anger in her eyes and worried expression was more than enough for me to understand that she was concerned for me. It reminded me of my mom and how she would hold me and soothe the pain away every time my dad struck me. Embarrassed by the incident, I buried my face in my hands and began to cry. My father would be ashamed of me for being surrounded by so many of *them*. But I didn't care. They were nice. I didn't care what he said. They weren't the ones beating me. They weren't the criminals.

"Charles," I heard Mr. Alvarez call from my house's broken gate.

He didn't have to stand outside the slanted, teetering gate outlined by the overgrown hedges and peeling paint. The only house on the block that was not well-maintained. Despite the many times, my father shouted to Miguel and the other boys on the block to go mow lawns, no one ever mowed his. Miguel and several other older boys would crank their lawn mowers and maintain the entire block's lawns on the weekends. All except my father's.

My father didn't come out at first. But after Mr. Alvarez called for him several times, my father came out shouting his usual white trash nonsense.

"Officer, *Como esta, Amigo?*" he said from behind the torn screen

door.

Mr. Alvarez didn't react to my father's sarcasm with hatred. Instead, he remained calm and said, "What's going on, Charles?"

"Ain't it time for your *siesta, Compadre?*" my father continued.

The women standing next to me began to drag their children away. They all knew my father and didn't want their children exposed to his hatred. Everyone left except for Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez. Mr. Alvarez continued to talk to my dad while Mrs. Alvarez began to pull me away from the house.

When we reached her home, Pepe, their youngest son, came out the front door to meet his mother.

"*Vete,*" Mrs. Alvarez said. "*Adentro, niño*"

Pepe went back inside as Mrs. Alvarez led me up the steps to her home. As we were walking in, Miguel came out with his *abuelita*. The two of them looked worried, and they rushed over to see what happened.

"Go in," Mrs. Alvarez said as Miguel led me in, and Mrs. Alvarez talked with her mother. I loved Miguel's *abuela*. She was always loving and cared for me when I came over.

Miguel grabbed my hand and led me inside while Mrs. Alvarez began to explain to Miguel's *abuelita* what happened. Neither his mom nor his *abuela* spoke much English, but they understood enough to get by.

"You okay?" Miguel asked as we walked inside.

"Yeah," I answered absentmindedly as the smell of cooking *frijoles* wafted through the Alvarez's home.

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The smell of the slow-cooking beans mixed with the Hispanic décor calmed my fearful heart. This was home. The warm, welcoming smell of a cooking meal, the brightly colored walls, and the cultural decorations. It always made me feel welcomed. Mrs. Alvarez's nonstop kitchen operations and meals. Her warm, homemade *tortillas*. Miguel's *abuelita's atole de arroz*. The bright mint green walls and smell of *Fabuloso*. The cleanness of the entire home and its light atmosphere. The floral living room with matching floral curtains I had seen so many times, yet each time I saw them they looked new to me. It all brought back memories of my last birthday with my mom. My father wasn't home, so it was planned at Miguel's home. They prepared an authentic Mexican

irthday party. My mother had always been excited by the way they celebrated birthdays and wanted to experience it with me. There was a *fiesta*, tamales, goody-bags filled with Mexican treats, and a *tres-leches* cake. They went all out. Until my father showed up.

He didn't say much at first. Most of our block was reunited for the party, and my father began chatting up our neighbor, the only other white family on our side of the street.

"What do you think of this *barrio fiesta*?" my father had said.

Our neighbor avoided talking to him as much as possible, eventually making an excuse to leave the party early. The party ended early for everyone as my father got drunk and began accusing Miguel's mom of being an illegal. But everyone knew. Even my mom. And my mother was not okay with her "betraying 'our' country."

"How can you interact with these Wetbacks?" my father had said. "It's our duty. To our country. I'm calling immigration. Sending all these illegal bastards back!"

I didn't know what my mother had said to him later that night, but I stopped him from going through with it. My mom didn't mind that they were illegal. I didn't either. To me, they were family. But something about "being illegal" gave my father power over our neighbors.

\*\*\*\*

"Let me see, *Mijo*," Mrs. Alvarez said to me as I sat on the floral sofa, the one my mom had sat on many times before with Mrs. Alvarez to drink some *café*, and have some *pan dulce*. They would talk for hours: my mom teaching her English and walking her through the citizenship process and Mrs. Alvarez sharing her homeland's recipes and her stories from when she was a girl in Mexico.

She pulled my shirt up to reveal the bruises on my back. The bruises hurt as she rolled the shirt up, and she began putting some cream on them. Miguel sat beside me as his mom dressed my injuries. He didn't say much. Didn't know what he could say to make me feel better. He just let his mom care for my wounds. When Mr. Alvarez came inside, he didn't look very happy but hid his irritation when he noticed I was staring at him.

"It's alright, *Mijo*," he said. "Your dad's a little drunk is all. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

I nodded, and he smiled at me. His reassuring, everything will be okay smile.

"Good," he said. "We're cooking your favorite tonight."

He walked off with Miguel's *abuela* into the kitchen. The cream Mrs. Alvarez put on my back warmed the wounds, numbing their pain and relieving my back. I turned to her, and she smiled. Her smile reminded me of my own mom and how much I missed her.

"There you go, *Mijo*," she said.

\*\*\*\*

I enjoyed dinner with the Alvarez's. Mr. Alvarez made some *carne asada* while Mrs. Alvarez prepared some *pico de gallo* and *salsas* to accompany. And Miguel's *abuela* worked on preparing some homemade *tortillas*. I remembered when she tried teaching my mom to make them and my mom's flour-covered, sweat-drenched, frightened expression when she either burnt them or made the dough too gooey to work with. She enjoyed the experience, and the two of us laughed at each of her failed attempts. Her spirit was always hopeful. Even after every attempt to recreate Mrs. Alvarez's cooking. My mom just wasn't that great of a cook. But she tried and enjoyed the experience, a lesson she instilled in me. "Enjoy life, Charlie," she had told me. "The world is a dark place, but you can live in the light of it all."

Miguel, Alex, Pepe, and I played outside while the adults cooked. They had a soccer goal set up in their backyard, so the four of us played a game while we waited for dinner to be ready. We all got along well enough until Pepe started crying because we wouldn't let him touch the ball. The game usually ended with him crying or grabbing the ball and running away with it.

When dinner was ready, the four of us grabbed a plate and sat on the grass eating and talking about school. Nothing in particular. Just something to keep the awkwardness away.

After dinner, Miguel invited me to stay over. I didn't want to go back to my house, so I agreed, not that my father would care. His mom set up a spot for me in his room, and we both spent the rest of the night talking. I thought about my father and what happened. I wondered what Mr. Alvarez had said. And what my father had threatened him with this time. He'd threaten to call the border people on Miguel's mom before.

That's why most people avoided conflicts with him. He always threatened to do that, though he never actually did. I didn't know what had happened between him and Mr. Alvarez. All I knew was that I was stuck with him.

I couldn't change him. But at least I had people who would take care of me. I had people around me who cared about me. Though they were all scared of my father, my mother was good to them. They were all as hurt when she died. She meant so much to all of us. She was our protector from my father. They loved her. I loved her. And she didn't deserve to die.

I rolled over, away from Miguel as her bright smile and delicate face came to mind. And once more, I cried myself to sleep knowing that tomorrow I would have to deal with the bastard she left me with.

## Ping Whytnee Shattuck

Six months ago, I wasn't this crazy. Six months ago, I'd never seen the inside of a Yahoo! chat room, much less held a conversation with a complete stranger online. Six months ago, I wasn't so neurotic about having my phone on me at all times or making sure the internet stayed on. Six months ago, I just wasn't. Now, I've had six months of gut-wrenching, soul-capturing connection in this virtual "relationship."

I stare at the screen of my T-Mobile Sidekick. I can feel my web of lies slowly choking me. I don't have to do it. I don't owe him anything. I don't need to do it. I want to, though. I lay back down on the couch to stop my feet and legs from quaking clean off my body. My eyes lock on the ceiling. I breathe in. I breathe out. I breathe in. I hold my breath. My hand pulls at my lower lip; I sigh heavily. Did the air kick off? Why is it so hot?

I sit up and stare at the minuscule photograph on the left of the flashing indicator and can hear it screaming at me with every blink. LIAR! FRAUD! IMPOSTER! The blonde hair and green eyes stare back as if looking into my soul and through my black, weeping heart.

My fingers tap incessantly on top of the keyboard, never pressing hard enough to actually type. My shoulders are tight. My left foot taps endlessly. I run a hand through my mousy brown hair, the foot tapping having now traveled up my leg and completely infecting my knee with its hundred mile an hour rhythm. My nose itches. My neck itches! Oh my God; why does everything itch? My heart beats so fast, it's triple the rhythm of the blinking cursor in that diminutive white box at the bottom of the chat screen.

He wants my number. With that request, he's driven me absolutely mad. In my desire to stop talking to him, my ache for release from this cathodic prison, I've ignored all emails and "pings" from the chat-app for the last three days. There is no reason for me to talk to him, nothing tying us together. The twelve-hundred miles prevent any obligatory conversation.

JOHNBUCKEYEB0I: I know you're there.

Fifteen letters and I can't breathe.

JOHNBUCKEYEB0I: Why won't you talk to me?

Eighteen more and I think my heart is no longer working. Dear

d.

Slamming the laptop shut, I flop onto the couch, grab my Sidekick, flip the screen up, giving me access to the keypad. There it was, the ten words I tried to fend off by confining them between two silver pieces of precisely cut metal. I look at the closed laptop, its shiny lid taunting me: Open me! Open me! My phone vibrates.

JOHNBUCKEYBOI: Just call me. What did I do? I'm so sorry, baby. Please.

I stare at that final word: please. "No, Katie, No. Don't do it," I tell myself.

Another ping.

JOHNBUCKEYBOI: I've scoured the internet. No tragic wrecks reported in your area, no obituaries for you. This isn't like you. What did I do? Please, talk to me, baby, just . . . talk to me.

*I'm not your baby. I'm not yours. Not really.*

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I haven't been on an actual date in three years. My recent ex didn't believe we needed to date once we were "official." That relationship was like a drug. I couldn't see past his smile long enough to understand that he only wanted me around because we looked good on paper. I had no idea he was cheating on me, from the beginning. I was so stupid, so blind. I'm standing in my bedroom, getting ready for bed, wondering where I went wrong. I run my hands down my sides as I look at my reflection. I can count on one hand how many times this body felt his caresses that last year we were together. It's been so long since anyone has touched me.

How do people interact with each other these days? How did people meet anyone who didn't already know everything about you because, well, that's small-town USA for you? I look at myself in my full-length mirror, turning sideways, examining the comfort-weight that had settled on my hips and abdomen. I can't meet anyone looking like

this. I'm so . . . blah. No, definitely not the time for dating.

Throwing on pajamas, I grab my laptop and head to the living room. I hop on Myspace, eager to change my background image to whatever emo Avril Lavigne layout I can find. I notice a girl from high school has recently changed her profile picture to include some cute guy with side-swept hair. Oh yeah, I heard a rumor about them. How she had met this guy online, but she did so under false pretenses. When her beautiful, size zero self-confessed truth to him, he opened his arms willingly. I heard they were expecting their first kid. Weird. Way to keep up with the times, Class of 2004.

I bite both lips between my teeth, an idea forming in my head. Maybe I could give it a go. No harm, no foul. Not to mention, I know Yahoo! has a great block feature for when you don't want to chat anymore. I just need to figure out how to find the chat rooms. Shouldn't be too hard. I scour Google images until, at last, I find the picture of a girl with blonde hair and bright, clear, Picnik'd lime green eyes, and just enough cleavage to make things interesting.

I open Yahoo! messenger and click 'new user.' I have to make sure that my screen name says "Hey, talk to me, I'm fun and flirty!" but doesn't yell "Spam Bot!" I'd heard about those, pornographic spam bots designated to fill your laptop with viruses and spyware, whatever that was.

Before I know it, I'm in a chat room called "Fun After Midnite," with the screen name CANDICEBabie08, names so irritatingly misspelled that I can feel my acid reflux boiling up my esophagus. This probably isn't a good idea. The chat room is filled to capacity with those infamous bots. Link after link of "Click Here for Sexy Photos!" and "Live Ladies in Bikinis: Fellas Can't Resist" cause the text to scroll at an alarming speed. Yes, definitely not a good idea.

I move to log out when I see a small blue sentence.

JOHNBUCKEYBOI: Any non-bots out there?

\*\*\*\*

JOHNBUCKEYBOI: Please.

*I can't. I have to quit you. I just, I can't.*

I sit up and open the laptop, again. This time I would do it. I would

him. I would confess my sins and pray for absolution.

I begin to type, my fingers trembling as they press each silver key with exactitude. I manage to get to my name this time, my real name before I hold down Backspace with fervor. I lean forward, my left hand trying to hold down my twitchy knee, my right hand scratching my eyebrows, my neck, my side, and OH MY GOD; WHY AM I ITCHING? I rub my bare feet back and forth on the carpet, the friction heating up the soles, and drop my head back, staring at the ceiling. What am I doing?

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: I just want you to tell me you're at least okay. Call me, baby, please call me. 216.555.0123. Please, baby, I'm literally begging you. Literally.  
*I'm not okay. I can't.*

\*\*\*\*

I'd been so busy with work, I hadn't opened my laptop since the night before. I open a Mike's Hard, refill the cat's water bowl, and sit down on the couch. Lifting the screen, I press the power button, the familiar white screen reminded me of the forbidden fruit, and I had willingly taken a bite. I'm so tired from chatting with him until the early morning hours. I feel like a teenager all over again, excitedly gushing on the cusp of a new crush.

Yahoo! signs in automatically. Within seconds, the only screen name on the friend's list changes from italics to bold. He's online. Was he invisible, waiting for me to show up? I smile, and before I can double click his screen name, a chat box pops up.

I cannot contain the excitement coursing through me. I know we haven't really talked for the first time last night, but I cannot control how bubbly I have become.

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: Hey you :)

CANDICEBabie08: Hey yourself ;-)

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: Did you have a good day at work? Any students give you trouble?

Oh yeah, I forgot about that. In my haste to make myself seem interesting, I had told him I was a dance instructor. Thanks a lot,

Channing Tatum. Why did *Step Up* have to be better than the sequel? And why is that the first thing I noticed when I looked around my room last night? I roll my eyes in frustration, quickly opening a search engine. I type "How to teach dance," just in case I need the reference.

CANDICEBabie08: Long day! Definitely, love my job, but I would also love a day off. School starts up soon though, so less time at the studio.

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: How's Muffin?

I smile. He remembered my cat. I chew on the inside of my cheek, faintly noticing the periodic bounces from the foot I have halfway underneath me.

CANDICEBabie08: He's good, fat and sassy, fluffy as ever. How was your day? Did you get to see your niece?

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: Yes! Took her and my sister to lunch. That kid can put away chicken nuggets :-D

I smile again, imagining this blue eyed, brown haired profile picture holding a giggling baby. I swear, I could talk to him forever.

JOHNBUCKEYEB01: Hey Candice, are you going to be on later? I have to go to work. The cinema popcorn won't pop itself :-D lol

My smile gets a bit bigger. He wants to talk to me! Oh wow. Okay. Okay. Calm yourself, Katie.

CANDICEBabie08: Yeah, I'll be here. <3

I press send and close the laptop. This isn't a big deal. This is okay. I mean, it's not like we're ever going to really meet. It's just something to do when I'm bored. I scratch my nose absentmindedly. Glancing at the clock, I calculate how many hours until a movie theater would close in Ohio. Just enough time to binge a few episodes of *One Tree Hill*. I can let Lucas Scott keep my mind off of Mr. Buckeye Boy.

\*\*\*\*

JOHNBUCKEYEBOI: You know you forgot to turn your screen name to invisible. I saw you log on. Candice, baby, please talk to me. I know it's a lot to ask, I just really want to hear your voice. I need to know you're okay.

I drag my fingers through my hair, stopping to scratch my neck. I can't do this. I need to log off. Maybe I can Google how to delete a Yahoo! account. My socks are making me hot. I take them off, tossing them toward the cat. I don't want to do this anymore. I can't do this anymore. I've mixed so many lies with truth; I don't know what's real anymore. Did he become attached to me? Or to *her*? Would he love my brown, spiritless hair? Or would he rather be with the green-eyed blonde that still smirks coquettishly from my profile picture? I groan and throw myself back on the couch. This familiar position reacquaints me with the stucco ceiling. I groan, loud enough to scare the cat, my toes tapping on the arm of the couch. I'm just crazy.

*Does insanity run in the family?*

I hear my phone buzzing with each new message, and I cover my eyes with my arm. I need to get a life. I can't.

Okay. I grab my Sidekick and dial.

One ring.

Two.

His voice.

"Candice?"

## In Passing By Maegan White

Angelle passed by me every day, not paying me any more mind than if I'd been a tree or a rock. She'd just gotten a new job, by the looks of her fancy briefcase. That briefcase alone probably cost more than my bike. She strutted as if she was a supermodel on the runway. She was beautiful enough to be a model, though. Her long black hair danced in curls all the way down her back, gently resting on her beautiful curves. She had a lovely face, with big dewy brown eyes, adorned with the fanciest false eyelashes. Her face always tilted upward toward the sky, a snub to all average people. Like me. I was average. Below average, even. But that never stopped me from loving Angelle.

I discovered that her new job was at a law office, where she was an assistant. I'm not a stalker or anything; she walked past me, talking loudly on the phone about it. Her new job, ironically, would bring her past me every day. I wasn't lucky like Angelle. I worked in my uncle's computer shop until recently, when he'd been evicted for not paying the rent. Everyone always took their computers to big chain stores now anyway. Shortly after that, my uncle died. My parents lived in Mexico and my uncle's death left me all alone. With no money and no plan, I just started doing odd jobs any time I could. Through my careful research (getting yelled at for "loitering" and having a hot coffee thrown at me for "being aggressive" while asking people if they needed their cars washed on the other side of town) I'd discovered that the people in this area of town were more accepting of my presence. All day, I essentially begged strangers to wash their cars for a few bucks. If my work was accepted, I'd earn about fifteen to thirty dollars in a day. Of course, those were good days. On bad days, I made nothing.

My life was a miserable one, but when Angelle began passing by me every morning, it was like a fluttering ray of hope. She was so lovely and graceful and looked terribly out of place among the average people. I tried to look as dignified as possible when she walked by, but that was hard to do while holding a bright yellow bucket of soapy water and cardboard sign that read: "Car Wash. Good Prices." Each day that she passed by, I fell more in love with her. When I saw her smile at a squirrel or wave at a child, my heart would melt. Sometimes, the sun would send its rays just over the top of a building, enough to illuminate her black hair

with a halo of golden light. It was a heavenly sight.

She passed by me in January. I tried to gather my courage. She passed by me in February. I smiled and waved at her, only to be ignored. She passed by me in March. I waved again. She scoffed in my direction and looked down her perfect nose at me. She passed by me in April. I made one last attempt.

"Angelle, hi!" I said, nervously as she bounced by in her stiletto heels. She paused, looking confused. "I don't know if you remember me," began. "I'm Eduardo. We had class together every year in high school." I anxiously awaited her response. She stared blankly at me with her wide eyes. "We had math together. Remember? There was that one time you got caught cheating and I said it was me who'd stolen the answer key?" I responded, hopeful she'd remember my actions if she couldn't recall my face. She said nothing. "Or that one time you were late, and I distracted Mrs. Sanchez by throwing a pencil?" I laughed nervously.

"Yeah, sorry. Doesn't ring a bell. You don't look like someone I'd hang out with," Angelle said, with words that stung like alcohol on an open cut. I couldn't breathe for a moment. I hadn't expected her response to hurt so badly.

With shame, I looked down at my bright yellow bucket. The soapy water reflected my pitiful face. I took a deep breath.

"Oh. Well, if you ever need your car washed . . ." I paused. "I'll be here." I tried not to show any emotion as a tear welled up in my left eye.

Angelle tapped her foot impatiently and rolled her beautiful brown eyes. "I need you to back up before I call the police. Creep."

I shook, like a wall about to crumble. Angelle stomped away, occasionally glaring back at me. All I could do was stand there on the corner of Hillcrest and Pecan Street as the woman I'd been in love with since high school strutted away.

She passed by me in May. She glared at me as I sank back into the shadows to avoid her gaze. She passed by me in June. I felt shameful and empty.

In July, she did not pass by. She'd likely found an alternate route to avoid a "creep" like me. In the heat of the summer, my car washing had picked up. My thoughts drifted to Angelle often. Her words echoed. "I need you to back up before I call the police. Creep."

In August, she did not pass by. I was still washing cars. In the first week of the month, I washed forty-three cars. One particularly hot day, I

washed a car for a tall man, with a scruffy face and dark sunglasses. I performed my usual car washing routines and techniques and completed them with a towel dry. The man paid me with a hundred-dollar bill.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "I don't have change." I handed him the money back, resigned to the idea that this wash was just going to be free for him.

"Keep the change," said the man. "You do a fine job, boy." He smiled. "Say, I have a business proposition for you."

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In September, I drove past the corner of Hillcrest and Pecan Street, to my new job at Carlo's Carwash and Detailing. Carlo owned almost all of the carwashes in town and paid his employees well. Life was finally turning around for me, but as I drove past the corner Angelle's words still echoed in my head. Sadness and anger filled my heart.

In October, I passed Angelle on my way to work. The sun didn't seem to follow her as it had before. She looked tired and ragged. Her once voluminous black hair now appeared straight and scraggly. Her proud stride had dwindled to a slow, unbalanced gait. Instead of her professional clothing, she wore a tight red skirt and an ill-fitting leopard print tank top. Shock filled my body to see her in that way. I almost didn't recognize her. Strangers walked by, not paying any more mind to her than if she had been a tree or rock.

*Now she can see what it's like to be average. Maybe this is karma for her being such a bitch to me.* I smirked, seeing that Angelle was finally learning her lesson. However, my smirk immediately disappeared when an orange car drove up and Angelle sauntered over to it. She swung her hips in a seductive motion and the driver of the car motioned for her to get in. My heart was in my throat and I felt like I was going to throw up. I watched in horror as the car drove directly down the street and parked at a hotel. I was shaking, harder than I ever had before.

The sight of Angelle in the car with that man hurt more than anything Angelle could ever say to me. For a week, I felt sick to my stomach as I passed by different men each day, picking her up, going to the hotel, and driving away. I cried in my car before work. Not for myself, though. I cried for Angelle. I cried for whatever happened to her to bring her to this life. I cried for her tired eyes and her constant frown. I cried for

he way she had to move her hips around strangers.

I thought back to our classes in high school. She was so funny and cute. Everything she did made people smile. We weren't the closest of friends back then, but we did talk. We had conversations and laughed. Occasionally she sat next to me on the bus. Angelle was a sweet girl, deep down.

The images in my mind fought so hard against what was happening in front of my eyes. Every car that drove by made me sick. At the car wash, I constantly felt ill, worrying I'd end up washing a car for one of those horrible men. But it wasn't my business.

One night, I was coming home late from work. I saw Angelle on the corner. Farther down the street, I saw the orange car. I knew where it was going and what would follow when it arrived.

*It's not your business.* The orange car grew closer. *It's NOT your business.* The headlights of the car grew brighter. *I need you to back up before I call the police. Creep.* The car was nearing Angelle. *Creep.* It slowed down. My heart pounded. *Creep.* Angelle noticed the orange car.

I could no longer watch the disaster unfold. My foot slammed on to the gas pedal and propelled me forward, just in time to beat the orange car to the parking spot along the sidewalk. I couldn't see the driver of the orange car, but Angelle had noticed my frantic parking job. The driver of the orange car zipped around me, honked, and continued down the road. Angelle began to sashay over to me, just as she had to the other men. It made me sick to my stomach. Her hair, stringy and tangled, was tied in a thin, greasy ponytail. She started to say something in a falsely sultry, drunken voice until she saw who I was.

Angelle froze. She looked angry for a moment, but then her eyes became defeated. She looked at her feet as she said in a horribly monotone voice, "Hey handsome. You want to have some fun?" I cringed.

At that moment, I remembered her looking at me in passing as if I was nothing. But here she was, as low as she'd ever been, and I couldn't see her as nothing. No matter how hard I looked. I couldn't see her as average. She looked at her feet the same way I'd looked at my yellow bucket.

"No, Angelle. Let's go grab something to eat," I said. Angelle stoically climbed in the passenger side of the car.

"Thank you," she said.

## Where's Thomas?

Maegan White

He stood there at the edge of the bridge looking at the rushing water underneath him. Thomas inched closer to the edge, clearly admiring the river. I couldn't relate. I hate water. I hate everything about it. While he seemed to feel eager and mystified, I felt sick. We reached the end of the bridge, finally, and I sighed with relief. I much prefer having the earth under my feet. Katie called from behind us, still on the bridge. She and Daisy were making their way across.

"Thomas! Wait up!" she called. A cool mist filled the air. "Did you forget about us? I'm the one who told you about this place!" Katie said with a chuckle.

"Oh, man. I'm sorry!" he apologized. "I'm just so excited! I can actually hear the waterfall now!"

Thomas was so overly excited that I could feel it too. It only made me jittery and nervous. I wondered if Daisy was feeling the way I was. It was obvious Katie was as excited as Thomas, but Daisy eyed the river nervously. She looked up at Katie and was greeted by an oblivious, "So pretty! Huh?"

We continued our hike. I loved our hikes with Katie and Daisy. It always felt like an eternity between them. Today felt different than normal, though. We hadn't been to this place. The sights and smells were all unknown to me. And I had a bad feeling about where we were going.

Our path curved into a wooded area. Everything smelled earthy and fresh. Tiny droplets of mist from the river floated easily through the air and were only revealed by passing sunbeams. The moss on the ground was like soft pillows under my feet. No dirt flew into my eyes or ears because it was all packed so nicely on the moist earthen path. I could tell others like my friends and I had been here recently. They'd left tracks and a bit of trash. One candy wrapper, in particular, caught my attention. Half the bar was still there, waiting for someone to come along and devour it. I was half tempted, but Thomas tugged me back to reality.

"Come on, Duke! We're almost there!" he called. I looked longingly at the candy bar. I was so hungry, but I suppose some other creature would be happy for the forgotten snack. I saw Daisy give a side glance at the candy and keep walking. She had better self-control than I.

We traveled through a dense part of the forest that ran along the



r. Its rushing waters were loud, and they made me thirsty. The trail we were walking suddenly got steep. My shoulders and knees were going to hurt me later.

"Here, Katie. Let me carry your pack down this hill," Thomas said, positioning for Katie to hand over her unusually large backpack. Katie hesitated for a moment and looked away.

"I'm strong enough to carry my own backpack, Thomas! Remember, I've done this before!" Katie griped. She took a step, and the ground began to slip away under her foot. She let out a huff and said, "Well maybe you can carry it down this time. You need the workout anyway!"

Daisy and I exchanged glances. *Sure, Thomas would carry Katie's pack, but who was going to carry me?* I inched over to Daisy. She looked down on me with judgmental eyes, as if mocking my cowardice. Before I could move on my own, I felt a tug from Thomas, and down I went. I was instinctively sprinting down the slope. My speed picked up so much that I found myself in front of Thomas, now pulling him along.

"Check out Duke! He's excited!" Thomas shouted to the girls. I let out an annoyed sound.

*No, Thomas. I am most certainly not excited. I am running because that is what you made me do. It's going to be your fault if you fall. I won't even feel bad. Well Maybe I will feel a little bad. But only a little.*

After the very unpleasant experience of being catapulted down a steep trail, we reached a fork in the trail that led to what appeared to be a cliff. Suddenly, I felt worse than before. *Why a cliff? Why are we so high? This cliff is too tall. Let's go back to the forest.*

Thomas and Katie placed their packs on the ground and began digging out various items. The sun was now higher in the sky and reflected off the strange flying device that Thomas likes to bring places. He placed the device aside and dug out a vest filled with some sort of foam. It looked like a life preserver. He and Katie both removed their outer clothes to reveal shorter, inner clothes underneath. I recognized those clothes. Those were what Thomas and Katie wore when they were going in the water. I looked at Daisy, who was nervously observing Katie.

Katie walked to the edge of the cliff and looked below. She nervously bounced around to Thomas.

"Do you have the drone ready?" she asked him. Thomas nodded.

At that moment, three other people walked up, soaking wet, from a trail that ran in the opposite direction. They were also adorned in water-soaked clothing.

"Sweet drone!" one said. "You guys gonna jump?"

Katie nodded. Another one of the people high-fived Thomas. *My high-fives are better. And I get food after them.* The people began excitedly chattering with one another using words that neither I nor Daisy could quite make out. The group smiled and turned to us.

"What about your little pals?" one of them asked, nodding toward us. Everyone always called us little. I actually was little, but Daisy was quite tall. But to every person, we were "little buddies" or "fur babies" and sometimes people made strange noises to us like "booshy wooshy." I still haven't figured out what that means, but it's good I think. People always say it to us with smiles and happiness.

"They'll be okay up here," Thomas answered. "We're just going to tie them right here." Thomas pointed to a small tree. I knew what "tie" meant. That word did not make me happy. I looked at Daisy, who was filled with dread. I could tell. She whimpered a bit.

"Yah. They're great dogs! They'll behave," added Katie. *She's not wrong. We are great.* But I felt like I was being punished as Thomas and Katie secured Daisy and me to two small trees. I hated when Thomas left to go places. He and Katie readied the small shiny flying device. It took off into the air like a bird. I wanted to go grab it from the air and chew on it. I tugged at my leash.

Then, the most terrible thing happened. Katie walked to the edge of the big cliff, above the rushing water of the falls. She breathed in and glanced at us. With a smile and a wave, she turned back to face the falls. With one leap, she propelled herself off of the cliff.

Daisy and I immediately cried out. Tears streamed down her fur. Thomas, seeing our distress, turned and patted me on the head.

"It'll be okay, Duke. I'll be right back," said Thomas.

*Wait. What? Tell me you aren't going to do that. Thomas. Tell me. Where are you going? No! Come back! You have to live! You're my best friend. I'll die without you! Don't leave!*

My yelling made no difference. He didn't understand my language very well. I cried out. Daisy cried out more. It was of no use. Thomas marched to the edge and waved at something below.

*Why are you waving at the water? It's not friendly! It's going to*

! you!

Thomas ran to the edge and leaped off the cliff, dirt flying everywhere behind him. I yelled and yanked at my leash as hard as I could. The small tree bent but didn't break. Daisy frantically jumped and clung on her tree. She began chewing it with all her force. That wouldn't work for me. But I did have an idea.

I began digging frantically at the base of the tree. Dirt and dust flew everywhere, as well as a few worms that I didn't have the time to eat. I dug with my small paws as quickly and as deeply as I could. I could see the little roots of the tree. I dug my paws into the cool ground and clawed the roots. The tiny tree began to lean. With all my strength, I ran in the direction that the tree was leaning. At last, it was free from the ground!

Daisy had managed to chew her tree enough to break the small branch free that she was tied to. Without another thought, the two of us took off down the trail, the tree still attached to my leash as I drug it along. We sprinted, with Daisy in the lead. She had much longer legs than I.

"Thomas! Thomas! Where are you?" I called. He wouldn't understand my words, but he'd recognize my voice.

We frantically continued speeding down the trail. We passed two humans who were wet. They carried vests like the ones Thomas and Katie had.

"Thomas! Where is he? Where's Thomas?" I barked at them. Daisy whimpered and yelped to let them know the seriousness of the matter.

"Aw! Look at this golden retriever!" one person said, looking at Daisy. "Oh, and this little corgi! Wait . . . he's got a shrub stuck on his back," observed the person.

"They have to belong to someone," said the other person, looking around with a blank gaze. I groaned.

*Yes, Thomas. But you don't understand that, clearly.*

I groaned. We didn't have time for this. Thomas and Katie were probably dead. Daisy and I took off down the path again. My short legs were beginning to hurt, and my belly was getting covered in dirt, but I had to find Thomas. The path came to a point where the trees reclaimed the sky. It was darker here, but I smelled the water close by. Thomas and Katie would be in the water.

We raced by more people with backpacks. All the while, my own personal tree drug behind me, occasionally catching on other trees and bushes. I could barely breathe.

"Come on! Keep up!" Daisy commanded with one loud bark. She didn't understand just how short my legs really are.

She quickly came to a stop at the sight of a squirrel. The little beast was sitting on a lower limb of a tree, chattering slurs at us no doubt. With a squeak and a tail twitch, it mocked us. Daisy and I growled. Perhaps the little creep had seen our friends. We were close to the river, after all.

"Have you seen a male and female human, with vests?" I called, trying to calm the instinct to jump at the vermin.

The squirrel let out a high chirp and another squeak. I didn't know much of the language of squirrels (most of it was derogatory anyway). But I did recognize one tail twitch that signaled the sight of humans. The squirrel turned its head to a smaller path.

"Come on, Daisy! This way" I said, taking off down the small path. "We'll get him later!"

Daisy agreed, and we raced downward. We tried sniffing the air for the humans. There were many of them nearby. We began to hear them. It sounded as if they were in the water. We followed the sounds and scents and, at last, stumbled down a steep rock to the edge of the river. There were so many humans in the water. Thomas and Katie had to be there. Daisy immediately leaped into the water and began searching. I nervously glanced at the glistening surface. I was still so tired from the run. I had to find Thomas, though.

*I can't leave him dying in that water. If I have time, I'll save the other humans too, but Thomas comes first. He's my best friend. I love him.*

I glanced at the tree stuck to my leash. I gulped. Daisy was already in the cold water, splashing around frantically, calling for Katie. She wasn't afraid of the water like I was.

*Be brave, like Daisy.* I let out one last whimper and dove into the water. I could barely keep myself above the surface enough to breathe. My legs paddled, and I raised my nose as high I could, sniffing the air violently for Thomas. There were so many people. Some called to me, others splashed me. My feet kept paddling.

Suddenly, I felt a horrible yank on my neck. I coughed. The tree attached to my leash was stuck between two rocks beneath the water. Panic filled my body. I couldn't move forward. I paddled harder. I called to Daisy, but I could no longer see her. My head could barely stay afloat. Only the tip of my nose could reach the surface now. Kicking and howling,

ruggled to get free. I pulled with all my might, but the tree and rocks  
e too strong. My head slipped under the cold water, and all went dark.

\*\*\*\*

Thomas and Katie walked back to the top of the trail, ready to  
ap again. Katie flirtatiously flicked water on Thomas as they checked  
ir drone to see the footage.

“That was so fun!” Thomas said. “I’m glad you talked me into this!”

Katie smiled. “Well, it’s only a little jump. This little twenty-foot  
terfall is nothing compared to the one I jumped from in South  
merica,” she said with a smirk. They were always in a competition with  
e another. The two laughed and joked until they reached the top of the  
ls. With horror, Thomas realized that their dogs were gone.

“Crap! I knew we shouldn’t have brought them!” Thomas said,  
urching the area with panic. “Duke! Duke! C’mere buddy! Come on!  
ke! Treats! C’mon Duke!” he called. No happy barks greeted him. Katie  
led Daisy in the same manner, but no reply.

The two took off down the trail, calling their dogs as loud as they  
ild. Thomas called so loud his voice began cracking. A tear was crawling  
m his left eye. Then another from his right.

“Duke! Duke!” he cried.

They ran past a group of hikers, who stopped them.

“Hey! Are you guys looking for dogs?” One asked. Thomas nodded,  
ping away the two sneaky tears. “We literally just saw a retriever and a  
rge come this way. They had leashes and everything,” said one hiker.

“Where did they go? Where are they?” Katie demanded.

The hikers gestured to the small trail on the left. Thomas and Katie  
ltd, calling their dogs. They reached the water’s edge and found Daisy,  
lashing about in the water. Katie sighed with relief.

“Where’s Duke?” Thomas muttered. “DUKE!”

At that moment, an older man in blue swim trunks raced to  
omas.

“Hey! I think I might have your dog over here! The poor little guy  
t stuck on a rock. I tried to get him to wake up, but I think his head was  
nder the water awhile. I wouldn’t give up though if it were me,” the man  
used, “There’s a vet not too far from here.”

\*\*\*\*

Everything was dark for a long time. My mind drifted to the  
abandoned candy bar and its forgotten gloriousness. Then that slimy little  
squirrel was there . . . taking the candy bar! My candy bar! I barked, and  
he couldn’t hear me. But then Thomas was there. I saw him in the water.  
He was under water. I had to reach him. I was stuck, though. I paddled  
and paddled. Suddenly, there was light! The darkness had vanished. I took  
a deep breath. It was air! Not water!

I opened my eyes and there was Thomas! Katie and Daisy were  
there too. They hovered over me. Thomas was rubbing my fur. It felt so  
nice to have my best friend back.

*But Wait . . . Thomas died in the water. And Daisy must have died  
too looking for Katie. Which means Katie is dead too probably. I’m dead  
. . . I couldn’t save Thomas . . .*

\*\*\*\*

“That’s right, your little friend is going to be just fine,” the vet told  
Thomas. He and Katie sighed with relief. Daisy was wagging her tail to see  
her friend Duke again. The vet patted Duke.

“Ya know, it takes real skill to drag a dang tree around AND  
manage to get it stuck UNDER WATER,” the vet said with a laugh. “I  
think you might need to be more careful letting this little fella out of your  
sight in the future.”

Thomas looked ashamed and nodded. He smiled at Duke, thankful  
that he was alright.

\*\*\*\*

*Yes. I must be dead. But . . . we are all dead together. This is  
great! I have all of my best friends with me! We are going to have so  
much fun!*

## Sacred Nature in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*

Maegan White

The narrative in *Go Down, Moses* includes many situations involving spirituality. The title itself is the name of a Negro spiritual about the freeing of the Israelites in the Old Testament. While many different forms of spirituality are present in the story, the most prevalent is the sacredness of nature. Through symbolic characters, such as Isaac, Old Ben, "Grandfather" deer, Sam, and Lion, Faulkner illustrates the importance of nature as a sacred force.

*Go Down, Moses* is a series of stories told at various times, through the use of different perspectives. These different pieces of the story come together to form a history of the McCaslin family. The stories involve lessons and observations about human interaction, tradition, and the importance of nature.

Isaac McCaslin is the major protagonist of the book, though the readers experience the stories through the eyes of many different characters. The audience receives presentations of events from different periods of time in Isaac's life. In the section of the book titled, "The Old People," Isaac is learning to hunt properly from Sam Fathers, the son of a Chickasaw chief. Once Isaac turns eleven, he is allowed to join the older members of the community on their annual hunting trip. Isaac, still an immature age, is eager to kill deer:

The boy did not remember that shot at all. He would live to be eighty, as his father and his father's twin brother and their father, in turn, had lived to be, but he would never hear that shot nor remember even the shock of the gun-butt. He didn't even remember what he did with the gun afterward. He was running.

Then he was standing over the buck . . . (Faulkner 164)

William Meyer describes the entire experience as more than the usual rite of passage, calling it a "sentimental data gathering" (33). When Isaac shoots his first deer, he must participate in a ritual in which Sam Fathers anoints Isaac in the blood of his first buck. This ritual is a lesson in respect for nature as well as an initiation into manhood for Isaac. (Faulkner 164). But Isaac must also see nature's sacredness. After the boy kills his first deer, he shows a childish eagerness to do it again. When the group sees a large, majestic buck, Isaac wants to claim it. However, Sam stops him. Sam respectfully salutes the deer, calling him "Chief" and "Grandfather"

lknner 184). In the years he spends with the hunting party and Samers, Isaac learns how much man relies on nature:

For six years now, he had been a man's hunter. For six years now, he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document: of white man fatuous enough to believe they had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey; bigger than Major De Spain and the scrap he pretended to, knowing better . . . It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and relieved against it. (Faulkner 191)

learns about life in the forest. Its variety of plants and animals provide only resources for the people living near the forest, but a source of 1 and mystery.

The longest section of the book, "The Bear," encompasses Isaac's with. In this part of the story, he is a few years older and has advanced wilderness skills. He still attends the yearly hunt and has proven self as a capable hunter and navigator of the forest. His vast knowledge of the woods gives Isaac a special relationship with the environment. He understands the unspoken rules of hunting and growing from the land. "Old Ben" is a giant, fearsome bear that dwells in the forest. The men pursue him, but even when presented with opportunities to slay the beast, they seem to find reasons to avoid killing. Rick Wallach compares Old Ben to Moby Dick. Both are sacred, some animals, built up with myths and stories. Wallach argues that Moby Dick and Old Ben are both mythical and real at the same time (44). The hunt is not just a hunt; it becomes a ceremony, a "quest to slay a monster" (Wallach 44). Old Ben has the ability to unite men on this quest only for a common purpose but by a common feeling. The members of the hunting party not only fear Old Ben, but they respect him as well. The legend becomes an obsession among the men. After studying his ways closely, Isaac can even distinguish Old Ben's prints from those of other

ts:

By now he knows the old bear's footprint better than he did his own, and not only the crooked one. He could see any one of the three sound prints and distinguish it at once from others, and not only because of its size. There were other bears within that fifty miles which left tracks almost as large, or at least so near that one

would have appeared larger only by juxtaposition. It was more than that." (Faulkner 210)

The hunters' reluctance to slay Ben indicates the men's intuition that he is a vital presence in the forest. While it is true that Old Ben is a killer, perhaps it is that fact that helps protect the order of the forest. Old Ben's status as a top predator and as a legendary figure helps to prevent too much harmful human interaction with the forest. Only the seasoned hunters, who respect the forest and understand nature, go after Old Ben and the creatures in his domain. Isaac and Sam exercise restraint when killing and do not take their hunts for granted. Old Ben is represented as a wise, fierce elder of the forest.

Isaac and the others see Old Ben as a powerful, mystical force, like the great buck of "The Old People." Though the men claim that their goal is to hunt Old Ben down, the bear always eludes death. Even sightings of him are rare. Old Ben becomes more of a symbol of the divine power of nature than a physical barrier. He is a legend among the hunters. While he is terrifying and dangerous, Old Ben is also a symbol of the strength of the forest. He's an awe-inspiring figure that represents the thriving of nature. As long as Old Ben is around, so being the forest, and the traditions that coincide with it. The traditional hunting trips are a way of bringing the community together and teaching the younger generations the importance of nature, just as, "Grandfather" buck is a symbol of the forest's sacredness. Isaac's cousin recalls that Sam Fathers showed him the same exact buck on one of their hunting trips, a detail suggesting the buck's recurring and eternal presence. The presence of these legendary creatures in the forest is a sign of the forest's mystical vitality. Their existence also serves as a source of protection. Because of these sacred animals, those who enter the forest are more cautious and respectful. When Old Ben kills a colt and a mother deer with her fawn, the men are disappointed in his actions. Old Ben has "broken the rules" (Faulkner 214). Despite the fact that Old Ben is a fearsome bear, they hold him to an unrealistic, yet constructed and moral set of values. They expect different behavior from such a legendary figure.

This connection between the forest, the animals, and the hunters is further supported at the end of "The Bear" when Old Ben, at last, meets his demise. The balance that was maintained through his existence crumbles, drastically affecting each of the main characters. The men understand that only a fierce dog as wild as Old Ben could properly hunt

They find a large, savage dog for the job. They call him "Lion" for his true nature. "So, he [Isaac] should have hated and feared Lion" (Faulkner 219).

When Lion attacks Old Ben, he clings to the bear's neck (Faulkner 226). Though Lion puts up a fight, Old Ben mortally wounds him, digging through the dog's stomach with his claws. Another member of the party, Old Boon, at last kills Old Ben with his knife, an Indian weapon rather than a white man's rifle (Faulkner 241). "For an instant, they almost resembled a piece of a statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man stride forward, working and probing the buried blade (Faulkner 241). Nothing less than this situation was the triumph that was expected. As Old Ben dies, Sam Fathers also collapses. Both Lion and Sam die only a few days later. They are buried together, both symbols of the old ways. Their deaths, along with the death of Old Ben signify the demise of the forest and the traditional way of life.

Lion, a force of nature, is pitted against the great bear of the forest. It is important to note that human interaction is the cause of this conflict. The logging activity in the forest is the reason for the forest's eventual disappearance. This represents a transition in Southern society in which traditional ways of interacting with nature are replaced with modern industry. Little care is taken with nature, less respect given. Within two years, sawmills and mills take the place of the sacred forest. Isaac witnesses this transformation and is deeply impacted by it.

Isaac becomes like his mentor, Sam Fathers. He observes nature and learns from it. By the time he is twenty-one and Isaac is next in line to inherit his family's land. However, after his experiences in nature, he understands that no one can "own" land. In addition, Isaac has also become aware of the incest that occurred in his family's past and wants to do more to do with the corruption that civilized man has brought to the land. To maintain the spiritual integrity of his relationship with nature, he renounces his ownership of the land and instead gives it to his nephew, McCaslin Edmonds.

At the very end of "The Bear," Isaac goes to visit the camp one last time. A logging company has contracted to cut down the entire area. After the deaths of Sam, Lion, and Old Ben, and the discovery of Isaac's family history, it seems the end of the forest is inevitable. The sacred animals and the wise elders that kept the forest in balance have disappeared. With the loss of the forest, also comes the loss of tradition. "Faulkner recognized,

the effects of modernity on the Mississippian ecology were destabilizing," explains Michael Wainwright in his comparison of Faulkner and Rousseau (302). Isaac is still spiritually connected to the forest and laments its loss. He is thoughtful and reflective when visiting the camp. He comes across a rattlesnake and carefully regards it. (Faulkner 328).

It had not coiled yet and the buzzer had not sounded either, only one thick rapid contraction, one loop cast sideways as though merely for purchase from which the raised head might start slightly backward, not in fright either, not in threat quite yet, more than six feet of it, the head raised higher than his knee and less than his knee's length away, and old, the once-bright markings of its youth dulled now to a monotone concordant too with the wilderness it crawled and lurked: the old one, the ancient and accursed about the earth. (Faulkner 329)

Isaac's encounter with the snake is a sacred moment:

He put the other foot down at last and didn't know it, standing with one hand raised as Sam had stood that afternoon six years ago when Sam led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child, speaking the old tongue which Sam had spoken that day without premeditation either: "Chief" he said: "Grandfather." (Faulkner 330)

He believes it to be the spirit of Sam Fathers wandering the woods. Sam's spiritual connection to nature—that of the Old People—and has been passed on to Isaac.

Once Isaac is older, in the section called "Delta Autumn," he is joined by younger men on a hunt. Because the forest has been cut down, they must travel miles away by car in order to find enough forest to hunt in. The decline of the forest is directly linked to a loss of spirituality and a loss of morality as well. The young men, especially Isaac's nephew Roth Edmonds, are crass and don't have the same respect for the forest that Isaac and Sam Fathers did. "A man shot a doe or a fawn as quickly as he did a buck, and in the afternoons, they shot wild turkey with pistols to test their stalking skill and marksmanship, feeding all but the breast to the dogs" (Faulkner 335). Isaac ponders on this drastic change:

At first they had come in wagons: the guns, the bedding, the dogs, the food, the whiskey, the keen heart-lifting anticipation of hunting; the young men who could drive all night and all the following day in the cold rain and pitch a camp in the rain and

sleep in the wet blankets and rise at daylight the next morning and hunt . . . But that time was gone now. Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because the roads were better, and they had farther and farther to drive, the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward as his life was drawing inward, until now he was the last of those who had once made the journey in wagons." (Faulkner 338)

At the end of the section, they have killed a deer and Isaac knows without doubt that it was a doe. William E.H. Meyer Jr. explains that the events that occur in "Delta Autumn" serve to "shock a much older Ike out of his delusions and into the reality of the New South and perhaps even into the context of a wider America itself" ("The Emersonian Test of American Manhood" 36).

Isaac ages with the forest, learns from it, and becomes who he is because of it, while Sam Fathers takes on the role of elder or educator to teach Isaac the ways of nature. Fulton explains that Faulkner often "aligns his male characters with nature" (443). Isaac becomes a direct extension of the forest and its sacred creatures. As Old Ben, a God-Like creature of the forest dies, so does the order of Isaac's community. "A mortal who is drawn briefly and tenuously into a symbolic world, Ike yearns to cross into another space, yet remains unable to escape his own material limitations," says Bruce Danner in discussing Isaac's relationship to the forest (271). Sam Fathers, the mentor, Sam Fathers, dies and so does Lion: two other symbols of the forest. With this domino effect of deaths, Faulkner clearly expresses a connection between the characters and the forest. William E. H. Meyer Jr. explains in "Emerson Dines on Bear: Or, the Eradication of Nature in Faulkner's South," that Isaac's character attempts to "salvage the pristine Southern land from the double whammy of both military defeat and the industrial revolution—attempting to recreate the natural world through his personal effort through literary recording and moral relinquishing". Nature is vital to preserving order in the South. Duncan McColl concludes, "And so we can arrive, not of strict necessity, but nevertheless, to the post-Reconstruction South of William Faulkner, where the historical conditions once again, for better or worse, seemed ripe to bear forth tragic fruit" (144).

For his later work, *Big Woods* Faulkner borrows some of his ideas from *Go Down, Moses*. By revising the stories and adding more details, he is able to create an even more detailed picture of the forest.

More information is given about Isaac. In addition, the audience receives more passages regarding the wilderness. While "The Bear" is tragic when included in *Go Down, Moses*, Matt Low asserts that the events from "The Bear" and "The Old People" become even more disheartening with Faulkner's addition of a present tense comparison of their forest (61). One such section in *Big Woods* reads:

It was his native land; he had been born of it and his bones would sleep in it . . . The Big Woods, the Big Bottom, the wilderness, vanished now from where he had first known it; the very spot where he and Sam were standing when he heard his first running hounds and cocked the gun and saw the first buck, was now thirty feet below the surface of a government-built flood-control reservoir whose bottom was rising gradually and inexorably each year on another layer of beer cans and bottle tops and lost bass plugs. (Faulkner 170)

Faulkner's unique depiction of the tragic disappearance of the sacred wilderness is different from the depictions of other ecocritical writers of the time because of his intense focus on the region. Faulkner creates Southern environments and characters that interact throughout a series of different books. Some of these characters and settings appear in a story and may not reappear in the same book but resurface in another Faulkner work. The presentation of nature does not have a direct approach. Rather than explicitly expressing the theme, Faulkner lets his characters speak for it, even if their choices and opinions may appear to go against the moral of the story. John T. Matthews explains that this "stylistic ellipsis" in the works of Faulkner carefully integrates repeated details and overlapping events to create a unity of structure and theme (248). Their actions still serve the main purpose. Welling notes that even in the world of ecocriticism, Faulkner's "The Bear" proves his "betweenness" (464). By approaching nature through the use of characters, Faulkner neither has to explain his stories, nor defend his decisions. The consistent characters and settings in Faulkner's stories reveal the disappearance of the spiritually uplifting wilderness and its demoralizing effect on the people around it.

Wainwright discusses how ecological issues appear very often in the same way throughout many of Faulkner's works. "Part of the corruption exposed in Faulkner's 'Golden Land' is ecological and involves the replacement of a native habitat for an alien one," says Wainwright



. While "Golden Land" is an entirely different story from "The Bear," the theme remains the same. Faulkner represents this corruption in *Go Down, Moses* not only with the killing of Old Ben but with the entrance of logging company and the railroad as well. William E.H. Meyer Jr. notes that "for old Ike as for Faulkner himself, the eradication of the wilderness or its transformation into the tamed land can only be legitimized by the powerful myth of Southern history, both its Eden and its corruption" ("The Emersonian Test of American Authorship" 37). Before the killing of Old Ben, the woods were a sacred, pure place to Isaac. The forest was a symbolic Eden to Isaac. After the forest has become corrupt, however, Isaac can no longer look to the forest for peace. Even his attempt at a hunting trip when he is older results in the discovery of more information that makes him feel unsettled. This event is truly a realization that there is no returning to the way things were.

In conclusion, Faulkner uses Isaac McCaslin, Sam Fathers, Old Buck, and Lion the dog to imply the sacredness of nature in the Old South. Once Old Ben is killed by the combination of Lion and Boon, the decline of the forest begins. Using Lion, the dog, to hunt Old Ben meant using nature against itself. As the mysterious and powerful Old Ben struggles with Lion, he is killed with Boon's knife, rather than a gun. At that moment, Sam Fathers falls to the ground and dies shortly after. Lion's injuries also lead to his death. Old Ben, Sam, and Lion all represent the power of nature. Sam is a symbol of the old ways of the South. With his death will come the decline of tradition and respect for nature. The "Grandfather" buck that Sam shows to Isaac is a religious symbol of the forest. Isaac recognizes this later when he meets a rattlesnake in the woods and gives it the same respect, believing it is the spirit of Sam Fathers. To Isaac, the wilderness represents a sacred, Eden-like peace that is slowly declining as it is replaced by modern technologies and modern mindsets. Danner notes, "critics see Ike's embrace of 'natural' ethics of the hunt as admirable but ultimately incompatible with the complexities of civilization," (272). While Isaac tries to preserve the old ways of the South by teaching younger generations to hunt, the younger hunters can never understand the forest the way Isaac does and thus, they never appreciate it the same way. The theme of sacred nature and its appearance in Faulkner's works like *Go Down, Moses* represents the importance of nature as part of the sacred tradition in the South.

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