manuscripts
Cover design by Emily Yoo
Cover photos “Precious Stones North America” and “Pearls” from VintagePrintable.com.

Copyright © 2016 by Manuscripts and contributors. All rights revert to authors and artists.

Visit us online at blogs.butler.edu/manuscriptsbu and www.facebook.com/manuscriptsbu
Welcome to our new issue.

Bryan Furuness here, faculty advisor for Manuscripts. I’ll keep this note short so you can get to the good stuff inside the magazine. We’ve got poems, art, stories—make sure to check out “Stained” by Katherine Shelton, the winner of this year’s prose contest as judged by Benjamin Percy—and more interviews with top-flight writers than we’ve ever featured before.

Manuscripts is a student-driven magazine, and all credit for this issue goes to the editorial staff, led by Emily Yoo, the Editor-in-Chief. Putting together last year’s issue—which won a number of awards from the Indiana Collegiate Press Association, by the way—wasn’t challenging enough, apparently. So Emily came back this year to put together another killer issue while planning her wedding.

I’m pretty sure she’s superhuman.

Thanks, too, to Karl Agger, our new Associate Editor, for running the discussions about submissions and overseeing the launch of the new Martone travel grant. Thanks to Brooke Marshall, the Events Chair, for taking open mic nights to a new level (Readings! Music! Stand-up comedy! Delicious snacks!). Brianna Bean did yeoman’s work in communicating with pretty much every undergrad in Indiana. Danke to Chelsea Yedinak for planning the prose contest before abandoning us for Germany. And to the rest of the editorial staff, the readers: Laud and honor and nachos to you.
It was a very good year, and they were a special team, and I'll remember them for a long, long time. No lie.

Reader, if you like what you see here, consider being a part of the project. If you’re an undergrad at any Indiana college, send us your creative work for consideration for next year’s magazine. If you’re a Butler student, come to an open mic night. Or be a reader on our editorial staff. You might even take part in our first Undergrad Lit Mag Summit, a conference for undergrad editors to talk shop.

Enough from me. Onto the good stuff. If you’d like a free digital copy of this issue, or if you’d like to order more physical copies, check out our site at blogs.butler.edu/manuscriptsbu.

Enjoy the magazine.

Bryan Furuness
Contents

Carey Ford Compton
Mowin’ Day

Claire Christoff
Sophomores

Wesley Sexton
Interview with Anne Marie Macari

Michelé Strachota
Phobias

Katherine Shelton
Jake, the too-angry child

Sarah Coffing
Merry Christmas, Papa

Marissa Pruett
Reading Boy

Elena DeCook
Providence

Cassandra Christopher
Interview with Laila Lalami
Meghan L. Davis
Vessel

Chelsea Yedinak
Bluebird

Ashley J. Junger
First Date

Chelsea Yedinak
Interview with Roxane Gay

Cole Hardman
On the Execution of Last Year

Carey Ford Compton
After the Baby

Alexandrea Sanders
Dark as skin

Mikayla Marazzi
Coping

Kaylie Ann Pickett
My Brother’s Keeper

Wesley Sexton
Interview with Dean Young

Sarah Bahr
Purples
Katherine Shelton
  Stained

Mariam Saeedi
  Alter Ego

Earl Townsend
  Catherine

Carey Ford Compton
  Paideia

Claire Christoff
  Dry

Cassandra Christopher
  Interview with Lev Grossman

Cole Hardman
  The Asparagus of Wheatly Cemetery

Alexandrea Sanders
  CATS!

Camille Millier
  The Wild Cats of Aoshima Island

Contributors
Junior hauled ass down Sheets Road, kicking up clumps of oiled gravel that clanked around in the wheel wells of his pickup.

“Gawdammit Candace, we’re gonna be late!” he said. A hand slapped him upside the head.

“Hush!” Candace said, settling low in the passenger seat. She propped one bare foot on the dash and the other out the window. “The Lord heard you say that. He don’t want you cursin’ on the way to His house.” She wiggled her toes in the breeze.

“We ain’t there yet. We’re gonna be late ‘cause a you.”

“Jesus don’t care if we’re late.”

Junior thumped his hand against the side of the pickup. “Hang on back there,” he hollered out the window. His teenage son and daughter hunkered down in the truck bed and braced themselves against the cab. With a rev, Junior drove over the bridge and hit a pothole on the other side, tossing the kids near a foot in the air. He heard a whoop of joy from the truck bed as they landed.

They got to the little white church just as the bell was done ringing. Candace tossed her flip-flops onto the ground next to them and stepped into them one at a time. The kids climbed out of the
truck bed and the four of them slipped in the front door as quietly as they could.

“There you are, Junior!” Pastor Max said, stepping down into the aisle to shake his hand. “I knew you’d be here. We waited a minute to start.”

“Thanks, we was runnin’ a bit late.” Junior pulled off his baseball cap and looked around. “Only ten today? Where’s Martha?”

“She wasn’t feeling good. But the Lord will be with her whether she’s here or home. Let’s get started.”

They sat by the open windows, hoping the August breeze would help cool down the stuffy sanctuary. A lone ceiling fan spun lazily above them and Candace fanned herself with a chunk of pages that fell out of one of the hymnals. They prayed for Martha and for their families and prayed especially hard for a young mother in town who lost her newborn son a couple of days before.

With a nod from the pastor, the wiry piano player hopped up from the first pew and got herself situated at the upright. Everyone else stood as well, searching through the books for the right song. The piano player plinked out the first line of the hymn and then cued everyone else in.

He knew the song because it was one they sang every week—“Little Brown Church in the Vale.”

_There’s a church in the valley by the wild-wood, No lovelier spot in the dale, No place is so dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the vale_, they sang. It had become a theme song for the little white church of theirs, and one Sunday, years ago, Pastor Max sat down to cross out each ‘brown’ and replace it with ‘white’ in spidery pencil.

_There, close by the church in the valley, Lies the one that I loved so well, She sleeps, sweetly sleeps, ‘neath the willow, Disturb not her rest in the vale._ As they sang, Junior saw movement outside the church window.

_Come to the church in the wild-wood, Oh, come to the church in the vale, No spot is as dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the_—“Oh Gawdammit,” Junior said.

Candace frowned and swung her hymnal at his face, connecting to his jaw with an audible _thump_. Then the rumble of a big engine flooded through the open windows, drowning out the piano and singers both. Ten heads turned and saw a great big rusty farm tractor towing a mower deck pass the window, mowing the pasture across the way. An old man hunched over the wide steering wheel, frowning.
and pushing his lips out, a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. His right leg ended in a sock-covered stump just above the ankle, and he held the gas pedal down with a heavy cinder block instead. He looked in the church window, the shade from his cap casting his face in a dark shadow, and drove out of view.

“Junior, help me shut the windows, will ya?” Pastor Max shouted over the din. He and Junior pulled out the rulers, bricks, and books propping the windows open. The swollen wood creaked and squealed as they slid the sashes down. The old glass kept most of the sound out, but also kept all the heat in. Pastor Max wiped his forehead.

“That Ol’ Boy just has ta mow during service, don’t he?” Pastor Max asked. “Why don’t ya ask him ta stop, Junior? He likes you, far as I can tell—he might listen.”

“Ol’ Boy don’t like nobody,” Candace piped up. “He’s old an’ stubborn. It won’t do no good.”

“I reckon I can give it a shot,” Junior said.

The bartender cracked open a Bud and set it on a cardboard coaster in front of Junior. He wrapped his hand around it, soaking up the cold like a new sponge drinks water. The tail-end of the Indiana summer was starting to get to him, and spending the morning in a hot church didn’t help. The Legion had cold air conditioning and even colder beer—maybe that’s why he spent so much time there.

“Dammit!” the guy next to him said. He was playing pull-tabs and tossing the spent ones in a bucket on the bar.

“Any luck yet?” Junior asked him.

“I won a dollar,” he said, “but then I lost it again.”

“Well that’s life for ya.”

“No shit.”

The bartender appeared. “Two in the jar, buddy.” She held up a plastic pretzel jar labeled ‘swear jar,’ shaking it so some coins jingled. He grumbled and stuffed two dollars in.

Junior took a big gulp of beer and looked around the bar. Someone had bought the jukebox for the next hour or so, all country music, and Junior wondered why they didn’t just listen to the radio instead. There was a NASCAR race on both of the two flat screens,
and two of the ladies, too drunk for late afternoon, argued over who was going to win. Someone had brought in a cake for the occasion, and it lay half-eaten and forgotten on a table near the kitchen. In the corner of the building a fenced-off table held a place setting for one. Its dollar-store vase with a plastic rose collected dust despite its prominent place, and each day the Legion Commander laid a fresh slice of lemon on the plate—a tribute to the soldiers who will never come home.

The door opened and a breath of late-day heat rushed in, followed closely by a hobbling figure. Ol’ Boy leaned heavily on his cane as the door slammed behind him. A few turned and looked but were quickly drawn back into the race. He stumbled to the far end of the bar and climbed with difficulty onto one of the red pleather chairs.

“There he is!” A woman in cutoff jean shorts and a tank top slithered over to the old man. “First one’s on me,” she said to him, pulling some sweat-crumpled bills out of her cleavage and laying them on the bar. “Second one, well, I’ll just leave that up to you.” She smiled through bright red lipstick.

Wham! Ol’ Boy slammed something down on the bar and the woman took a step back, surprised. It was his prosthetic right leg, the foot wedged in a steel-toe work boot.

“I don’t want none a yer titty-bills, Marquita, an’ I don’t need yer charity, neither,” Ol’ Boy said, his toothless mouth whistling alongside his words. Marquita wadded the bills up and stuffed them down the front of her tank top.

“You’ll come around. Ya always do when ya get drunk enough,” she said. “Get this bastard a Bud,” she hollered to the bartender, pointing thumb over shoulder, as she stumbled back to her seat.

Ol’ Boy tugged a couple dollars out of the work boot on his prosthetic leg and tossed them on the bar in front of him. There was a click-pop of a can being opened, and his beer appeared in front of him, swaddled in a foam koozie. Ol’ Boy took a big gulp.

Junior saw his chance. He moved to the seat next to the old man and dealt his coaster onto the bar like a hand of euchre, placing his beer on top of it. A moment passed. The old man pretended not to notice him.

“Hot outside, innit?” Junior asked Ol’ Boy. The man grumbled, taking another gulp. “I reckon it’s the hottest summer we had in
years. Yer tractor holdin’ up alright?”

“I dinnit come here ta have no conversation, boy.” He downed his Bud and tugged some more money out of the shoe for another.

“We have service jus’ fer the two hours—on Sundays all days, even. Cain’t ya wait ta mow ‘til later in the day?” Junior leaned in closer. “It jus’ gets so gawdamn hot in that church with the windows closed—pardon my French.” The bartender brought him another.

“You a carpenter, boy?”

“Yessir.”

“Then why don’ ya get out there an’ work while ya still can. Winter’s comin’ soon—won’t be no jobs fer ya.”

“Will ya think about it, at least? Take Sundays off.”

“No. Git outta here, go be with yer family.”

Junior stood, chugging the last of his beer until it was gone.

“Damn, Junior,” Marquita shouted across the room, “if ya don’t cut it out yer gonna end up jus’ like Ol’ Boy over there.” She laughed, drunkenly swinging her arm and knocking her drink into her friend’s lap. “The ol’ bastard’s got a cow pasture but ain’t got no cows!” She and her friend laughed despite the mess she’d made. “An’ what happened to yer leg? That don’t look like no war wound!”

The old man slammed his beer down on the bar and slid off his chair, using his cane to hop over to the door. Each time he stepped with his sock-wrapped stump, his right side sank a few inches.

“Ya forgot somethin’!” Marquita yelled as the door shut behind him. Junior looked down and saw the leg still lying on the bar where Ol’ Boy left it. “Well, take it to ‘im, Ol’ Boy Jr.” She laughed at her own joke and the bartender went over to escort her out of the Legion.

The leg was heavy in his hand—some kind of thick plastic. It was more of a foot, actually, with a long hollow tube that secured it to the calf. He laid it in the passenger seat of his pickup. Ol’ Boy was gone by the time they got Marquita out of the way and Junior got outside, and Junior wasn’t quite sure where to go. He knew where Ol’ Boy’s field was, but was his house nearby? He put the truck in gear and aimed for Sheets Road.

A gravel road next to the little white church took him up a
hill and around a bend. He came upon a barbed-wire fence and his
tires buzzed as he drove over a rusted cattleguard. After a moment
a tall red house rose just over the hill and he approached it. The sun
began to set, a sliver of red and orange burning at the horizon. He
parked, turned the truck off, and hefted the plastic leg.

He climbed some dusty steps up onto a crumbling concrete
porch, stepping toward what seemed to him to be the front door.
The screen door sat uneven on its threshold and the door itself hung
open. Orange streaks of light stretched across a modest kitchen, a
small round table in the center piled high with yellowing newspapers.

“Hello?” Junior called to the quiet house. “Hey, Ol’ Boy? Ya here?” He heard the creak of a piece of furniture and the banging of a
cane. The old man rushed around the corner into the kitchen best
as he could on his stump of a leg.

“Boy, I told ya ta git!” he shouted. In his haste he stepped wrong and started to fall, catching himself on the kitchen table. A stack of papers slid sideways and crashed to the floor, muffling the sound of broken glass. “Damn blood sugar’s gonna kill me,” he muttered, pulling himself up. He looked through the screen at Junior. “Ya come all this way ta staring at me? Ain’t ya gonna help an ol’ man out?”

“Yessir,” Junior said, pulling the screen door open. He helped Ol’ Boy onto a chair and began to scoop the papers off the floor.

“Gimme that,” the old man said, swiping his leg out of Junior’s grasp. He slid his stump into it and buckled it at the top.

A shard of glass fell from the stack of papers as Junior collected them. He dug through, looking for the source, and came across a shattered picture frame. In it was a black-and-white photograph of a young man wearing an army uniform. Junior pulled the photo from its broken frame and flipped it over. In curly handwriting, someone had written “Henry A. Clark, Jr., 1981” on the back. He’d seen the name somewhere before, he thought. Ol’ Boy snatched the photo out of his hand.

“Git!” he shouted, a string of saliva stretching from his lip. Junior leapt up and pushed the screen door open, letting it slam behind him as he left.
There’s a church in the valley by the wild-wood, No lovelier spot in the dale, No place is so dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the vale, they sang.

Ol’ Boy’s tractor rumbled outside, growing louder and softer again with each pass by the church. Inside, in the sweltering heat, Candace fanned herself with one of the hymnal covers that had fallen off. Junior had to shut the windows again, and to top it off the lone ceiling fan had stopped working. Even Pastor Max seemed willing to leave early. Besides, they had a supper to get to.

The Legion’s frigid air conditioning was welcome after the heat they had endured all morning. Junior ordered a couple beers and sat at the bar for an hour or two, while his two teenage kids settled at a family table in front of one of the flat screens. On top of the carry-in supper, the Legion had organized a fundraiser benefitting the young woman who lost a newborn son nearly two weeks prior. Candace stood by the food, having baked and prepared much of it herself. Junior picked up his beer and headed over.

“How’s it goin’?” he asked.

“Made thirty dollars already,” she said, holding up a handful of cash. “Ain’t it great?”

“Thirty dollars won’t buy no baby coffin.”

“Naw, but it’s a start. Every little bit counts.”

“I reckon it does.”

He looked over at his kids. His daughter held a whole tenderloin up on a fork and took bites out of it, hypnotized by the TV. His son swiped around on his smartphone, clearly bored. He’d rather be back at the house four-wheeling in the river bottoms with his friends.

The door popped open and Marquita walked in, greeted by a chorus of hoots and hollers. Candace leaned in, lowering her voice.

“Don’t she just look like a busted can a biscuits with her stomach hangin’ out like that? Useless as a tit on a nun, she is. Almost like that Ol’ Boy—sittin’ around, drinkin’, ain’t contributing nothin’ ta society,” she said.

“I bet he’s got his reasons.”

“Ain’t no reason you can’t be nice ta people.”

“Speakin’ of,” Junior said, “you seen him yet?”

“Naw, I reckon he’s still mowing.”

“Ain’t he usually here by now, though?”
“Why’re ya so worried ‘bout that ol’ fart?” Candace asked.
“The Lord came down an’ claimed a baby boy, an’ you’re worried about an old drunk bein’ late?” She hefted a spoon.
Junior turned toward the bar. “Hey, ain’t Ol’ Boy usually here by now?” he called.
“Hell, I thought he never left,” Marquita hollered back. “He may as well live here.”
“See, ain’t that weird? Even on mowin’ days he’s usually here already.” Junior finished the last of his beer in a hurry.
“What’re you plannin’ now? Ain’t you gonna help with the fundraiser?” She plunked the spoon down in a casserole.
“I’m jus’ gonna check on him. What if he’s dead? Then you’re gonna feel real bad.”
“You can’t always give a shit about everyone, Junior. Ya don’t have to.”
“No, but I can sure as hell try.”

Junior tore down that long Sheets Road to his little church in the boondocks. The sun was setting now, painting the sky in bloody shades of orange and red. From behind the church he heard the distant rumbling of a tractor somewhere off in the wide pasture that stretched west, probably even over the state line. On foot, he followed the uneven barbed-wire fence until he found an opening. Ol’ Boy had mowed there already, and Junior waded through a layer of cut grass, weeds, brambles, and shredded sticks, listening for the sound of the tractor in the distance.
“You’re tresspassin’ now, Junior,” he muttered to himself, “He could run ya over with his mower an’ no one would know.” He walked about ten minutes before he found what he was looking for.
It was Ol’ Boy’s tractor, run up against a tree, sputtering and coughing as it choked on the last of the gas fumes. Junior approached it like it was a wild animal, not sure if it would break free and run off. He heaved the cinder block off the gas pedal and turned the key to shut the tractor off. Hanging off the steering wheel was Ol’ Boy’s cane.
“Dammit,” he said to himself, unhooking it to take it with him. He checked the tree where the tractor had rubbed against it. A patch
of bark was worn down, looking like the tractor had been stuck there at least an hour. “Gawdammit.”

He followed the tracks in the grass back to where the mower deck had hooked a corner on a tree and pulled itself off, sending the tractor off on its own. The sky got darker and redder, devoid of blues and yellows and purples, and the shadows stretched longer. He reached a hand under the mower deck and pulled out a clump of grass. It was dark and sticky with blood.

“Jesus!” he shouted, dropping the clump. He wiped his hand a bit on his jeans. “He just hit an animal—a nest a bunny rabbits or somethin’. Yeah.” He followed the mown path until he saw it.

A shred of cloth lay there, torn from a shirt and spotted with blood. It was plaid flannel—in a color he’d seen Ol’ Boy wear before. He walked a little further and reached a clearing where the grass was short and green. A strip of flesh, rent by the mower’s blades, lay folded over, stuck to itself with drying blood. He considered it for a moment, and then with a trembling hand, picked it up.

He gathered what he could of the old man, placing the pieces solemnly in a pile. He laid the hooked wooden cane across the top, a small memorial to the man he couldn’t make whole again. Looking up from his task, he realized where his search had taken him. He stood in the graveyard on the hill behind the church, the polished gray stones glinting in the last throes of the sunset. That’s where he’d seen it. He walked to the third row.

On the end, a stone read “Henry Allen Clark, Jr., Beloved Son, January 10, 1962 – September 17, 1981.”

Next to it, another stone stood, one that had puzzled him for years. It read “Henry Allen Clark, Sr., July 27, 1944 –,” the second date left blank, waiting patiently for the day he would need it.
The comfort afforded by a Honda Civic is far less exciting than tales from the backseat of someone’s father’s Corvette but she is a cautious girl, the product of public television and holy cards, stranger to both the game of baseball and all its euphemistic connotations and he is a nervous boy whose pack of Marlboro Reds sits idle in its cellophane prison, betraying any hope of adolescent prestige. The radio murmurs its Mellotron sweetness, dismantling, if only for a moment, the reality of advertisements for divorce lawyers and male enhancement supplements.
Lips—dry, sweet, and puerile—
meet clumsily
in the long-awaited exchange.
But it is growing darker still

as the baby hand creeps toward eleven
and Friday night begins its descent,
unforgiving as always.
Corvettes, she imagines, are for red lipstick,

black lace, and pay-per-view endeavors.
Honda Civics are for duckbills fumbling in the shadows
to 45 Minutes of Continuous Classic Hits
and minor revelation.
Interview with

Anne Marie Macari
Anne Marie Macari is the author of five books of poetry. Most recently published was her book Red Deer, which was released in 2015. She spoke to a Manuscripts staff member, Wesley Sexton, about how to generate new material and what to do when ideas seem blocked. Macari founded and teaches in the Drew MFA Program for Poetry & Poetry Translation.

Wesley Sexton: When writing about a literal situation (something that actually happened) how important is it to stay true to that situation?

Anne Marie Macari: For some people it’s not important at all. I think it’s a little more important to me. I don’t really change things. I might leave them out – if it’s not working I’d rather leave it out than change it. I’m always imagining and creating something in poetry, so I just try to bring a little bit of the literal into the imaginative.

WS: How important is it to make the reader clear of the situation?

AMM: It depends on the poem. Sometimes the poem needs a certain clarity and other times there is something else going on where you feel that the situation or event is the catalyst and you don’t need to know the details. Being curious humans, we always want to know the details. We love narrative. It’s a balance and each poet has his or her own way of balancing lyric and narrative, but sometimes if the poem is great I don’t care. If there’s something else carrying the poem, I don’t have to have clarity. Other times, if there is nothing else carrying the poem, and I don’t know what’s going on the first thing to say is “Well, I don’t understand the poem.” However, if it were a better poem I might not
care so much.

**WS:** How do you define the lyric poem?

**AMM:** The lyric is interior. It is the existential part of the poem—the who am I, where am I; it is the consciousness in the poem. It’s also the beauty of the poem—the way language can carry the poem. It’s all those things. But if you put it in contrast to narrative (which is the telling of a story) the lyric is the part that is looking at the story, and feeling it and experiencing it and self-questioning.

**WS:** Would you say that the narrative is the base and the lyric comes from that?

**AMM:** I don’t want to make an equation of it because it’s more mysterious than that and usually they’re codependent. Most contemporary poets use both together. You can just have a little snippet of narrative that can carry a lot of lyric; or a lot of lyric just needs a little snippet of narrative, but I don’t want to make some kind of equation between the two because everyone has his or her own way of working with it.

**WS:** You write from different perspectives occasionally. What purpose does that serve for you?

**AMM:** It’s not that I want distance but I don’t always want to be so literally writing about myself. I’m kind of bored with myself sometimes, so I like to find a way out. Even when I was writing my book *Gloryland*, which is a lot about motherhood and has birth poems, I used other vehicles. I wrote about Mary and I used other vehicles to write about it because I really didn’t want to say “And then this happened to me.” It’s a way of getting out of the self for me. Distance isn’t quite the right word although it is a kind of distancing, but it’s also gaining a larger perspective.
WS: How often do you revisit your poems and what happens when you do that?

AMM: When I go back and look at the work I’ve published, I am such a different person than I was when I wrote those poems. Sometimes I am surprised in a positive way and sometimes I think I would do things differently now. But part of the survival of an artist is that we want to keep working and moving forward. We’re always looking ahead, but when I do stop and look back, it’s surprising. Who was this person who made this poem? Remember what I was going through then? And look how far I’ve come since then. When I wrote my first book I had just gone through a terrible divorce and those poems are much more autobiographical. I felt like that was always going to be my story, and then I moved out of it and I was in a different part of life.

WS: What is more difficult for you—beginnings or endings?

AMM: They each have challenges. One thing I can say about the beginning is that sometimes if I get a first line that clicks in my head, I know I’ll get the poem. That doesn’t always happen though. Sometimes I’m struggling and struggling; but once in a while I get that first line it’s almost like I’ve found a hallway that leads me to the rest of the poem. That’s a good feeling.

Endings are harder because you have to ask where have I gone in the poem, have I pushed myself far enough, have I questioned myself enough? It can be easy to find a great line that’s a great ending, but is it really enough? Have I really done the work I need to do in the poem? And I find that with my students too. Sometimes they’ll find a great line and it works as an ending but in between the first and last line they haven’t done enough work in the poem. Then there are different kinds of endings. Is it good enough to tie the poem up or do I want to leave it open to leave the reader
(and myself) in a more uncertain place? All those questions come into play.

**WS:** *How do you know when a poem is ready to end?*

**AMM:** It used to be harder. I have a better sense of it now, but you learn how to get more done. I don’t want to say that you learn to be economical because that sounds so mercenary, but you learn how to get more done within the shorter space of the poem. I’m sure at some point I’ll go back and write longer poems, but my poems are no more than a page each now—short lyrics with very little narrative—but something has to happen. Some kind of shift has to happen. If that shift hasn’t happened I don’t care how good the language is. I have to feel some transformation in the poem.

**WS:** *At what stage in your writing process do you begin to think about an audience?*

**AMM:** I don’t think a lot about that because I think I’d go a little crazy. One of the things about writing poetry is that if you have an audience it’s not a very big one; and in some ways that’s good because you have the freedom to do what you want to do. When something seems finished, I then think of my little group of writers that I show things to and ask myself, “Is this ready to come to the group?” That’s very important to me. I have a very tight group of four or five women who have been working together for a while now and I can’t imagine not showing them my work. They are my crutch and they are great critics. They are my audience. It’s a very small audience but they are my favorite people to have read my poems.

**WS:** *Have you ever revealed a poem too early and felt that feedback inhibited the poem’s growth?*
AMM: If you show a poem that is too raw, people are going to try to find something, and it may not be what you need to know. Work on something–do a lot of drafts before you show it because it can be derailing. I don’t have that issue any more but I remember being in workshops where the critiques didn’t feel right and maybe that was because I showed the poem too soon. Also you have to learn to listen to all the voices and know when it’s right for you and when it isn’t. That’s part of the workshop experience. You want to listen to everything, but you also have to learn what you need out of the critiques. A lot of times even as a teacher I’m stabbing in the dark trying to figure something out and I may or may not be helpful. I like to say that to the students: just because I said it doesn’t mean it’s right.

WS: When you write your very first draft, do you write in lines or does that come later?

AMM: I do write in lines, but that doesn’t mean I don’t change them. My default setting in my brain is to start something in couplets. It doesn’t always stay that way but for me couplets are a type of skeleton or scaffolding that I can work off of. It gives me enough space in between for something to happen. I don’t always keep them but if you read my work there are a lot of couplets.

Very early on in my writing life, I wrote some prose poems and I think that was because it gave me freedom not to worry about the lines. If you get stuck on line, just stop and write it out in prose. Just let yourself go because the most important thing is to write freely, and then you can shape it. Especially for younger writers: write in a journal, write in prose–just write and don’t worry about the lines yet. Just get it out there on the page. We have so many ways of stopping ourselves and critiquing ourselves and that can really be detrimental. You have to do it at some point, but just let stuff come out first.
WS: You spoke earlier about how your voice often changes. How do you navigate these transitions between styles or between voices?

AMM: I’m full of uncertainty, especially after I finish a manuscript. There’s always this period of I don’t know what to do or I don’t know where I’m going or I don’t remember how to write a poem. I know that sounds crazy but I really do go through that. I think a lot of people do. But then if I’m doing something which is different from what I’ve done in the past (which is usually the case) I have so much uncertainty about it and I have a hard time sharing those poems. That’s where I am right now with my new poems because they are so radically different. I like the poems but when I read them I’m very nervous about them.

WS: Well, the titles of your new poems are taken from traditional Shaker hymns, correct?

AMM: That’s right.

WS: Where did you get that idea?

AMM: I finished Red Deer—the cave poems—and those poems are very visual. I didn’t connect it but I remember thinking I wanted something to do with music. I wasn’t able to write for a while, but something in me was hungry for music in my poems. I was reading the New York Times one day and I saw a picture of Francis McDormand in a little Shaker outfit, and there was this play off-off-off Broadway—well, it wasn’t even a play but this group of people who were going to be performing Shaker spirituals—and I just knew I needed to hear that. So I got tickets and we went down to this little performance garage. It was a wonderful performance by the Wooster Group of four women, very plain, who weren’t singing beautifully. They were literally just singing these
hymns off an old record of Shaker spirituals and everything was completely simple. Every once in a while they would shift their seating and I different one would sing. Then halfway through some young men came out and they kept singing, but while they were singing they danced with the men in a circle to these simple dances. It was ecstatic. The first part was very meditative and the second part was ecstatic, and there was something about the simplicity in the hymns that was very important to me. I grew up going to church. I went home and started writing. I wrote the first half dozen in twenty-four hours, which is what happens to me when I find something. All I did was take the titles of the spirituals—not the content or anything—and go with it. These poems have more rhyme and meter in them than I am used to using, but I’m very uncertain about them. People seem to like them, but I am very self-conscious writing in rhyme and meter because obviously I grew up without it. We’ll see where it goes; I have about twenty of them now.
“You know how birds fly in those V formations?” Jo asked as she tucked her hands behind her head and looked up, counting the clouds. The sun reached mildly down from the sky, slowly warming the bench she was lying on, but a breeze rolled off the lake making her shiver. She crossed her ankles, trying to protect them from the wind which hadn’t quite figured out that it was technically spring now.

“Sure. What about it?” Casey asked from his spot on the ground. He had conceded the bench to her without even being asked. She’d trained him well.

Jo closed her eyes and imagined a flock of birds moving across the sky in perfect synchronization. “Do you think they all know where they’re going?”

“Like always, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Casey sighed, picking at the yellowing grass and stacking it into piles next to his hips. His two-sizes-too-big short-sleeve shirt billowed around his thin torso, but he didn’t seem to mind the cold.
“I mean, they’re just blindly following the bird in front of them, aren’t they? That’s the point? Do you think they all know like ‘hey, we’re heading to south Florida’ or do you think they just trust the guy in front?”

Casey lolled his head in her direction, his unnecessary Ray-Ban’s shading his eyes. “I have no idea. Why don’t you tell me what you think?”

“I don’t think they know,” Jo said, looking down at him. Her braid fell off the edge of the bench and he tugged on it lightly. “What do you think it’s like to be a bird?”

They were both silent for a second and then Casey said, “Hey Jo, can I ask you something?”

“Sure thing, slugger.”

“Why do you think I care?”

She sat up in a rush of energy. “Because you should care! They’re not bound by anything. They can go anywhere they want. That would be the best kind of freedom.”

Casey sat up, pushing his sunglasses back into his wild hair. “I really doubt birds think about it that much.”

“But you don’t know.” Jo laid back down and looked at the sky.

Casey slowly lowered himself back down, too. “I guess I don’t.”

They were silent for a long time, each thinking their own thoughts respectively. Casey didn’t mind playing hooky, especially not now that they were seniors, but it did cross his mind every once in a while that they were supposed to be in school. Jo, on the other hand, hadn’t thought about school since she’d decided she wasn’t going. What else did she need besides the open air and a pair of ears to listen to her contemplations?

“I hope they don’t have Pteronophobia,” Jo said, to test whether Casey had fallen asleep or not.

“Who?” he mumbled.

“The birds.”

“You hope they don’t have what? …A fear of flying?”

“No, a fear of feathers. Fear of flying is Pteromerhanophobia, but that would suck too.”

Casey considered what she said and then nodded. “Yeah,
that would suck.”

…..

“Jo! Get up!”

A voice reached Jo’s ears through the fog of sleep. She burrowed deeper beneath her comforter and pretended she hadn’t heard him. Having only made it to bed three hours previous to her wakeup call, she wasn’t feeling very inclined to resurface into society. After a few moments of blissful silence she found herself drifting off again.

“Jordan!” her brother Miles yelled, his feet making heavy footsteps as he entered her bedroom doorway. “I hate it when you make me play mom. Get up.”

“I can’t!” Jo yelled, her voice muffled beneath the blankets. “I have Heliophobia.”

“You used that one last week.”

“Fine, I have Chromatophobia.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure you don’t have it,” he said, clearly getting impatient.

“It’s the fear of colors! And yes I do! I can’t come out. I must live in total darkness!”

“Jo,” he said, and then he ripped the covers off the bed.

“I hate you.” Jo glared at him, feeling the cold morning air sink into her bones. Once the cozy bed bubble was popped there was no hope for falling back asleep.

“Tough. We’re leaving in five.”

“Wait!” Jo swallowed. “Mom’s not taking me?”

“That would have required her coming home last night,” Miles said as he walked out the door.

Jo shouldn’t have been surprised, but for some reason she always was. It wasn’t as if their mother ever did anything traditional like buy food or pay the bills, so why come home? Sighing heavily, Jo slid off her bed and picked up the first piece of clothing she touched. Shirts and pants were easy since they covered her floor like water covered the Earth; it was socks that were the hard part. Eventually she found one in the Pacific Ocean and one in the Mediterranean Sea—both dirty—and by then her time was up and Miles was yelling down the hallway. She slipped into her boots, grabbed her mostly empty backpack, and
ran out of the room. That last thing was more for appearances than anything else.

In the kitchen, Miles straightened his tie and held out a twenty. “For lunch.”

“I don’t want your money.”

He rolled his eyes. “I took it from Mom’s whiskey bottle.” The one she thought they didn’t know about. The one she only sometimes remembered to put back into the corner of her closet. Didn’t matter, it was usually empty anyway.

“Fine.” Jo snatched the bill and shouldered past him out the door.

Miles’ car was a piece of shit, but at least it ran. Still, Jo was late to school and Miles was late to work. Even though the bell had already rung, Jo shuffled her feet outside her first period classroom.

“Jordan,” Mr. Dienes said, noticing her as he reached to close the door. “What are you doing out here?”

“Oh I can’t go in there.”

“Why not?”

“I have Ephebiphobia.”

His fingers tapped rapidly against the door knob. “Which is what?”

“The fear of teenagers. So I really can’t go in there.”

“Jordan, you are a teenager.”

“You see my dilemma then.”

Mr. Dienes gripped the doorknob tighter and flicked his head toward the room. “Let’s go.” Jo scurried inside as he cast his voice over the room, “Quiet down everyone!” and shut the door behind them, clapping his hands together to get everyone’s attention. To her right, the classroom door opened again and a hesitant head poked in.

“Come.” Mr. Dienes snapped his fingers. “Come in.”

“Sorry,” the kid said, pulling a wrinkled piece of paper out of the massive stack of books he was carrying.

Mr. Dienes glanced at it quickly and tossed it aside. “Yes that’s fine. Take a seat.” He wasn’t the type of teacher to introduce a new student to the class, which was fine with Jo. However, she wasn’t fine with the way the new kid made a
beeline right for her. She didn’t think about the fact that there weren’t that many open seats or that his books were probably pretty heavy and her row was closest. She just tried to conjure up a good excuse as fast as possible for why the empty seats on either side of her were off limits.

“You can’t sit there,” she said. And when he just stared at her, “Um, I have Dextrophobia.”

The new kid stood there with his books halfway out of his arms and his mouth just a little bit open. “What?”

“It’s the fear of objects to the right side of my body,” she motioned to the seat he was standing over. “So you can’t sit there.”

“Um, okay,” he said, stepping around her to the seat on the other side.

“You can’t sit there either,” Jo blurted, making a few annoyed heads snap in her direction. “I also have Levophobia.”

The new kid looked sideways at Jo, mouth open again. “Let me guess-”

“You can sit back there.” She pointed to the empty seat two rows behind her.

She felt a little bad about the puppy-dog likeness in his eyes, but more than anything she was relieved he went anyway. After successfully securing her space, Jo flipped open the solitary notebook she carried around and began to sketch a dragon she knew was going to be epic. It had been forming itself in her mind for days and was finally ready to come to life. It quickly grew a body and a head as class progressed. The flames were just curling out of its mouth when Mr. Dienes said, “Jordan, I’d like you to do number two for us.”

She looked up. “You mean read my answer out loud?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“Oh, I can’t do that.” Jo pinched herself in the thigh to keep from shrinking beneath the judgmental gazes of her classmates.

“Jordan.” Mr. Dienes didn’t hide his clenched jaw muscles. “I’m sure you can.”

“Oh no, you see, I can’t because I have Graphophobia which is the fear of writing so I couldn’t write down the
answers to any of the questions on the worksheet. I did it, I swear I did it, but that’s a lot to keep in your brain and I can’t quite remember what my answer was for number two since I couldn’t write it down.”

There was a moment of silence where Mr. Dienes was either trying not to yell at her or deciding how he was going to murder her later in secret. “Please see me after class,” he said and then called on another student.

By the end of the hour Jo’s wings almost looked real. They were massive and scaly and epic just as she’d thought they would be. She shoved her notebook into her backpack and walked up to the front. “What’s up?”

“What’s up,” he said, scribbling on a post-it note, “is that I’m concerned about you, Jordan. A few of your other teachers have voiced similar worries about your poor attendance and homework grades.” He ripped the post-it off the pad and handed it to her. “I’m sending you to see Principal Harris so maybe the two of you can talk about it.”

Jo hated the way he looked at her like she needed help. “With all due respect, Mr. D, I’d rather not see the principal. If he’s just going to tell me again how poorly I’m doing, I already know that. So can I save us both some time?”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m, unfortunately, not giving you a choice. You can head down to his office. He’ll be expecting you shortly.” With that Mr. Dienes sat down and dismissed her.

Jo pinched her thigh so her head wouldn’t hang and her feet wouldn’t drag as she made her way down the hallway. On either side of her, classroom doors slammed shut and she wished, for the first time ever, to be on the other side of one of those doors. The secretary smiled disgustingly wide as Jo entered the waiting area. “You can just go right on in, Sweetie.” Jo wanted to pinch her instead.

Principal Harris’s smile was more appropriately sized as she closed the door behind her and took a seat in the plush armchairs across from his desk. It didn’t really make sense to waste all this money on comfortable chairs when no one that had a reason to sit in them could ever be comfortable.
“Jordan,” Mr. Harris smiled, a little bit sad this time. “I hear you’ve been having some trouble.”
She shrugged. “If that’s what they say.”
He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think so?”
She shrugged again. “I don’t know.”
“Well.” He clasped his hands together and rested them on his expensive wood desk. “I’ll just tell you what I’ve been seeing and hearing and then we can go from there.” He paused to let her reply but she just picked at the fraying strings on her backpack. “A few of your teachers have voiced to me that you’re frequently absent and that when you are in class you’re not really present. They’ve said you rarely turn in your homework and overall don’t seem to put any thought or effort into school.”
When he put it that way it sounded worse than it really was. Principal Harris ducked his head, trying to make eye contact with Jo as she desperately fought his efforts. “Yeah, I mean that’s true.”
“Would you like to say anything on your behalf?”
“If you’re going to suspend me or expel me or whatever, just do it.”
“You’re a smart girl, Jordan. Other than this year and last year you have good marks throughout your schooling career. It’s clear that the problem isn’t with the work.”
“What are you saying?” Jo didn’t like the way this was going, the way he was scrutinizing her. She pinched her arm to keep from snapping at him.
“Are you having problems at home, Jordan? You know we’ve got lots of people here who can help you. You don’t have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable.”
In that moment Jo hated Principal Harris. How dare he think that she was “troubled.” How dare he assume that she couldn’t just be a bad student because she was lazy. “I’m not having problems at home.”
“You don’t have to deny—”
“I’m not having any problems at home, okay?”
He rubbed his thumbs over the backs of his hands and nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. May I ask you, then, why you miss so much school?”
Jo took a deep breath. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I have Dromophobia which is the fear of crossing streets. So when my brother can’t drive me to school because he has work, I can’t walk ‘cause I won’t be able to cross the street to get here. So I have to stay at home. So that’s why I miss so much school.”

Principal Harris kept nodding. “Okay. Then why not do your homework at home and hand it in on the days you are here?” Little beads of sweat were budding on his forehead, probably from all the patience he was exercising.

“I’m really glad you asked,” Jo chattered animatedly. “It’s unfortunate, really, that I also have Numerophobia which keeps me from doing my math homework and Logophobia—the fear of words—which means I can’t do the homework for the rest of my classes either.”

“Why doesn’t your fear of words affect your ability to speak?”

It was kind of a smart ass thing for a principal to say (even if he made it sound nice) so it was a good thing that when it came to phobias Jo was always prepared. “No, that’s actually a really good question. Thank you for asking. For many of my childhood years I couldn’t utter a single word. Then, one day, I decided I wanted to go to therapy and after years of hard work I’ve managed to overcome some aspects of my phobia. They’re making a documentary about my journey and I now give inspirational speeches to kids in Canada.”

Principal Harris gave her his best disappointed-adult look and said, “Jordan…”

“Well what did you expect, Mr. H. I’m not troubled, I’m just a kid who hates school and doesn’t do her work. Nothing special to see here, let’s move it along.”

“I really don’t think that’s true.”

“Well I’m sorry you’ve made me out to be something I’m not. Can I go? I’m late for a class I never go to.”

He paused for a moment, considering whether or not to let her get away with it. “All right, get to class then.”

He wrote an excused absence pass and Jo stalked out of the office as fast as she could. The idea of ditching the rest of the day only crossed her mind once as she made her way to
second period. She would have done it too if Casey wasn’t in her next class. She needed a pair of best friend ears to listen to her principal woes and then she could skip after that. Handing the note to her teacher, Jo took her usual seat between Casey and the window.

“Hey,” Casey whispered. “Where were you?”

“You’re not even going to believe this,” Jo said, as the teacher blabbed on about something or other in the front of the classroom. “D-Man sent me to the Principal’s office because he and the other teachers are ‘concerned’ for me.”

Casey copied down the notes from the chalkboard into his notebook. “So what’d Harris say?”

“He asked if the reason I don’t do school is because I have problems at home,” Jo snorted. She was surprised when Casey didn’t laugh. He flicked his eyes from the board back to his notebook as he continued writing. Jo smacked his arm. “Did you not hear me?”

Casey put his pen down and looked at her. “I mean, you do, don’t you?”

Jo looked like the new kid from first period with her mouth hanging open like that. “What are you talking about? Are you taking their side?”

“Jo,” Casey started. “Your mom’s an alcoholic.” He and Mr. D and Principal Harris must have practiced that pity look together. “You have to drive around and look for her. I’d say she’s a pretty big problem.”

For a long moment they just stared at each other and Jo forgot to pinch herself to keep from being hurt.

“Jordan?” Her teacher called to get her attention. “Since you don’t have a partner, Annie is going to work with you today.”

A timid girl across the aisle smiled at Jo with a mouth full of braces and gathered her books in her arms. She strode over and sat down in Casey’s seat. “Hi.”

Jo didn’t reply as she turned away from Annie. She pulled out her notebook and flipped it to the next blank page, sketching the outline of a butterfly.
Katherine Shelton

Jake, the too-angry child

Your little body is boiling.
I can hear the screeches before they pierce the air.
I want to pour your hot water over dead leaves
and drink the pain away.
I’ll burn my tongue. Just steep with me.

You and I define danger:
One coil of hair longer than the rest,
A bundle of overgrown braided cells,
liable to get caught in riff raff or to whip
any who wander too close.
You groom your lashing hair at the back of your head,
Out of sight out of mind.
Mine toys with my cheek,
Weighing my gaze downwards.

But I fear I adore you,
Gapped and clenched teeth.
You hurl a dodgeball with murderous intent.
You screeching brat,
Sneaking my embrace as if escaping from Alcatraz.
And now our wards are continents:
Your side for the kids who scream too loudly to listen,
Mine for teens that are razor-blade-friendly.
I am stuck.
Not quite a woman.
Not quite you.
Not quite healthy.
But quiet all the same as you apologize profusely
for walking in as I changed out of bloody clothes.
I am quiet still
When you express relief
that I am not your sister
who would have surely “socked” you.

I no longer wish to be cured
while you boil
and fester
lacking vocabulary to explain
that all the science,
all the moon-walks, all the wars,
all the pills accumulated
can never unshred a boy in Bedlam.
Below the dim lights of the dining room, Grandma shakes me out of my stupor and into hers.

“The doctor told me I need to lose ten pounds by January 1st,” she tells me over the giant mess of Oreo pudding she’s holding. Every square-inch Christmas tree on her plate has been destroyed by white-and-black globs.

I raise questioning eyes to her. “What did you tell him?”

She scoffs. “I said to him, ‘No, I don’t think so, sir. Nooo, sir. It’s the holidays.’”

“Maybe you’ll start tomorrow then.” I nudge her and offer a smile. She shows off all her teeth in the way she and I both do, but her eyes stay put. The day Grandpa died they glassed over, and two rocky shells formed over the blue.

“Mom, go ahead and be the other head of the table,” Dad tells her before assuming his nightly spot. He looks brave there, opposite his mother, but her hands can’t stay still. She’s recently had her wedding ring polished.

Grandma nods and reaches for my hand as we sit down. In the reflection of her humble diamond, I almost see his face.
What I’m afraid of most is forgetting the sound of his voice when he said, “You betcha,” or “I love you, kiddo.” It was the kind of voice no one could forget, raspy like that of a long-time smoker even though he never touched a cigarette in his life. I wish I had recorded the last “kiddo.”

I look down to the white tablecloth in front of me. There’s a small red stain from the time I ruined a manicure. I wanted Rudolph’s nose on my thumbnails, but I ended up with lacquer stigmata and a very angry mother.

To my left is the best part: the tree. A few weeks ago I came home and helped set it up, as I always do. Every year, Mom is just an inch too short to wrap the garland—or maybe the tree is just an inch too tall. Dad listens to Sinatra from the couch and quietly chuckles as she keeps trying. Stephanie cackles as strange ornaments seem to appear out of nowhere. Some years it’s a creepy nutcracker, one year a bare-midriff Santa on a surfboard, but The Moose from Quebec always gets us.

“Who goes to Canada for a honeymoon?” I always ask. It’s tradition.

Mom and Dad glance at each other, shrug, and smile. “We do.”

No matter how many times we try to hide the obese winter whitetail, The Moose from Quebec somehow always manages to make himself front and center.

Grandpa liked the moose because he said it had “character.”

As plates get passed around, I find myself wondering less about what’s actually in Uncle Rodney’s root beer and more about why I can’t pinpoint Grandma and Grandpa’s anniversary.

Richard Martin Hawthorne died at 11:45 a.m. Tuesday, July 28, 2015 in his home after a long battle with leukemia. He was at peace in his favorite chair, Old Blue.

I found out when my phone rang in the dentist’s chair.

“I know where he went when he died,” she had said. “His eyes went up to the ceiling, and he looked so happy. I know who he saw.”

Forks clink, my heart pounds, and Grandma breaks the silence again with: “He came to me last night.”

Most of us just stare at her, mouths full of potatoes or ham or air. Dad’s eyes dart up to the ceiling. Here we go.

When he was little, Grandma spent a lot of time with a
psychic who told her all kinds of secrets, secrets that led Dad not to trust Grandma so much. I wonder if the psychic ever mentioned leukemia. I wish I wasn’t hearing this.

I wonder what she did with his hearing aids.

“What?” Dad asks her. He’s coming from a place of annoyance, and I want him to retreat.

“He brought me some Christmas presents,” she continues. “He sat and watched me open them, and they were all so lovely.” The glass in her eyes starts to shatter. “It was so nice.”

Dad shoots Aunt Jill a look, but someone holds a hand out. Let her speak.

“I sat on the couch, and he sat there next to me in Old Blue, just like he always did. And he looked so peaceful. His skin was pale, but healthy, and his eyes sparkled again.”

Someone hands her a tissue.

“His belly was even there!” She forces a laugh. “I always told him to put down the doughnuts, but I didn’t expect the belly to be something I’d miss.”

Old Blue was where he always sat. I didn’t know until after he died that the raggedy old recliner had a nickname. He sat there and read me stories; he sat there and let me cry. He sat there last time I saw him, just two days before he died.

His fingernails had turned blue, a scary shade I hope never to see again. The only color against his sallow skin was the bright yellow from the socks on his feet. Gifts from the hospital. Sorry you’re dying. Enjoy these free socks.

At that point, the cancer had gotten to his brain and slowed him down like an anaesthetic. My sister showed off her 4H pictures, and he cried because he couldn’t understand what they meant.

When I told him I loved him that day, I could tell by the look on his face that he wasn’t sure what I meant, either. I walked out the door with his tears ingrained in my memory and his icy hand imprinted in mine.

I don’t want to tell Grandma, but he still haunts me at night, too, because the goodbye he couldn’t say is the one I miss the most.
“Well, shit.” He squints at me in that way that used to really get me, hands in trouser pockets, shoulders cocked back a little. Like we’re meeting for the first time and he’s getting knocked on his ass all over again.

“Well, shit,” I reply, amicably.

There’s a small part of me that’s still superstitious about the dress, which is stupid. I couldn’t possibly bring us any new bad luck, but I zip my coat up further over the seed pearls and tulle anyway, against the chill of the train station. I hunch down into my jacket, hands in pockets, neck retreating into the hood as if I’m trying my level best to shrink a few inches. The over-gelled back of my hairdo crunches a little as I roll my neck around.

He’s looking out at the tracks, stark in the unpromising November sun. The waiting platform, just this little Plexiglas box, has enough of that Amtrak smell—a little airplane cleaning fluid, a little pee—that his cologne wafts over only every once in a while. I still love it.

“How long have you been here?”

“Maybe five minutes,” he says, and punctuates it with a cough.

This is somehow the best we have ever managed to sync up,
and I can’t help but laugh at it. Unkindly, I guess, with a little bit of this ugly-stepsister snort. But he looks like he gets it and is remembering the same four years of Why would you say that in front of my sister and Is that really worth being offended over as he chuckles shakily down at his shoes. I bounce on my toes for warmth, wondering why this little fish tank doesn’t heat up faster.

He looks like he’s been crying. You had time for that? I wonder at him.

I guess he would. He didn’t have half a family babysitting him. He probably had all the time in the world. I bet he stopped in that back hallway, with the jungle-green wallpaper. I bet he leaned against it, tilted his head back against the pinstripes, and loosened his bowtie like a dog trying to take the cone off after a particularly unfortunate trip to the vet. The tears would have felt nice, given how much control he usually has—given that I wasn’t there to clumsily loop an arm around his shoulder and stumble through reassurances. The exit sign above the side door would have buzzed welcomingly, nonjudgmentally.

For my part, I had enough time to process one of the only emotions I feel with clarity: panic. I’d grown rusty at running away. I’d expected, somehow, to strain against that familiar end of the leash. The adrenaline hasn’t left me yet; I feel like a time-lapse video of a partly cloudy day. Shadow, sun, shadow, sun, passing over so fast that my stomach churns, won’t settle down against the rest of my organs.

“IT’s a little ironic, right?” I’m too nervous not to talk.

He looks slantwise at me, eyes that irritated red. “What’s ironic?” he crackles out, and it occurs to me that maybe he didn’t start to cry till I showed up. Maybe he had been having the happiest, surest moment of his life at the Amtrak station.

I look down at my shoes. “Just, I mean,” I waver. “I was the flight risk, right? And now look. Look who got here first.”

He’s still looking at me the same way. “I guess everything with you ends up funny.”

It specifically doesn’t mean everything is funny with you, huh. I would recognize that; I’m familiar with it. And he never said it to me.

I feel, acutely, how great I look. Probably this is one of the top five times I will look beautiful in my entire life. While it was getting set up, the hairstyle felt like my mother mercilessly pulling my ridiculous hair into a ponytail for kindergarten. The feeling remains. It just makes my posture better.

This isn’t very fair. He’s all red, and I guess he didn’t shave
because there are little blond bristles all over his jaw. I can hear them when he scrubs a hand down his face. The overall effect is something like a man-shaped cutout of sandpaper inside a tux, which makes a high-pitched laugh jump up my throat.

I hitch my dress up—the tennis shoes underneath my skirts feel like an equalizer—and sit on the bench. The air inside the Plexiglas fish tank is still bruisingly cold. The metal seat is an absolute punishment. I should probably feel like I deserve it.

My stomach still flickers uncomfortably, sending the occasional twitch up into my shoulder blades. I was never hyperactive as a kid, but this unsettled feeling became familiar sometime between seventeen and twenty, so I feel like I can sympathize. My niece, who is actually hyperactive, is probably careening off the walls in the bridesmaids’ suite. I wonder where all the flower petals in her charge will end up.

He stopped looking at me sometime in the last twenty seconds, and he’s got his fists balled up under his biceps, arms tightly crossed over his chest. I sigh guiltily and reach into the front pocket of my backpack.

“Hey,” I say.

His shoulders don’t loosen any as he turns around. His eyebrows twitch up at the flask I’m offering, but he swipes it and sits down next to me.

That’s better. I don’t know how, but something about it is better.

“I’m really sorry,” he clears his throat in that masculine, post-liquor way.

I take it back from him for my own swig. “Should either of us actually be apologizing?”

He must feel braver, or something, because he turns all the way to look at me.

“Probably not, right?” I continue. “Nobody’s going to end up with the moral high ground. We’re both going to have to apologize enough to everybody else.”

“Probably not,” he agrees, taking back the flask.

Right on time, my phone starts buzzing. I have never hated how jaunty its little ring is more than I do right now.

“I already turned mine off,” he says, a little surprised at me.

Of course he did. Lord, everyone’s going to think he’s dead. The fish tank must have warmed up, because I’m aware that I’m sweating a little as I pull the phone out of my coat pocket.
I show him the caller ID and roll my eyes. My cousin, the one with the crush on him. “Not my mother.” The phone continues to chirp through the steel-drum riff of the default ringtone. “Not my sister. None of my bridesmaids.”

That gets him chuckling, then actually laughing, then wheezing. I lose it, too, cackling as I clutch the phone to my chest. He leans forward, losing his grip on the flask. My dress has too many layers for that, so I lean back against the transparent wall, and my hairsprayed head crunches again. I’m still laughing too hard to see right when I reply with a text, one of the automatic choices that says “In a meeting.” I show this to him, too.

He buries his face in his hands, squeaking breathlessly.

For a minute longer, we just sit like that. I look up through the ceiling at the blue-white sky. He catches his breath audibly and I bet to myself that he’s leaning on his knees and rubbing the back of his head like he does after a good laugh.

The flask lies on its side on the grubby ground between us, and I pluck it up for one last gulp. “I’m kind of sorry anyway.”

There’s a single cloud fast-walking across the path of the sun, like it woke up late for something.

“I’m sorry I made your parents like me,” I say matter-of-factly.

“Cute.”

He plays with the unraveled band of his bow tie. I run my hands over my skirts, which just bounce back up again.

“I wonder if they think we’re eloping.”

He shakes his head, half-smiles at me apologetically. “No, they know.”

He’s right. I want to confess that my mom called me while I was in the car.

The tracks start to shudder, and we both stand to see the Amtrak sliding towards us. It seems right to reach out and shake his
hand, so I do, and he complies. We always were pretty nice to each other. The fish tank has become a sauna while I was distracted, and I feel funny in the blanketing sunlight.

My coat is riding up around my waist, and I pull it with difficulty back down over the many skirts. “So, where are you off to?” I ask, the train snorting as it stops in front of us.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I was just gonna go on an adventure.”

I hike my backpack onto one shoulder. “Well, shit.” I nod agreeably. “Me too.”
Interview with

Laila Lalami
Introduction by Cassandra Christopher

In an interview with National Public Radio, Laila Lalami mentioned that she believed the “closest we come to truth is in the form of fiction.”

Truth: the supernatural powers that be do not spare anyone based on race or religion. In shared adversity we all become equal.

Truth: humans are complex creatures, equally capable of cruelty, kindness, and unimaginable darkness in desperation. No one is purely hero or villain.

Truth: Mustafa, the titular character of Laila Lalami’s The Moor’s Account tells us what he knows as fact, but we must infer our own truth, so that each reader discovers his or her own connections to the story.

Personally, I understand Mustafa’s strong familial connections and his willingness to do anything for the people he loves. I understand his Portuguese master’s affection for his horse that runs much deeper than that for an animal merely used for transportation. And I feel Mustafa’s pain as a slave when he realizes that he never thought about the people he once sold until he joined their ranks. As I read The Moor’s Account as well as some of Lalami’s other essays and short stories, I realized the truth I was finding in all of her work was that an author needs to understand the complexities of people: the different struggles we face across the world, the love we can feel for so many people, and the blackest parts of our soul that we like to pretend do not exist. I am no longer in awe that The Moor’s Account won the American Book Award, but rather aghast that Laila Lalami did not win the Pulitzer for which the same novel was named a finalist. Only in the hands of a skilled storyteller can we as readers be suckerpunched by a revelation that touches our souls, and only in the hands of a skilled storyteller can these truths so deftly be presented, as Mustafa says, “in the guise of entertainment.” In other words, only in the hands of someone like Laila Lalami.
Cassandra Christopher: So, religion is an absolutely huge factor in the book and it just kind of changes over the course of the book with Mustafa being very devout at the beginning and then at the end he can’t believe that the Spaniards would think that there was one god for every person on the earth. I wanted to know if your own religious beliefs played into that or if writing this at all changed your religious beliefs.

Laila Lalami: I knew because of the time and the place that he had, that religion was going to play an important role in his life. In the beginning of the book he is more religious but he’s never, he’s not the most literal-minded person in terms of religion. As he falls into bondage and he comes to America and he sees that there are all these alternate modes of thinking about the world, I think makes his views of religion more complex. And it seemed like a very natural growth for anybody who has gone through those experiences. So that was something I was interested in exploring in a 16th century way even though that’s something we see a lot in the 21st century. Whether that actually connects with my own views of religion, I don’t think so. Well, I guess it could in a way. When I was younger I was sort of a more religious person in a more traditional way, but now, obviously things are different for me. I’m older, I’m wiser hopefully, I’ve lived in many different places and different cultures. So I would say yes, I guess it does mirror it in a way. It’s funny because the reason I’m pausing is that somebody tweeted me the other day that there’s a list of the five hundred most influential Muslims in the world and apparently I’m on it, and so when they told me that I said “I’ll raise a glass to that.” Not a very good Muslim, but I do identify as Muslim. And I think part of the reason that I do identify this way is because I am interested in models of social justice and that is something that is central to Islam.

CC: I also wanted to ask, you talked about that you learned
about the expedition, you learned about Esteban, and that kind of sparked your curiosity on him. Is that a normal beginning for your writing process, like a spark of curiosity?

**LL:** Yeah. The inspiration can come from anything, but I guess what distinguishes just an idea that lasts a couple days versus something that you’re going to devote several years of your life to is it has to speak to you, it has to resonate in some deeper way. It’s kind of like when you meet someone and you have to decide whether this is an affair or a marriage. Because, in marriage you have to find stuff to talk about all the time and if the conversation continues for a while you’re like, oh this is a marriage. But if you run out of things to say after a couple of days that was just an affair. And it’s kind of the same way, deciding whether it’s a book or not. Does the interest last? And once I start dreaming about it, then I know I’m onto something.

**CC:** Do you mean daydreaming or sleep dreaming?

**LL:** No, I mean both. Like I daydream about stuff but I find that at night if my thoughts have drifted to whatever the topic was, then I know it’s deeper than that. You know, in a way writing a novel is almost like having this dream that you can return to at any moment. And because that interest lasts I know that this is a book project, this is something I want to be thinking about.

**CC:** You mentioned something at the reading that made me rather curious because I didn’t pick up on it when I read the book. You mentioned a gay love story, and I started thinking about it.

**LL:** Diego Dorantes and the friar.

**CC:** Ooh. The friar I picked up on a little bit.
LL: Yeah. So in the book I wanted it to be subtle, that they’re just friends, and you know Dorantes kind of rejects his younger brother. So the younger brother doesn’t really have any friends, the only friend he has is the friar. So in the book if you go back and look you’ll see that they’re often alone and there is a scene that kind of hints that there is something between them. Dorantes kind of teases Diego about women and in that teasing you can tell that he senses there is something going on with his brother, but it’s never addressed directly. And that was the only way I could do it. This is the 16th century so I was trying to kind of hint at it. Again I was trying to look for opportunities to make the story as different from the myth of exploration as I could make it.

CC: Okay. You have studied in three different countries now, and now you teach in California. Has your education experience in any way informed your writing style, has any one of them informed it more than others?

LL: Your writing is in a sense a sum of all your experiences. Everything that you’ve experienced goes into it. But I think where the education played a role is that when I was an undergraduate student in Morocco, that was where I first started reading English and American literature not in translation but actually in English. I had always loved literature and I had always written but then I kind of fell in love with it. I started reading it a lot and then later I studied linguistics and that made me more sensitive to language in all of its complexities. I don’t just mean things like syntax, but more than that, how language is used within society. And I think maybe that actually has played a role in my writing. I noticed that in my book language is used as a tool of, for lack of a better word, power. It can be used to bring people into or exclude them from groups. I’m also interested in these situations where there’s more than one language
being used in communication. So that was true for all of the expeditions, particularly true for this one because the members of the expedition used Spanish to communicate with one another but that wasn’t the only language that was being used on the expedition. Portuguese was being used, of course Esteban’s thoughts are in his own native language and there are indigenous languages all around them. And that complexity and all of the potential for misinterpretation I find to be realistic.

CC: You use the truth a lot in your work, which is something I definitely picked up on for the introduction, but do you have a definition that you kind of base the use of it on, or is it just you know something to be true?

LL: You know, I think the truth is very slippery. I like to say you can take the same set of facts and you can shape them into completely different stories, and to me the truth is really on the side of the stories. A fact is something that is independently verifiable, it’s something that we know happened. So in 1527 six hundred people departed from Seville, and that was something that was witnessed by a number of people, it’s documented. But then truth, the story of what really happened once they got there, we have only one person for it. It’s a little grayer there. Another example might be people still today are debating the Iraq war. Why was it waged--was it waged because there were weapons of mass destruction, because they needed to have regime change, was it waged for any number of reasons. But of course the facts are known to all of us, we know exactly what happened. We know when decisions were made, we know when the US invaded, we know all of this stuff that’s beyond debate. But when you try to ascertain what really happened that’s when you get into very different interpretations and different truths, so to speak. So I think that it’s slippery. I think that’s what makes fiction interesting because fiction is
interested in that gray area. That’s where fiction can give us the most. It can make us aware of all the ways the facts can be interpreted.

CC: Did you ever consider any alternate endings for the book?

LL: Estebanico is mentioned in the chronicle of Cabeza de Vaca, but he’s also mentioned in another relation, a very short relation, written by a friar named Marcos de Niza who had been sent by the viceroy to be the advance party for Coronado and look for the Seven Cities of Gold, except that Estebanico separated himself from the friar. So the friar had to write and say what happened, and he said that he had seen the Seven Cities of Gold and of course there were no Seven Cities of Gold, so it’s very fun, but because we know that the friar lied in that relation what he says about Esebanico I also take with a grain of salt. So he said that he had last seen him when he was going forward, and that Estebanico had been killed because he had made some demands. And when I looked at that I thought, come on man, how do I know that he died, and plus I don’t want him to die. So it was again, that was a plausible ending so I went with that. I thought that that would be a more interesting way to end the story.

CC: So essentially the ending was the alternate ending.

LL: Yeah.

CC: When I first read Ruiz talking about his cannibalism, I had to stop. I had to put the book down, I had to stop reading. My roommate was asking if I was okay, and I said, “You don’t understand; the character just ate someone else.” Was that the most shocking thing that you learned?

LL: When I was reading the book, because Cabeza de Vaca
does not talk about the torture of the Indians, but does mention cannibalism among the Spaniards, that was really quite shocking to me when I read it. In Cabeza de Vaca's narrative, it’s described in maybe a paragraph. And he is actually very ironic, he says, “And he came back because he had nobody else left to eat.” Something like that. It was really, kind of like sarcasm. But anyways, in the scene I wanted it to be in dialogue so that it slowly dawns on you what just happened. But again, I must say these things like cannibalism happen more often than people think, whenever people go somewhere they’re not supposed to go or somewhere uncharted and they meet with a lot of resistance whether from the natural elements or from the indigenous people.

I think what was interesting to me about it was that in the 16th century, when the Spaniards invaded and took over Mexico, they found that the Aztecs actually would sacrifice bodies to their gods and feed parts of the bodies to animals. And they were utterly revolted by the behavior of the Aztecs, so there were all these images of the natives as being the savages. There were actual discussions about whether or not they were human, whether they had souls, rather. And so to me, narratively, yes the cannibalism was revolting, but what made it kind of interesting in the story was that everything that they feared out of indigenous people, they actually became themselves.

**CC:** You said at the reading that you set up the book especially like an arabic travel narrative from the time period. Was it just the time period that had you form it that way, or did something about the form of calling the chapters, “The Story of…” make you choose that?

**LL:** It was a combination of things. I felt like, when he’s writing, he is in a sense writing about something he knows no other person in his town or perhaps his region or his
country, no other person has seen before. So he is in that sense performing the role of the travel writer, going into a new place and writing about it, so travel narrative made a lot of sense. And also, one of the influences is that there is a great Moroccan traveler named Ibn Battuta who was born in Tangier and who traveled huge spots of the world and came back as an old man and wrote about it. I thought, interesting: maybe I could do something like that. In terms of calling them stories, that’s where *One Thousand and One Nights* pops up. Because I thought, if I say chapter, it’s such a modern way of dividing a book. Because the book is about storytelling, about truth, and because of the influence of *One Thousand and One Nights*, I thought it would make sense to use stories as sections. And then the beautiful thing about calling them stories is I could actually play with the timeline so that it didn’t have to be straight-up chronological. It could move back and forth more easily.
How do we know the bodies we love?
We see their surfaces; layers of skin, hair, clothes.
Seeing though, has never been enough.
We have an insatiable craving to be inside.
Knowing and understanding.
We attempt to seep our way inside, first by sitting on the skin, hoping to be absorbed by time and with diligence.
This is futile. For, we sit upon the upper most layer of epidermis to create yet, another layer.

So, we creep across the other openings of the body to find one in which we can fit. Small though they are, we squeeze ourselves inside. Maybe through the ear canal to dent their memories with our sounds.
Still, this is not enough. We move over the body and its orifices and find
one that holds promise; the mouth. It is here that we scrap our spines on the roof, crawling inside. Passed the teeth and the tongue slipping down the throat. We make our beds in the belly, and recline amongst the acids and juices. Here we are comfortable. Here we bloat the individual.

Eventually, we tire of this, and it too, is not enough. So, we move through the inside of the body climbing the spine like a ladder. We reach the eyeballs, licking the backs of the eyelids tasting the slat of tears to come. We move on, our mouths wet and dripping to the tunnels of the brain. A delicious maze. We walk through its twists and turns dizzied. We grow famished. Ripping chunks out of its walls, we feed ourselves. Here, we make another home, for it is more permanent than the last. It is not enough to be ingested, we crave to be remembered.

So, we trash the place. Pissing on the floors, staining the carpets of the mind. Punching holes through the dry wall of another soul. We wreak our havoc in the minds of individuals, whirling about like garbage in a strip mall lot.
She just wanted to know what it was like to fly. But no one believed her. She just wanted to be free for once instead of tethered to the ground; to have wings instead of limbs and leap.

But the paramedics didn’t understand that. Neither did her parents.

The Monday after she tried to fly, she learned that her classmates thought she was lying, too. They saw her and her broken arm in a sling, paired with the bruises on her face and neck, and pitied her.

“Hey, freak,” said the boy behind her in Spanish.
“Maybe next time,” said a girl in gym.

“My name is Eliza, but you can call me Blue,” she said on the first day of 5th grade. Mrs. Whither was unimpressed.

“Blue is a color, not a name, Eliza.” Her lips were pursed in constant frustration. Mrs. Sharon Whither could have been an actress, had she not gotten married, as she liked to remind Mr. Whither.

“I picked it because I like bluebirds. Did you know that they hunt by perching and swooping to their prey?” She saw that in an encyclopedia.
“How fascinating, Eliza.”

The other kids snickered at her and called her “Birdbrain” for the rest of the year, but their words meant nothing. She knew that she was Blue and someday they would, too.

That was the year her parents started fighting. When they began yelling, usually after dinner, throwing accusations at each other like knives, she would escape to her bedroom and watch the birds in the tree outside. At the time, she didn’t understand what was happening. All of her friends’ parents were still together, and when they sat her down and explained what divorce meant, she nodded quietly. It was only when her mother moved out that she realized, but by then it was too late.

Blue was crying by the time she reached the top of Horseshoe Lake. She was only 14, but she had seen too much. She was ready to fly away. It was January, and the lake was frozen, but she needed to jump more than ever before. Every winter, the seniors would go to the lake and roll boulders off the top to break the ice so they could dive.

There was a stack of rocks to her right, and she set to work. Wiping off her face, she picked the largest one and dropped it below. It took a worryingly long time to arrive at the bottom, but it took a large chunk of ice with it as it sunk. She didn’t want to hit ice, so she dropped two more rocks to widen the hole.

Blue surveyed the scene, satisfied with her work.

When someone shouted “What’s up, Birdbrain?” during lunch in 6th grade, Kennedy was the one who stood up for Blue.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, twerp?” Kennedy was the same age as her, but she had experienced a growth spurt over the summer and now stood taller than many of the guys in their grade. She punched Jack, the kid who’d shouted, in the stomach and introduced herself.

They were best friends from that point on. Sleepovers every Friday night, joint parties that girls would kill for an invitation to, and promises to stay together forever.

But the summer after 8th grade, when everything was in flux before high school, Kennedy confronted Blue.

“I think it’s time we talk,” she’d said over their milkshakes.

“About what?” Blue really had no idea.

“Well, I’m just not sure how this is going to work in high
school.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. Us. I want to try out for cheerleading. You said you want to look at the debate team. Those don’t really mix. I just think it would be wise for me to move on now, to save us both the trouble later.” And that was that.

The next day, Kennedy told everyone that Blue was practically a stalker, was insane, and that she got a restraining order. Blue didn’t understand what had happened. Everything was fine one day, but the next, she was out of Kennedy’s circle forever, the object of lies and daily insults. No one asked her if any of it was true. They didn’t care.

Blue stripped to her underwear, setting the clothes in a pile under a pine tree. It was freezing, and she shivered in the snow. No birds were out. They had all flown away. She was ready to follow them. She closed her eyes and jumped.

Her mother remarried that summer, too. She moved three hours away and had a whole new family, complete with step-kids. Blue and her father weren’t invited to the wedding. They only found out because someone at church mentioned it. When they got home, her dad drank a case of beer and passed out in his recliner.

Blue left him there and met up with Derek, her crush. He was new in town and didn’t care about the gossip surrounding her. He paid attention to her like no one else ever had, even Kennedy. She could be herself with him. When they were together, she truly felt like she could leave Eliza behind.

“Are you sure?” He whispered in her ear. They were in his basement bedroom. His parents were running errands and wouldn’t be back for hours.

“I’m sure.”

She closed her eyes until it was over, which didn’t take long, and checked to see if she felt any different, any happier. She didn’t.

When school started, Blue continued seeing Derek, although their “dates” were almost always in his basement bedroom. They didn’t go out like normal couples did. They just slept together and drank stale beer he stole from his parents.

She never thought to wonder why they didn’t go out. It was kind of nice, having a secret life no one else knew about.

Blue and Kennedy hadn’t spoken in a few months when she saw them together. Kennedy and Derek, on a Saturday night, in his
car, heading to the movies. His arm was around her neck. They were out, like a normal couple.

She confronted him the next day. “I saw you! With her! What about us?”

“Whoa, babe. I thought we were just having fun. We can still hang. We’re just…really cool friends, okay?”

“Friends don’t fuck, Derek.” She walked away from him and headed home, but turned right instead of left and found herself at the top of Horseshoe Lake.

Someone hiking had called 911 when they saw a nearly-naked girl jump off the cliff. An ambulance arrived and found Blue in the water, hurt but alive, with a smile on her face.

They pulled her to safety and wrapped her tightly in brown wool blankets nearly the color of her skin. Someone carried her into the back of the bright red ambulance while the driver started the sirens.

“What were you doing up there? You could have killed yourself,” one paramedic asked her.

“I was flying.”
During a dull, damp, and unobtrusive day in the early spring, when clouds hung low in the sky, she passed alone, heels click-clacking, through a particularly uninteresting part of the city, and found herself facing a melancholy bar as the shadows of the evening quickly grew longer. The exterior was a flat black, occasionally interrupted by unimpressive graffiti. Two small windows framed the door; however, a small collection of neon signs and band fliers prevented them from providing any visibility. A small sign hanging over the door is the only identifying feature. It once read “Winnie’s Bar and Restaurant,” etched in wood; however the ink had largely chipped away from its warped and faded surface, so now it served more as an antique decoration than an actual sign.

She couldn’t help but admire her selection. The bar was innocuous, unlikely to have been heard of or visited before, with the added bonus of being difficult to locate and identify. She’d scheduled their meeting for a Tuesday night, knowing that nothing of interest happens on a Tuesday. She had even made sure that nothing of interest was within walking distance, steering clear of parks, beaches, theatres, and clubs. Over the last year she had relentlessly filled her free time with a series of projects: she’d alphabetized her pantry, she’d
started making her own bread and pasta, she re-grouted everything, she’d started following celebrity gossip. This had been her latest project. For the last week and a half, every day after she arrived home from work, she would obsessively search the Internet for possible bars, creating a color-coded map where she could cross-reference the location of attractions with the potential date locations. She had ended up with a few possibilities, but after walking by each, she had selected Winnie’s as the least interesting and most nondescript.

She forced herself to cross the street and enter. She had to pause in the doorway for a few moments for her eyes adjust to the drastically dim interior. All the lights in the bar were on, but somehow they did nothing to discourage the substantial shadows. She selected a table in the corner near the rear of the building, allowing her a partially obstructed view of the door, and making it difficult for anyone entering to spot her.

She placed her purse delicately on the booth beside her, and crossed her legs. She felt her underarms moistening, and her foot began to do an involuntary twitching jiggle. In an attempt to dispel the cataclysmic sense of growing acidic nervousness she ordered herself a drink. She’d largely quit drinking about a year ago. While it had never been a problem, she’d been worried, given the circumstances, that it would become a habit. Tonight she was making an exception to this rule.

As she waited for her drink to arrive she fidgeted with her blouse. Nothing too bright or too low-cut. Expensive enough to look nice but cheap enough not to look flashy. She smoothed her collar, and re-tucked the bottom into her skirt. She resisted the urge to pull out her compact and check her lipstick one more time. Instead, she pulled her locket from under her blouse. She used to keep it on a short chain, so it hung at her collarbones, proudly displaying the delicate heart to everyone who saw her. Recently, she had exchanged the short dainty chain for a longer sturdier model, so she could hide it beneath her clothing. People used to smile and compliment her on the beautiful necklace. Now she couldn’t stand for anyone but her to see it. The last time her mother had caught her wearing it she’d softly advised, “Don’t you think its time you took that off, and start to move on?”

Finally, the bartender meandered back to her small table. He mumbled through his dark, limp hair, “Old Fashioned,” taking the time to place a napkin between the small glass and the table, before once again disappearing behind the illuminated shelf of unimpressive alcohols. She let her fingers slip from the warm metal, extracting the
fruit skewer before taking a much-needed gulp. She popped the cherry in her mouth, relishing the sweet syrupy taste, while she considered the orange slice. She’d always hated citrus, especially oranges. Something about the smell and sharp taste disagreed with her. She used to order her drinks without it, not wanting to waste the fruit, but he liked oranges so she had gotten used to disdainfully plucking it from her glass and plopping it into his. He’d eat the orange slice with exaggerated enjoyment, relishing in her exaggerated disgust. This was the first time she’d ordered an Old Fashioned since it happened, and she had forgotten about the orange. For a few moments she watched the fruit dangle from the black sliver of plastic, releasing a few drops of alcohol and juice onto the tabletop. When she felt her eyes begin to prickle, she quickly balled it in a napkin and shoved it under the metal caddy holding the table’s salt, pepper, and hot sauce. She wasn’t going to let herself cry over a goddamn orange slice.

She took another gulp, and decided to focus on the situation at hand. She reminded herself that this wasn’t a big deal, that people did this all the time. In fact there are probably thousands of women just like her waiting in bars just like this for their blind date to arrive. Adam, a friend of Sarah from accounting, was supposed to arrive in 8 minutes and 24 seconds. The date was the result of a group effort, largely spearheaded by her endearingly concerned best friend, Mindy, to get her to forget and reenter the dating world, or as Mindy kept calling it, “the real world”. She begrudgingly agreed once it became annoyingly clear that Mindy was not going to abandon the effort anytime soon. She did her makeup for the first time in months, and put on an outfit that was as close to cute as she could muster, and made herself actually show up.

No matter how much Mindy pressed the issue, no matter how many people supported her, no matter how many guys they presented to her, she couldn’t make herself want to be on a date, to want to move on, to let any of it go. More than anything, sitting in this dingy bar she wanted to go back. She could almost imagine if she put herself in the right mentality, if she said the right thing, or concentrated hard enough she would be able to force herself back. Back, before last year, before anything had happened. He would be sitting across from her with a big smile on his face because he was always smiling his big goofy smile. He would be telling her about some nature documentary he watched last night, and how there’s a type of frog that can spit poison or something like that. There would already be a couple of empty bottles and glasses on the table, along
with a pile of used napkins because he probably would’ve already spilled something because he was always just so goddamn bad at holding things. She could see him sitting across from her, see him leaning back in mid laugh when he turned pale and silent. His radiant smile transformed into a stoic frown, his skin turned pallid and gray, and his secondhand t-shirt became a suit.

She stood up. This wasn’t right. This could never be right. She shouldn’t be at this bar without him. She shouldn’t be sitting down, having drinks, getting dressed up while he’s dead, while he’s gone. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t betray him. She couldn’t leave him behind.

She tucked the locket back under her blouse, and grabbed her purse. Headed determinedly to the door, she collided with something warm and solid.

“Oh my gosh! I’m very sorry, but I think I’m supposed to meet you here. Sorry I’m a little late; I had a bit of trouble finding the place. You’re not leaving already are you?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The innocuous and painless escape she had desperately wanted had just been eliminated. It could’ve just been a mix up—wrong place, wrong time—they’d reschedule; nobody would’ve known, but now she’s trapped. She watched his welcoming smile fade and turn unsure, as she kept standing there unable to think of what to say.

She kept trying to look at him, but it was like she couldn’t make her eyes focus. Everything about him was wrong: hair is too long— not him, smile too straight— not him, too short, too stocky, too tailored— not him, not him.

“Hey. Is everything okay? You are Laura right? I’m sorry, I—”. She didn’t let him finish. Hearing her name was a physical blow, driving the knife of not him deep into her gut. She felt the pain of it radiate through her body with each heartbeat, sending the electric sting of not him racing through her. She moved all at once, flinging herself towards the exit, while shouting, “Sorry! I really have to leave now,” and added, “Nice meeting you,” as she slipped through the heavy blacked-out door. She heard an incredulous “What the fuck,” before the door slammed closed.

Gulping down the damp night air, she blindly fled from Winnie’s. She walked several blocks at top speed before realizing that nobody was chasing after her. Nobody was going to force her to go back.

She realized that she was being incredibly rude to Adam. She realized that she never actually paid for her drink. She realized that
Sarah and Mindy and her mother were all going to be disappointed and worried with her for acting this way.

She felt her eyes begin to well up, but she was so tired of being so miserable. The street around her was deserted, so she let out a guttural “FUCK YOU” to no one in particular.

For a moment she considered turning around, finding Adam and apologizing profusely, sitting down and pretending to be okay like everyone so desperately wanted her to be.

Instead, she took the new lipstick Mindy had bought her out of her purse and threw it down a nearby storm drain. Then she used her sleeve to try to wipe any trace of it from her face, uncaring that it smeared up her cheek and ruined her blouse.

She walked a few more blocks, and hailed a taxi. She returned to her empty apartment. She shed her clothes and remaining makeup, turned off her phone, crawled beneath their covers, and stared silently at the unchanging darkness.
Interview with
Roxanne Gay
Roxane Gay is a writer, editor, blogger, and professor with a diverse bibliography. Her written works include Bad Feminist, An Untamed State, and the forthcoming Hunger. She is also a contributing op-ed writer for The New York Times and a professor at Purdue University. Her work often handles race, gender, and sexuality through the lens of her own personal experiences. During her visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Gay took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Chelsea Yedinak.

Chelsea Yedinak: In Bad Feminist, you reference a large number of different books and movies and pop culture items, and you also place an emphasis on how important reading has been in your life. I was wondering what books and authors serve as your inspiration and which you continue to hold close to your heart?

Roxane Gay: Edith Wharton’s Age of Innocence is definitely a book that is important to me. And the Little House on the Prairie books are also ones that you really hold in your heart forever.

CY: Are there any specific authors that have inspired you as you’ve come into your writing?

RG: Zadie Smith, Toni Morrison, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Edith Wharton. And really anyone that I’m reading. I get inspiration from everything that I read, and I read a lot. Catherine Chung is a contemporary writer, and she’s one of my favorite writers. Alexander Chee. The indie writer xTx. I get inspiration from everything I read, good or bad.
**CY:** You have a really diverse bibliography in terms of style, with your essays and short stories and then your novel, plus a memoir coming out soon. So how do you decide what stories and issues you want to write about next and in what form you want to write them?

**RG:** I don’t have a really good answer for that. Oftentimes my decisions are deadline-based, especially in terms of nonfiction. Somebody asks me to write about something, and there’s often a really tight deadline. And so that’s my motivation for doing it. So mostly that. But then, once in a while—not once in a while, a lot of the time, really—you get this sort of idea, and it just becomes a fire in your gut, and you just think I have to write about this, I have to write about this. And so I just follow my gut.

**CY:** Your novel, An Untamed State, originally had a less happy ending that was changed after you received some feedback. About the change, you wrote, “Maybe it won’t be completely realistic. Maybe that’s okay.” How do you decide when you’re going to lean more towards that fantasy and when to go more realistic for an ending?

**RG:** I don’t know. It depends. It really depends on how it serves the overall story. It really is about what serves the interest of the story. With the novel, in working with my editor at Grove, Amy Hundley, I realized the reader had been on such a journey alongside Mireille and not only did she deserve a happier ending, so did the reader. There is no happy ending for someone like her who’s been through what she’s been through. But I do believe she was strong enough to find her way back to herself, slowly but surely, and that it was important to give the reader that. And so, for me, making that choice served the best interest of the novel. It’s always about the best interest of whatever I’m writing that is my guide in making narrative decisions.
CY: You talk in Bad Feminist about the careless language regarding sexual violence in our culture. For example, how we make a spectacle of it in Law and Order: SVU and other shows. You handle those topics in your writing, but you do a really good job of making it so that it’s not entertaining. Do you have any advice for someone who’s considering writing about sexual violence and handling it sensitively?

RG: The first thing is to not consider it a plot device, but rather something that happens in the story. Don’t use it as a device; let it be an organic part of the story. And let there be good narrative reasons for including it. I think you start from there. It’s all about being genuine and organic. Then make sure that you don’t exploit the violence to titillate the reader or to repulse the reader just for the sake of repulsion. And there are a lot of different ways to go about doing that.

CY: Since you’ve written Bad Feminist, some of the issues addressed in the book have changed, such as marriage equality. Do you think that we might see more of those issues being fixed in the near future?

RG: It depends on who the next president is. Yeah, I think the social tide has certainly turned in terms of marriage equality. But those gains could just as easily be taken away from us if a Republican president is elected and controls 3 or 4 seats on the Supreme Court. I mean, it’s terrifying that there are people whose rights depend on who’s in power. That’s not the way civil rights should work. And so I think that we have to celebrate the gains that we’ve made while staying extraordinarily mindful of the work yet to be done.

CY: You talk at the end of Bad Feminist about how the goal isn’t necessarily for everyone to be a feminist. They should be, but you can’t force everyone to. There should be more of an open dialogue and a more accurate representation of feminism.
Do you think we’ve gotten some of that in recent years with movements like He for She? Is there a specific way to start that activism?

RG: I think we’re starting to have more open dialogue, yes. And hopefully we continue. And I hope we also go beyond dialogue. The issues we’re facing demand more than simply conversation. I think we see it in these programs like He for She from the United Nations. Emma Watson starting a feminist book club. Any time a young woman who’s in the public eye claims feminism, I think it offers an opportunity for conversation. And I think we can do these same kinds of things in our day-to-day lives for those of us who aren’t famous. We can just find these moments where we can have a good conversation about feminism and go from there.

CY: Several of your essays discuss very personal experiences from your life. How do you maintain the personal aspect of your writing?

RG: I just try to maintain boundaries for myself, but recognize that sometimes you need to write from experience. And so I’m willing to write from experience when I know that it’s going to serve a greater purpose in an essay.

CY: You said that the style of your upcoming memoir, Hunger, was influenced by other nonfiction that changed how you viewed it. What sort of style will that be?

RG: I read Maggie Nelson’s Argonauts last year. Just a great book. And she had no real sections or chapters; it was just fragments. And I’m borrowing from that. There are no chapter headings, there are sections, but there are no chapter headings in Hunger. And some chapters, for lack of a better word, are one paragraph, while others might be ten pages. So I’m just playing with structure and form and really trying
to deconstruct form a lot in the book.

CY: On Tumblr, writing about 2015, you said, “My skin has not gotten thicker. I can hear a hundred compliments, but it’s the random teenager on Tumblr saying, ‘Roxane Gay is unoriginal and untalented’ that is a knife through my tender heart.” How do you keep going and writing in spite of the criticism or backlash you receive from those random teenagers on Tumblr and others?

RG: You have to just keep it all in its proper place. The reality is that I’m always going to write. I was writing when I was four years old. It was my favorite thing to do. It still is. And so I always just try to separate writing from publishing, which are two very different things. You know, eventually I’m able to gain perspective on that little fucking twerp who has some nonsense to say and they just don’t like my work. That’s fine. You always want to be liked, but at some point, you have to accept that you will not be universally liked and that, quite frankly, anyone who’s universally liked is suspect.

CY: Was there a moment when you realized that? Because I think a lot of younger people are taught that you need to be liked. You’ve mentioned that female characters that are unlikeable are often viewed much more negatively in reviews.

RG: I’m still learning. It’s something I have to actively remind myself and to tell myself and reassure myself of.

CY: You’ve spoken about how, as a black, bisexual Haitian-American, you’re often told by society to be silent. Do you have advice for other writers who are being told to be silent?

RG: You just have to write anyway. You can’t really listen to people who tell you, “Don’t speak.” Those are not people who have your best interests at heart. So you have to write
despite so many of the negative messages that we receive in this world.

**CY:** How do you deal with the criticism you receive for writing and speaking out?

**RG:** It depends. Criticism is always difficult, but when people are criticizing me because they want me to be quiet, that says more about them than it does about me. And I’m not particularly interested in that. But when criticism is going to make me a better writer and thinker, then I definitely try to sit with the criticism and see what I can learn from it.

**CY:** Do you have any advice for creating constructive criticism and how to give someone the tools to make a piece better?

**RG:** I think you have to point out what’s not working in writing. There’s just no flowery way to do that. It is what it is. The nature of criticism is that you are going to say, “This is what is not working.” But you want to make sure that it’s about intentionality and where you are coming from in terms of the criticism that you’re offering. And making sure that your criticism is not just “I hate this kind of sentence.” That’s a personal preference, that’s not a criticism. You want to always make sure that your commentary is in the best interest of the piece that you’re criticizing.

**CY:** You’ve written about how you weren’t always interested in using the term “feminist” to describe yourself, particularly in your teens and twenties. Was there a particular moment when you realized you wanted to claim that title?

**RG:** Yeah, when I turned 30, really. Right before I got my Ph.D., I had this moment where I was working in the College of Engineering at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and I was working in communications and I recognized that
I could do what these faculty members around me were doing. And most of them were men. So I decided to get my Ph.D. and I think that was really part of the catalyst for my feminism. I don’t know if it was an awakening, but I was willing to embrace feminism and to claim feminism and that willingness has just gotten stronger and stronger throughout my thirties and now into my early forties.

**CY:** Do you have any advice for young people who are interested in feminism but might have some of the same reservations that you had when you were younger?

**RG:** Yeah. Don’t worry about those reservations. People are going to think what they’re going to think. Try not to let that shape the choices and the decisions that you make for yourself and how you see the world.

**CY:** There’s a long-running joke about an English major being worthless. Do you have any advice for young English majors going into the world and what they might do to keep writing alongside careers?

**RG:** Yeah, I think that you have to believe in the value of your major despite the rhetoric that an English major is worthless. It’s not worthless. It’s one of the most valuable majors. You can do anything with an English major. And just recognize that if you want to be a writer, you have to have a day job. And it’s okay. There’s no shame in that, and it doesn’t make you less of a writer and it doesn’t make you less committed to your art, it just makes you committed to your rent and health insurance and things like that.

**CY:** What do you get out of your reading and writing?

**RG:** It’s just my favorite thing to do. It makes me happy. It makes me relaxed. It helps me make sense of the world. It
helps me make sense of myself. It allows me to be creative and free, so reading and writing are everything.

**CY:** What are some good books that you’ve read recently or that are coming out soon?

**RG:** I loved *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. Just outstanding, melodramatic, dark. I loved it. Best book I read last year. *Great Kitchens of the Midwest* by J. Ryan Stradal was a lot of fun. *Voyage of the Sabled Venus* is this gorgeous book of poetry by Robin Coste Lewis that I loved.

**CY:** All of the major awards tend to go to pieces that are more dramatic as opposed to comedies. Do you think there’s a reason why people discount happiness?

**RG:** I think comedies aren’t necessarily focused on happiness; they’re focused on laughter. I think that people tend to equate struggle with authenticity and with merit. And I think that we’re very suspicious of happiness, as a people, and so I think that is what is reflected when awards generally go to darker work.

**CY:** There is a responsibility for art to reflect life and point out problems, but fiction is also often a way to escape those problems. Do you think that a happy ending can be important in fiction? Is there a way to do both?

**RG:** Yeah, absolutely. I think we can have happy endings. They exist. And really, for me, the interesting story is what did it take to get to the happy ending? That’s really where my attention is drawn and so I think happy endings can exist while also acknowledging that a happy ending isn’t a perfect ending. I think people hear “happy ending” and assume bliss, but that’s not necessarily the case. And so we just have to remember that happiness has as much texture as sorrow.
Red leaves of rust fall
from old iron-blue oaks

like sparks out the autumn barrels of
a line of ancient red-nosed rifles

pointed at another AWOL-crazy year. They found him under

the persimmon tree, picking in
twilight-colored fermented pulp,

cutting the eyeball-shaped seeds
in half with a rusted pocket-

knife, seeing what the seeds
see—white spoons in the center

means a long winter. “Save
your bitter maize for better days,”
he said, his Et tu Brute
before they made him drag

a cross made from the same scented
cinnamon-sticks your mom set out

in an orange vase before the first
Thanksgiving dinner I ate

with you and all your family. We
were sitting there when a red moon
gave the order and yelled, “Fire!”
sitting there on the porch together:

half-forgotten jack-o-lanterns
full of purple flies, flickering

smoke-signals coughing in
the cracking windows of our rotten-

wrinkled eyes, starting to frown
and praying that we learn to speak

before the days run too short,
before vanilla candlewax

runs out our mouths, before
persimmon seed prophecies

come true, and all that numbing
snow falls from angry skillet-

colored winter skies and snuffs
our timid candle-tongues out.
Three months and twelve days after the baby, I finally took his advice. I was going to join a workout class. I'd always been short and relatively average as far as weight goes, but he insisted. I thought the pregnancy weight suited me just fine, but it was for my own wellbeing, of course. And he was the father of my baby—why shouldn’t I trust him?

Anyway, I signed up for a workout class with one of those exciting names. Move!! met at a roller skating rink downtown four days a week for a half-hour. Each class cost me seven dollars, which was a bit much, but I figured if I skipped lunch a couple days a week I could afford it. Two birds with one stone, you know. But no one told me I’d have to wait around for 45 minutes in the stuffy, dim room to save a spot each time—the class was in that high of a demand.

The skating rink was a wide, short building that looked like a warehouse from the outside. It sat in the shadow of the Interstate overpass, its small gravel parking lot bumpy with potholes. A wide glass front door opened up onto the skating rink’s lobby, which was carpeted in deep purple carpet printed with slivers of fluorescent ribbon in oranges and yellows and greens—the kind that lights up in black light. Booths and benches dotted the room, and the smell
of pizza and nachos hung thick in the air. The walls were lined with skeeball machines and arcade games, all of which flashed garishly. It was a place for children. And yet it attracted people like me and Jenn.

Jenn was a mother like me who joined the class to help her lose that last bit of baby weight. That is, if she had any to begin with. She had straight brown hair pulled into a tight French braid and always wore bright-colored yoga pants and tanks with sayings like “push yourself” and “give it your all” across them in big letters. She had a pair of Nike running shoes that probably cost more than my cell phone, and one of those fitness watches that cost even more than that.

I first met her on a Tuesday, arriving just a few minutes before the class started to find that there was no more room on the rink’s wide polished wooden floor. She had her tote bag, sweat towel, and water bottle spread out in the back row, blocking off an area big enough for her and someone else. I turned to leave—I could always walk Lucy, my black lab, around the block a few times. She’d be bored from sitting at home alone all day, and lord knows she could stand to lose some weight too. Poor thing could barely climb up on the couch. I could just come back tomorrow.

“Hey! Red shirt over there!” came a shout from the back row, apparently directed at me. I barely heard her over the thrum of the electronic music. “Yeah, you. I got a space here.” I jogged over.

“Thanks, I was just about to leave,” I said, tugging the double knots on my shoes tighter. “They really need more room in here. Or more classes.”

“Totally,” she said. “I’m not gonna save my friend a space anymore if she’s not gonna show up. I mean, they even offer babysitting during the class for a couple dollars. No excuse.”

Over the sea of messy buns I saw some women with fluorescent shirts corralling children into a fenced-off area near the restrooms, away from the music and sweat.

She smiled. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Beth. Yours?”

“Jenn. Nice to meet you,” she said, beginning to jog in place. “I’m here to kick this baby weight to the curb!” She stopped and dipped into a low squat, turning her head to look up at me. “How about you? What’s your drive?”

“Baby weight, too.” I lunged and oh god why do my ankles
have to do that shaky thing? “I’m about three months out.”

“Well hey then, congrats,” Jenn said. “Boy or girl?”

“Boy. Cameron Kyle. Yours?”

“I’m about six months out. Her name is Olivia Jane.” Jenn smiled. “Maybe we could arrange a play date sometime.”

“I—uh—”

The instructor, Amber, tapped her microphone a couple times to check the volume and then greeted us with a perky voice, signaling the beginning of class. She wove through the crowd and climbed up on a dance platform against one wall of the wide room. The first thing that struck me about Move!! was its relative darkness. Patches of color lit the room here and there under the gaze of the black light, but overall it was pretty dim. No one would be able to see me flapping and flopping around in the back row, thank god. No one wants to see that.

Two light fixtures with spider-like arms stretched across the ceiling, bulbs of different colors flicking on and off in time with the loud electronic music. On the far wall flashed rings of light, spreading and shrinking like recurring fireworks. Projected on the wall there in the center, was the word Move!! in an exciting font. One exclamation point just wasn’t enough, I guess? And three must have been too many.

Though I didn’t take the class seriously at first, I quickly learned to. The next half-hour of my life was pain and heat and sweat, and more than once I found myself doubled over, desperately trying to convince my stomach not to vomit. Midway through the first song I had to stop, wheezing, to catch my breath. In front of me, rows and rows of women powered on in sync with the music, kicking and punching and stepping side to side. He was right, I had gotten lazier during my pregnancy.

“Did you survive okay?” Jenn asked me after the class was over, her face covered in a sheen of sweat. She tugged on the front of her shirt a few times, airing herself out.

I was certain I was going to die, and soon. “My calves are gonna hate me tomorrow.” Squeezing just below my knee gave some relief, but I knew I’d be useless for the next few days—well, more so than usual. Climbing the stairs up to my bedroom was going to suck. Maybe I’d sleep on the couch tonight instead.

“Hey, that means you worked hard,” she said. “I barely survived
my first time—it was harsh. But what doesn’t kill you, right?” She hefted the tote bag onto her shoulder and dabbed her forehead with the towel. “See you tomorrow then?”

I paused, considering the stretch in my calves and the stitch in my side. I’d gone through worse pain.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

I showed up early the next day, for some reason. The dubstep music thrummed, emanating from speakers suspended from the ceiling at regular intervals around the perimeter of the skate floor. It’s not like I had anything else to do, being off work and—well, not busy. God, I’m so lazy. Jenn was sitting in the back row again, texting on a big square phone, the kind that looks silly when you put it up to your face to talk. A white gym towel, neatly folded and glowing in the black light, lay a couple feet away from her, marking off a second spot—for her friend, surely. I set my stuff down the next space over and she glanced up.

“Hey!” she said, shouting over the music, her smile lit by the glow of her cell phone in the dim room. “Beth, right? How’re you holding up?”

Jesus, I am so tired of that question.

“About as well as any day, I guess.”

“Your calves feeling any better?”

Oh.

“No, they’re still burning from yesterday.”

“That’s Amber for ya. Calf raises are her favorite.” Jenn reached over and collected her towel, motioning for me to take its place in the spot next to her. “It’s gonna hurt now and probably for a while, but I promise it gets easier—you just have to stay with it.”

The song that had been playing came to an end and the room fell silent for a moment as the instructor toyed with the DJ booth’s settings. Jenn set her phone down on her bag and pulled her legs into a stretch, which I did my best to mirror.

A clomping sound echoed across the wide room in the sudden silence, followed by a bright peal of laughter. A toddler stomped out onto the floor, his slender mother digging in her tote bag as she pursued him ten or so feet behind. His golden curls bounced as he spun and skipped, admiring the glowing effect the black light had on his shoes. He bent in half and grabbed the toes of his shoes,
preoccupied, and his mother scooped her unladen arm around his waist. She swung him up and planted a kiss on his cheek, sending him into a fit of giggles.

“What a cutie,” Jenn said. “Your son’s three months old, right?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Does he sleep through the night? My Olivia had me up three times a night every night until about a month ago. Do you have to get up with him a lot?”

“Oh, no,” I said, giving my shoelace a listless tug, “he’s a little angel.”

“Oh, you and his father are so lucky.”

I paused, looking around. More people had arrived, mostly women—mothers, housewives, several men here and there—shifting and swaying as they stretched and chatted.

“His father isn’t in the picture anymore. He—well—it was like a switch flipped when I got pregnant.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jenn said, pausing. “Do we hate him?”

“Do we—what?”

“You know, block him on Facebook, flip him off when you drive past his workplace—” she raised an eyebrow, “—key his car?”

“No. No! Well, no. He doesn’t have a car, and we work at the same place—that’s where we met.” I readjusted the bandanna holding my hair up. “I mean, I’m not supposed to hate my son’s father.”

Right?

“It sucks, honey. I know, but you don’t have to like him. I’ll hate him for you! Not being there for his son—what a bum.” She raised her water bottle in a sort of toast. “Screw him!” she declared, taking a gulp of her water with a chuckle.

The instructor fiddled with her microphone and I knew class was about to start. I was going to do better today, no matter what—no matter what anyone said.

I made it through the first song, the warm-up, without stopping. The next song was tolerable: some squats and some kicks. Kick, kick, and—a sharp pain stabbed my lower back like a needle and sent me stumbling, catching myself against the back wall.

“You alright?” Jenn shouted to me between breaths.

No.

“Yeah, just—it’s just my back problem. Epidural—the doctor
said it would make my back worse for a couple months. I’ll just, uh, sit down for a minute.”

Jenn stopped for a minute to help me get situated. “Take it easy, okay?” she said and then got back to work.

I knew the pain would pass after a couple minutes but I just needed to—Get off your ass, you lazy bitch! Look at all those people in front of you! They’re working out. What? You’re hurt? You’re just lazy! Get up! Get up!—I stood, steadying myself against the wall, and leaned forward, stretching out my back to make the pain pass faster.

Even though it hurt, I got moving again, picking up at the start of the next song. Every move, every twist pinched in my lower back and sent electric pain down my left leg. If you ever want to stop being a fat cow, you better keep going. Move!

I ducked out of class just before the last song was over, desperate for some painkillers and my heating pad, my best friends since the baby.

I don’t know why, but I went back the next day. My body couldn’t handle the work—it had made that much clear. But I’d been defeated by everything else—I wasn’t about to defeat myself.

Jenn had saved me a spot again, and she tapped away on her phone as I approached. She glanced up and smiled, her white, white teeth nearly glowing in the black light.

“Hey, girl. How’s your back doing?” she asked.

“Better. A little stiff.”

“Glad to hear it. I had back trouble before my pregnancy and it only got worse afterward. You never really recover from having babies,” she said, tying a bright bandanna around her head.

The only sound in the room was the throb of the music, like a great heartbeat in the cavity of my chest.

“So I hope this isn’t weird,” she began, digging around in her bag, “but I have something for you.”

From her bag she produced a plastic grocery bag and handed it over. Inside were a few pieces of clothes—onesies for a boy—decorated with turtles and trains and dinosaurs.

“They’ll fit your son, right? You think?” She smiled.

The material was soft between my fingers, and I found myself squeezing tighter and tighter.

“Jenn, I can’t accept these—”
“Oh, no, don’t worry! I didn’t buy them just for you. Literally everyone I know has girls, so I was trying to find someone with a boy who could use a few onesies I got early on in my pregnancy.” She tried to decode the look on my face. “I mean, if you don’t want them, I’ll take them back, but you can make better use of them than I can.”

I pushed the onesies back into her hands, my eyes starting to burn with tears.

“I can’t take them. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” she asked, simply.

Oh, god, not that question again. I felt the tears coming.

“I’m sorry.” I stood and grabbed my things. A tear betrayed me, rolling down my face, followed by another. “I’m sorry, I—I can’t accept—I, um, I have to go.”

I turned and walked toward the exit.

Who was I to think that I was ready? That I could handle this? That my life was ever going to be the same as it once was?

I don’t blame Jenn for not knowing.

No one ever knows at first—it’s not like you can look at me and guess. No one can see the scars on your heart. They ask me about his hair, his eyes, how big he is, and lots of other questions I should have answers to but don’t.

One of the instructors at the front desk looked at me as I walked past, her eyes asking why I was leaving when I’d already paid. But she didn’t stop me.

Why? It’s a question I ask myself every day. Why him? Why me? Why do I try anymore? At 20 weeks I learned he was sick. His kidneys weren’t forming, there was no amniotic fluid, and the doctors gave me a choice.

So I kept him.

I kept him as long as I could.

His father and I had only known each other for a couple months beforehand. I was unintentionally playing catch-up to the rest of my close friends, two of whom had just gotten engaged. My two sisters-in-law had just had babies as well; a boy and a girl, and I suppose I just wanted a slice out of that same pie. But I picked the wrong guy to have a child with.

He’d start taking his pills again, he said. He’d see a therapist, he claimed. He’d be just like he was before the baby, he promised. He loves me, he lied.
Even in text messages I can hear his voice. You fat cow. If you were a better mother then he’d still be with us. He’s ashamed of you, you stupid bitch. He looks down from heaven and cries because his mom is a whore. It’s your fault he died.

I don’t answer his calls anymore. I should delete his number. I should block him. But I don’t.

I pushed on the heavy door and it scraped in a track on the ground as it opened. Light poured onto my face and I winced, squeezing my eyes shut. I hate the bastard. I hate him because he made me hate myself.
I was told fire and ice will make us perish
    But I’ve boiled my skin
    In a pool of melting knives
    I’ve nurtured frostbitten limbs
    Swimming in Alaskan lakes
    But nothing can compare
    To watching my weeping mother
    Stripped of her knit-sweater, bare
    Hanging from a willow tree in our yard
    The store-bought noose
    Cutting into her throat
    Tears dripping down to her hips
    I didn’t feel the gulf of wet heat
    Or the snap of spearing frost
    I could only feel the snickering secrets
    Of our meat-sack bodies
I have hanged
Another’s sun-soaked mother
From the willow tree in my yard
Her neck spilling a secret of revenge

Ice and fire
Or hate and desire
Will not slaughter us
Our own unforgiving
Will
Crunch fingers
Rip keratin from nail bed
Chew to round edges
into perfect half-moon circles
Taste salience of rose polish
painted to prevent this—

Brain emptied,
absent of nothing
but the drip, drip, drip
Of gone, gone, gone.
Eyes hallowed
like laser beams
searing two holes
into the adjacent wall.
Head stilled
as straight as a milk carton
flattened by a semi-truck
skidding across a state road.
It was not his fault
that the road was a skating rink
but I hate him
every day
for what he stole.

“I have been robbed”
yells an itchy voice
reverberating off the wooden planks
of my bunk bed ceiling.
I do not recognize the voice;
it sounds removed, unfamiliar.
But I claim it as my own
when I realize
I am alone in this room.

The solution is
to slide eyelids
like garage doors
to conceal sight. And
allow consciousness
to absorb into
an argyle pillow case. And
hope everything will be different
in the morning.

See the attempt
to unfeel needles
jabbed into the chest.
To unstitch fabric
covering bruised hipbones.
To unwind time
dancing agony
around the clock.
Only to wake up
and re-feel
and re-stitch
and rewind
all over again.

Watch how something
folds into nothing and
unfurls into something
all over again.
I remember my big brother crying through most of his boyhood. The brother who didn’t cry—I’d pat his shoulder while he sobbed over things he couldn’t explain. But for the most part, we were happy kids. It’s just that Phillip cried every day until he was about 17 years old.

I think the only thing we were missing was a pet. My parents said we couldn’t afford a pet, and actually, there wasn’t much that we could afford. Our clothes were second-hand, but no one would have known unless we told them. Mom shopped at Aldi’s, and Phillip and I didn’t know that our “Doritos” tasted like complete shit until we were well into high school. The two of us had a car we bought together with the little money we earned from working after-school jobs. I worked at the Dairy Queen, and Phillip worked right next door bagging at the Carey Heights Family Grocery. We parked the old Cutlass Supreme in the joint parking lot, and off we would slump to our jobs. I got to drive on the way home.

Phillip and I never talked about ourselves or anything important. We just did stuff together. We were those weirdo brothers who got along, and we looked alike, too. We both inherited our mother’s dark-chocolate hair, pale skin and big brown eyes, but
everything just looked better on him. We are both pretty moley, something we inherited from our father, but mine showed up all lumpish on my eyelid and forehead. Meanwhile, Phillip’s were placed as graceful beauty marks on his cheek and neck.

I don’t know if we would have been that close if we’d grown up wealthy or even middle-class. Pulling our resources together, we would go out to eat with friends and share meals, and no one wondered if we were poor. They just thought we were twins or something, and we just wanted to eat the same thing.

One night after a high school basketball game, Phillip and I waited in Applebee’s for our friends. We sat in the lobby and colored in Applebee’s coloring books, the kind that try to teach children Applebee’s is the only restaurant—an integral part of adulthood. We laughed loudly, drawing dicks and balls all over the Applebee’s propaganda, and our commotion caught the attention of a small Down syndrome man. He politely introduced himself and said he wanted to color too. I jumped up and got him a fresh coloring book and more crayons and got him set up. I showed him how to draw a proper set of dick and balls, and made sure he didn’t forget the occasional curly hair. His delicate eyes smiled as he giggled and slobbered on my shoulder. But Phillip stopped coloring and moved to the other side of the bench to watch. This kind of behavior wasn’t out of the ordinary for him, because Philip didn’t like strangers. Easily awkward, I could tell the Down’s man made him nervous.

Phillip was quiet throughout the meal. He pushed his food around his plate and sulked, but not in the way a child mopes for attention, Phillip wasn’t trying to hustle anything out of anyone—he could never help the way he felt. On our way out, we saw the Down’s man again. He hugged and kissed me on the cheek and didn’t want to let go. Who must have been his parents peeled him off and apologized. As Phillip and I drove home, I watched his face alternate between distress and confusion. I asked him what was wrong.

“You’re just a really good person,” he said.

I think it would have benefitted Phillip to have a pet when he was a kid—a dog, a cat, a fish, something. Phillip was seventeen the last time I watched him cry. He had brought home a puppy, but our parents told him to take it back to wherever it came from. He said he made enough money at Carey Heights to buy dog food, but our parents argued that it wasn’t enough. They said we didn’t understand
all the hidden costs of a pet and they weren’t going to end up footing the bill. I defended Phillip and offered to pick up extra shifts at Dairy Queen to help pay for these costs—so mysterious to me then—but they shook their heads. Phillip gave the puppy to one of the teachers at school. We never saw it again, but that dog ended up living something crazy, like twenty-years. It died of natural causes.

By the middle of Phillip’s senior year, he had stopped speaking to our parents almost entirely. I don’t think it was about the dog. I don’t think it was about anything—really. He just grew moody and restless. One afternoon while our parents were gone, Phillip and I lounged around watching reruns of *M*A*S*H*. There was a knock at the front door and I stood to answer it. Phillip jumped up and threw his hands out at me, pausing them midair. He lowered his voice and gritted through his teeth, “No! Do not answer that!”

“Whoa. What’s going on?”

“Shut up!” In a hushed voice, he managed to come across as screaming. “What is wrong with you?”

No second knock came, but we stood like that for several minutes, the pulse in my throat the only movement between the two of us. Phillip eventually sat down like nothing unusual had happened, and I went to the front window to peer out through a crack in the blinds—must have looked insane from the street. On the doorstep was a brown UPS package. It ended up being a delivery for our mom, just a box full of discounted cooking utensils.

Phillip moved out as soon as he graduated high school. He came home only once, and that was on Christmas morning. He stayed an hour, just long enough to open presents—half of which he left behind on our parent’s living room floor. I spent weekends at his house watching TV on a secondhand couch that smelled like cigarette smoke. I did see my brother a lot that year, but looking back, I guess he never went out of his way to see me.

The weekend after I graduated high school, I moved out of my parents’ house and in with Philip and three of his friends. Early spring, the house was moist and trashed. The other guys were nice, but no one spoke to me more than polite small talk. Phillip kept to himself, locking the door of his room and passing through the house on his way out to work. He would appear in the kitchen, an apparition stirring Rice-A-Roni in a small pot, and he would smile at me almost gratefully. Occasionally, early in the morning, I’d run into
a pretty girl on the way to the bathroom, but I never really knew if she belonged to my brother or one of the others.

One day that winter, Phillip arrived home after work so happy I’d describe him manic. He was never diagnosed with bi-polar disorder; he was never diagnosed with anything. But he appeared so overjoyed, I remember feeling afraid. He whistled through the house and up the stairs and into my room. He leaned his forearm on my doorframe and wore a contorted smirk.

“Hey buddy, let’s go for a ride.”

“Ha, okay. Where we headed?”

He grinned. “Kittens. Baby kittens.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. A girl at work knows a lady who has a whole litter. Let’s go get some.”

“The landlord doesn’t mind?”

“Fuck ‘em.”

We drove almost 30 miles outside of Carey Heights, arriving at an old farmhouse. A middle-aged woman in overalls and scraggly hair escorted us to her back porch.

“Now they need their shots. They ain’t got their shots yet.” I nodded politely and assured her it wouldn’t be a problem. I picked up each kitten out of the wooden crate and kissed the tops of their smelly heads and patted their tiny butts. Phillip grabbed an all-black kitten much skinnier than the others, and named her Clove. I decided on a round, gray kitten with a milk mustache. I named him after the mustached man who smiled on the JARVIS LAW OFFICE billboards and who looked like a friendly walrus.

Jarvis was a happy little guy. He played and followed me around, he used his litter box, and he even slept with me. Clove, on the other hand, was odd. She pissed and shit in Phillip’s closet and spent most of her time hiding underneath his bed. I tried holding her, but she grew more hostile each day. Phillip and I would bring the kittens together, but Jarvis ignored her and opted to play with my fingers. Despite how bizarre Clove was, she pleased Phillip. It actually seemed appropriate that he would have a cracked-out little kitten.

The following week Phillip worked doubles at the grocery, so I decided to check on Clove. I opened Phillip’s door and nearly choked on the smell of cat shit and vomit. I tied one of his t-shirts around
my face and tended to the hot mess permeating his confined room and closet. I scooped up gooey cat diarrhea through plastic Carey Heights’ grocery sacks. I poured vinegar all over the hardwood floor and scrubbed it with a thousand paper towels. I changed the litter in the cat box, though it had been unused. I changed the water in Clove’s bowl and mixed some chicken broth in with her dry food. When I got down on my hands and knees to check for her underneath the bed, I saw a puny, black clump breathing heavily in the far corner. As I crawled under and grabbed her, I was met with an agonizing cry of pain.

I pulled her out and saw an ugly sore on the back of her elbow. It was raw flesh, and some of her fur missing. My hands shook, dropping her in that moment of panic, she dashed back underneath the bed. I ran out of Phillip’s room and called him several times. When he called me back, he was furious.

“What the fuck, Ryan. What do you want? I am at fucking work—”

“Phillip, it’s Clove, she has a—”

“—who? What are you talking about? Are you seriously calling me at work over a goddamned cat?”

“No, listen, it’s serious. Her skin is like peeling or something…”

Click.

I waited for Phillip to come home but he never did that night. I didn’t see him until the next afternoon, and his eyes were bloodshot—he looked deranged.

“Phillip, we need to talk. Right now.”

“Seriously? You’re a roommate now, Ryan. You can’t demand…”

“You better take Clove to the vet before I do. Okay? There is something wrong with her skin and it looks really painful and it’s making me sick just thinking about it.”

“Yes, I will take her.” Phillip waved at me. “Stop worrying.”

“You’ll take her now?” I asked suspiciously.

“I will take her when I wake up from this nap. Okay? A couple of hours will not make a difference at this point.”

I should have just taken her myself. I should have done a lot of things differently, but I was a dumb and broke, selfish nineteen-year-old, worried I wouldn’t have enough money in my savings account to pay for the visit. I barely had enough money for rent or gas. I
decided she wasn’t *mine* and justified that negligence to myself. After all, Jarvis was fine. I took care of him and paid attention to him. He had a room full of toys. He had wet food and dry food and tuna treats. He was healthy and funny and everyone in the house loved him. So, I put Clove out of sight and out of mind. She was a runt, and Darwin was right.

Phillip and I returned to normal. We watched sitcoms together and shared Hamburger Helper meals, and gossiped about girls who parked their cars in the Carey Heights’ lot. He didn’t offer up any free information about Clove, and I didn’t ask. I’d say about a week-and-a-half went by before curiosity got the best of me. I walked to his room and tried to seem casual about it, but the truth is, I was nervous.

His room no longer smelled like shit and I was comforted by the fact that Clove must’ve been using the litterbox. But when I checked, it was immaculate. I peered underneath his bed and saw Clove crouched in her corner. She didn’t squirm when I grabbed her; she was warm, soft, and subdued. She was even smaller than I remembered, and when I pulled her into the light, I was horrified. All the fur on her left back leg was missing, and her flesh raw and oozing. I gently touched the place where her inner thigh met her belly and some of her fur just slid off. She moaned a little and stared up at the ceiling. I screamed.

Phillip appeared in the doorway, his eyes ashamed and worried. “What…what is going on, Phillip?” I wailed.

He winced. “What is it? Ryan?”

“You never took her to the vet, did you? Did you? Goddamnit, Phillip, look at her! Just look at her.” A steady stream of tears flowed over my cheeks, and I rubbed her tiny nose with my pinky. “We have to take her and we have to take her now—right now. Let’s go. I’m getting my shit and I’m driving and we’re fucking leaving.”

I placed Clove on a towel in the middle of the floor and she just laid there. She didn’t move or bother to readjust herself. I walked past Phillip, shoulder bumping him as I headed to my room for my keys and wallet.

“Ryan, wait. Buddy? Stop. We can’t take her to the vet.”

“What? We have to.” I thought about her tiny skull and how her ears just fell. “She is clearly in a lot of pain and might even be dying, Phillip. What is wrong with you?”
“We can’t take her. They’ll call the police. They’ll arrest us.”

Phillip’s eyes were pleading.

“Why would they arrest us? We’ll just tell them we didn’t know it was this bad. That it just…it just got way worse overnight.”

“No, Ryan. I did it.”

I blinked. “You did what?”

“I’ve been burning her with a lighter.”

I pushed back the damp, sweaty hair from my face and stared at the hardwood floor.

“I don’t know, buddy. I don’t know why. I just did. I just sat there and did it.”

My mouth was open, the room still.

“Please. Please, help me, Ryan.”

“Oh, I said, unable to look at him. I looked at every corner and every empty space in that room, but not at Phillip. I remember I didn’t want to even speak his name. “Okay, yes. We cannot take her to the vet. But we have to do something.”

“Yes, you’re right.” I could hear the relief in Phillip’s voice and it made me sick. He eagerly asked, “What should we do? How should we do it?”

“Nope. Wrong.” I madly shook my head. “How are you going to do it? I’m not touching this. I’ll have no part in this—”

“—okay, bud, it’s okay, you don’t have to. I’ll do it.”

I closed my eyes and covered all of my face with my hands. “Just smother her or something. Strangle her.”

“No, I can’t do that!” Phillip jumped around like a child who didn’t want to visit Grandma’s house. “No, Ryan, I can’t do that! Please!”

“Oh fuck you, Phillip. You can burn her legs with a fucking lighter but you can’t put her out of her misery?”

Phillip fell silent. I looked at him and saw my brother—saw him whole. I said, “Alright, I guess you don’t need to do that. It’s… I guess it’s too close, even for you.”

The events that followed—the plan I orchestrated—were difficult for me to comprehend. I don’t like to think that that person exists somewhere inside me. I don’t like knowing he is in there. I told myself I was innocent, because I didn’t actually physically do any of it. The only thing I physically did was walk into the kitchen, retrieve two plastic grocery sacks from underneath the sink and hand them to.
my brother. From there on, I merely proposed a plan. I look back on that day and tell myself I was being pragmatic. I don’t know if I did the right thing, but I haven’t convinced myself I didn’t do the wrong thing either.

I told Phillip to drive to an isolated location, maybe the parking lot behind the abandoned Methodist Church. I told him to park the car and wrap Clove in the grocery sacks, and to be sure to tie the bags tightly so she couldn’t wriggle away. I told him to get out of the car, and place her just in front of the rear wheel. I told him to get back into the car. I told him to floor it.

As I waited at home, I tried to cry. I tried to cry for my brother, I tried to cry for Clove’s short life. I tried to cry and feel sorry for myself. But when Phillip returned, I looked up and we were both completely dry-eyed.

“How did it go?”

“I didn’t get her the first time.” And he went to his room and shut the door.

A few weeks later, I came home from work and Jarvis walked toward me sideways. His nose ran green mucous, and his mouth locked open in an unforgettable haunting position. I immediately took him to the humane society where they told me he had caught distemper and needed to be put down. When they asked why I never brought him in for vaccinations, I said I couldn’t afford them.

That summer I moved out and got an apartment with my now-wife. My relationship with Phillip deteriorated, eventually ceasing to exist at all. He stopped showing up at family functions, stopped calling on holidays and birthdays, and my parents and I stopped asking if we talked to him. I think he’s a chef now. Someone told me several years ago he moved to Maine to live and cook at some mountain resort. The last I heard, he had beaten up his girlfriend and put her in the hospital and he’s really sorry about it. And I just wonder if he cried.
Interview with

Dean Young
Dean Young has authored twelve books of poetry, his most recent contribution being a collection of new and old poems entitled *Bender*. His book *Falling Higher* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. Young has served as the William Livingston Chair of Poetry at the University of Texas in Austin since 2008.

Wesley Sexton: What first drew you to Surrealism as an artistic movement?

Dean Young: When I was a kid my parents took me to Washington D.C. and in the National Gallery there is a painting by Salvador Dali which really impressed me because it was so strange. Then, I went to the library and got a book of his paintings. Their strangeness and dreamlike qualities really impressed me, and that’s how I found out about Surrealism. Then, I went to the library again and got the *Manifestos on Surrealism* by André Breton. I read them when I was in the 8th grade and that really opened it up for me.

WS: Surrealism is so much about our thoughts—our imaginations, and poetry in the last fifty or so years seems to have shifted from trying to understand the world to trying to understand ourselves, and the way we interact with the world. How do you think those two impulses overlap?

DY: The self is a manifestation of the world as much as DY world is a manifestation of the self, so to see the self as a phenomenon in the world makes a lot of sense.

WS: What do you draw from the New York School?

DY: With Koch particularly, his poems are fun. There is
almost no suffering in Kenneth Koch’s work. There is a sheer joy of the medium of poetry—of making poems—and they are free of the burden of seriousness. That’s true of Frank O’Hara and John Ashberry too to some extent. Freedom of seriousness isn’t just about being funny. It’s also about having a kind of dexterity in what the poem can do—what directions it can follow. Ashberry in particular is extraordinary in his resources of distraction and surprise and the beauty of motion in the poem. It follows a kind of musicality that doesn’t seem bound to sensible argument.

**WS:** About these poems that lack seriousness, some people might say, “Well, what’s the point?” How would you answer that question?

**DY:** What do they mean by point? What are you looking for? You have a preconceived notion of the poem’s destination, or what a poem should be about. From my perspective, that’s obviously very limiting because you can’t appreciate it as much.

**WS:** Traditionally poems are thought to bring us toward some kind of discovery or epiphany. How else can we think about poetry without binding it to this obligation of discovery or insight?

**DY:** One of the most common ways is to think about it as poetry itself. A corollary of that is to think about the ways in which meaning is structured, and made. One of the ways of making that apparent is to resist it— to not make meaning in ways that are conventionally expected or understood. Poetry can be thought of as in resistance to conventional ways of thinking.

**WS:** In The Art of Recklessness you talk about how poetry can restore a level of primitiveness to society. What do you see as the
value of primitivism?

DY: It gets us back to the raw state of being and desire and physicality and biology and facts of our existence, which are not things that should necessarily be ignored or thought of as detrimental to life. I think we have a tendency to lose contact with the earth—with our being—in our desire to become more civilized. It gets us back to the first feelings of awe and appreciation and fear and love that strike me as being vital to our existence—to human friendship.

WS: I wonder if you thought about how technology plays a role in that?

DY: I’m very suspicious of technology. It’s wonderful. For one thing, it’s brought music into our lives in ways that were impossible 100 years ago. I listen to recorded music almost constantly, and it’s a big part of my life. But technology also mitigates. Every experience it gives us is a mitigated experience. You also have to deal with the environmental impact of technology.

WS: Do you think music and poetry function in similar ways?

DY: Music is something that has a kind of meaning—we take a kind of experience from it—which isn’t narrative, which isn’t argumentative. It doesn’t have a point. It’s an experience that in and of itself is sufficient. It doesn’t refer to anything, and that is an inspiration to me because poetry can have similar possibilities.

WS: So that it creates its own reality without necessarily explaining it?

DY: Yeah, it’s not obliged to make sense.
WS: I've often found that if some of my favorite lyrics are spoken or even read on the page, they become incredibly underwhelming. Do you have any thoughts as to why that is?

DY: It’s just because the music itself has so much power. I’ll listen to songs for years before I even begin to hear what the lyrics are saying. It’s not that important to me. I love vocal music, but the content of the language is always a distant second to what is happening in the music.

WS: Also from The Art of Recklessness, in the beginning you say something like “if everyone in the world decided to write a poem today, we can be sure nothing would be made worse.” It’s understated there, but what do you see as the value of writing poetry.

DY: One of the things is it’s not materialistic. I think it helps people get in touch with something that is beyond them—something beyond their particular daily concerns—and also much bigger than they are. Something that can inspire awe and appreciation and surprise. And it’s free. You make yourself open to it and it comes, and it connects you to this huge history of people who have been writing poems for thousands of years.

WS: In Bender there are many odes. What draws you to that form?

DY: It’s that the ode is the poem of praise. We often expect a poem to be a poem of complaint or woe, so the ode attracted me as a way of doing something different and not being obliged to sorrow.

WS: Writing seems to come so naturally to you. Have you struggled at all with teaching?
DY: Well, teaching is really demanding. It takes a lot of time. It’s really exhausting, but because it’s so woven into my life—the way writing is woven into my life—I’m not sure what has taught me what. I’m sure of learned things about teaching from my writing, thinking about what someone could say to me that would be useful, and then trying to create an environment where that can happen in class. That’s how my writing has influenced my teaching.

My teaching makes me susceptible to the work of young poets. Their concerns and their practices and their discoveries have influence on my work. I want it to. I want to be influenced by as many people as possible.

WS: You’ve spoken about how conformity can be dangerous to poetry, but reading and being influenced by other writers is a form of that. Do you have a feeling about what the difference is?

DY: Reading poems makes people want to write poems. Some of the biggest compliments I’ve ever receive about things I’ve written are that someone has said they read my poem and it made them want to write a poem. Poetry defies the law of supply and demand. Its value is not diminished by the amount available. The more poetry there is, the more poetry there is. There is no limit. Poetry is never saying no to poetry.

WS: Is there a danger of being too closely influenced by a poet?

DY: Probably, and then it’s just a question of steering the other direction. Read something else–something very different. You need an antidote.

WS: How do you feel that the Romantic poets have influenced your work?

DY: The difference of 100 years in terms of my attitude
toward poetry is absolute and unassailable. It’s harder for us to feel contact with poets the further we go back in time. The older I get the less remote 100 years seems to me. I feel pretty direct contact with Keats and Wordsworth. I think it’s vital to develop a connection to poetry that is a connection beyond the poets of your era—to develop what Eliot calls a “historical sense.” It occurs throughout life. It’s not like some people ever finish. Don’t feel guilty at any particular time about not having yet read a poet, because it’s perpetually in development. But I think everyone should read poets from every era.

**WS:** *Your poems don’t seem very concerned with narrative. Why do you think that is?*

**DY:** Narrative is just one way of ordering experience. It’s gotten to be the dominant way of ordering experience. We have movies and television, but we also have music, which isn’t necessarily narrative. I am not that interested in narrative, maybe because it is the dominant way of ordering experience. In poetry I want to see what other ways I can find.

**WS:** *There is certainly some narrative in your poems though. You can often say something happened or you can identify a subject at least. Do you have any thoughts about how narrative intersects with imagination in your poetry?*

**DY:** It has to do with process and with how association is central to the process. I am not being held to any kind of logical expectation. That is where Surrealism influences me most.

**WS:** *What value does the association hold for you?*

**DY:** It creates new types of connections, which forms
meaning because meaning is connection.

**WS**: Sometimes our mind can form connections that only make sense because of the imagination, but that doesn’t make the connection any less real.

**DY**: I completely agree.
Peer at your reflection
in the smooth skin of the eggplant
your father would never eat,
in the peppers that grew in your small garden,
in the glob of Heinz ketchup
you attempted to drown your green beans in.

Snuggle close to the threadbare fur
of the one-eyed dinosaur, whose arms
you clasped tightly around you
every night before going to sleep,
to the right head of a Dragon Tale,
a fleeting vision of the street sweeper
with the graveyard of stuffed animals in its grill.

Clutch the wiffle ball scoop with which
you plucked the scratched plastic
ball tossed by your mother from the air;
study the swirling surface of the rubber ball
before it cleared the backyard fence
for the 19th time and splashed
once more into the middle of the lake.

Gulp the 44-ounce Fanta cherry
and blue raspberry gas station slushies
you and your sister downed
with your father’s blessing,
rushing home to scrub your lips raw
and shine your stained teeth
before your mother could discover
your secret sin.

Listen to the late-night crackle
of the sizzling explosions that sliced
the sky once a year in July,
to the rustling of the glued, taped, and tied
array of streamers that dragged the street
behind the caravan of another
year’s homecoming floats.

Marvel at the swirling particles
that stained the porcelain toilet bowl
after your sister learned
that vitamins don’t flush;
stare transfixed at the bruise-like beds of your nails
after another Indiana winter.

Try to see the allure of an amethyst ring
glistening in the glass case at JC Penney
when all you can think of are one-eyed
dinosaurs, eggplants, and the murders
of hundreds of thiamin lions.
Winner of the 2016 Manuscripts Prose Contest with Benjamin Percy
The large conference room, normally housing lectures, had been colonized by unfamiliar persons. Volunteers checked donors in and offered battered, laminated pages detailing any juvenile or scientific question on the process of blood donation. The recovery center was at a desk on the opposite wall, furnished with granola bars, cookies, and enough bottled water to shorten the planet’s life expectancy by a few years. Nurses scurried to and fro, retrieving necessaries at a communal table in the center of the room, assessing possible donors behind portable walls, wiping and sticking donors at gurneys, and repeating the process.

This particular room and setup was familiar enough for Ms. Nuja. She had travelled around site to site within the city, seeing so much that all the individual portraits morphed into a broad mural. It hung like a tapestry in the back of her mind and there she let it expand, each addition seeming smaller in its accumulated growth until the majesty was lost entirely.

A young man, perhaps an older boy, practically skipped into the room. It was not only his pink shoelaces that gave off a distinct air
of femininity. The other nurses gave a collective, small frown. This group, Nuja acknowledged with a groan, disliked turning people away. She, however, was seasoned; the worst case scenario was that the stranger walked away with all of his blood.

Still, even people at the front desk who got a glimpse of his bony hands were polite and committed to procedure. Nuja would do the same.

“Would you like a free T-shirt?” the acne-ridden volunteer chirped.

“Oh!” the young man was taken aback by the honor, “No, thank you very much, Miss! I don’t need it.”

The girl took another look over the missing buttons in his shirt. “I think we have your size, though.”

“You’re so nice,” his voice was like melting butter, “But no, I won’t need it.”

Nuja approached the conversing pair and addressed the boy, “First time donor?”

“Yes, Miss,” he drew his too-long sleeves back over his jutting elbows before immediately pulling his sleeves back down again.

Ms. Nuja raised her eyebrows in response. Gentility had long been squelched from her in an effort to be taken seriously, resulting in strangers typically calling her “ma’am” over “Miss.” She was flattered by this boy’s deviance from the norm—ideologically flattered, not romantically. Only now was she beginning to feel sorry for the emaciated, presumably gay boy. His eagerness buzzed off of his skin. “Well, you can follow me back when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now, if you don’t mind, Miss. Not to rush you! I only meant I could go if you would rather not wait around.” He looked horrified with his tongue-tied state, his giddiness draining from him. “Or maybe you’d rather have a break. I’m sorry, just do whatever you want.”

Ms. Nuja stared at him a moment, trying to discern if she believed he was spineless or simply too polite. But in the end, it made little difference. “Come on,” she said, and led him back behind a portable wall she had helped set up earlier that day. On the other side sat two chairs and a computer with a list of reasons why he could not donate. She could think of a couple reasons more than the automated system. For example, a grinning boy who wore thin clothes in the winter had no business giving anything away.

Still, Nuja sat down in her chair and began the online survey. “I’m going to have to ask you a few questions.” She glanced up at
him, his weight teetering between his feet as he bashfully scanned the floor. “You can sit,” she offered.

“I may?” his blistered lips smiled a touch too widely, and started to bleed a little. “Thank you, Miss.”

The power of the word “Miss” started to nauseate her. “Please, call me Fola. Or Ms. Nuja.” She cut him off before he could apologize, “First, your name?”

“Katurian P. Napels.”

Nuja suppressed a smile. It was always a pleasure to find others in the “say that again?”-name category. “Spell that for me?”

He obeyed, and additionally set his ID on the table. From this, she gathered that he had recently turned 18.

“Happy belated birthday, Katurian.”

“Thank you, Miss Fola Nuja.”

Most of the general information was fine. He seemed to hesitate over an address before he simply pointed to the one on his identification. Nuja paused over his height and weight, an irrational guilt resonating in her gut.

Katurian scratched the back of his head knowingly, ruffling up his already messy, brown bowl-cut. “I guess I’m a little underweight...”

That was an understatement. His skin appeared to struggle in stretching over his bones. “Yes. I’m afraid this could be a problem.”

“Why, exactly?” he leaned forward in his chair, his wide eyes looking all the larger.

Again, Nuja hesitated. “For your own wellbeing.”

Katurian nodded slowly, “Is that the only reason?”

“Isn’t that reason enough?”

Katurian smiled, that dab of blood from his lips smearing slightly over his crooked teeth. “Next question?”

Nuja sighed, sounding almost sympathetic. “I’m afraid there’s no need. I’m not legally allowed to put you in harm’s way, it goes against the entire purpose.”

Katurian’s soft eyes darkened in an instant. “No, Miss, I insist.”

He did nothing actively threatening, but at the very least, Nuja no longer believed he was a pushover. He did not look eager to fight, per se, but she caught sight of a reservoir of power inside of this boy. It knocked her off her game. “Katurian, I could lose my job if I don’t turn you away at this point.”

His jaw twitched strangely, all nuances of which were visible in his starved face. “I want to save a life.”

“Save yours.”
His entire demeanor greyed. They stared at one another in complete disillusionment. At last, he stood, and Nuja sat up a bit straighter. She picked up his ID and reached out to return it to him. The barrel of a gun was positioned directly in front of her left eye. Katurian cocked the small pistol.

“I’m terribly sorry,” his voice wavered, but his hand did not. “I really insist we go through with this, Miss.”

She did not ask why this was so important. She did not cry for help. She was not going to argue or barter. She was going to get through this nightmare as briskly as possible. Her life was the goal, and so she was perfectly obedient, even if she trembled.

They got through health history questions without any problems. Midway through, Katurian put his gun back in his pocket, under the too-long shirt. He sat back in his chair, drawing his knees to his chest. He was a child, which terrified her to her core.

“Have you had homosexual intercourse?” Nuja queried softly.

Katurian frowned. “Consenting or not?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The boy flinched. “Seems like it should matter.”

Nuja clicked her tongue indifferently, “I’ll just say no. That one is left over from the AIDS scare anyway.”

After completing a few more questions and lying about his weight, Nuja stopped. Adrenaline prevented exhaustion, but she was still perplexed into idleness.

“What’s wrong?” Katurian asked.

She looked at him flatly and whispered, “Aside from my life being threatened?”

He bit his lip. “I’m really sorry about that. But you were gonna make me leave.”

“I can’t just start draining your blood out there. You’re obviously ineligible. And I’m not sure how much is safe to take from you.”

Katurian drummed his fingers on his knees anxiously. “Well, I can help you with the last one. You’re going to take it all.”

Nuja momentarily forgot how to breathe. “You’re making me murder you?”

“But I don’t want you to get in trouble or anything. Maybe you could bring the gurney back here, say I’m embarrassed but wanna donate? I’ll write a note to let everyone know I’m okay with this, that
I’m making you. Sign it and everything. Will that work?”

“You’re making me murder you.”

Katurian’s smile was patient. “If you don’t mind, Miss, I would appreciate it. I was going to just do it the old-fashioned way, with razorblades. Only that felt like a terrible waste.”

“Katurian...” She didn’t think to wonder why he wouldn’t use the gun in his pocket.

“Can you imagine?” His words bounced. “All that blood just... wasted. I have enough iron and I’m not sick.”

“You are sick,” Ms. Nuja hissed.

Katurian pouted. “Not in a way that anyone else will catch.”

“You need help,” Nuja insisted with quiet, vicious urgency, “Just go home and talk to your parents--”

He looked sad, but not for himself, for Nuja. “I can’t do that. You’re kind of overestimating me, Miss. Nobody can stand to be near me, especially the people who had to have me.” He offered his best smile. It was gorgeous despite everything. “Can we please just do this? It’ll be over before you know it, promise.”

“I’ll take you,” she promised, “to someone who can help you.”

“You’re going to help me.”

They stared at one another. He reached a hand past his loose shirt and into his pocket. Her entire demeanor greyed. She would not let him point a gun at her again.


Just beyond her and Katurian’s walled off corner of the room, everything ran smoothly. Two large, open, trusting entrances. Free gifts as one entered and as one exited. Not a hint of security. Not one camera in this massive room. All smiles and laughs and jokes out there. Nuja wanted to vomit.

Instead, she kicked up the locks on the wheels of a gurney and proceeded to push it back behind the fake wall. When she returned to the main, open area, another nurse approached her.

“What’s going on?”

Nuja could only muster a head shake as she proceeded to transport the rest of her necessary materials.

Apparently, she reeked of trauma. The nurse grabbed her arm. “What is going on? Should I...” She faltered, trying to read Nuja’s expression, “Do I need to call someone?”
Nuja nodded, simplicity lightening her slowly and then ferociously. She whispered, “911. Be subtle. He’s armed.” Nuja broke away from her grasp.

“What are you doing? Don’t go back!”

“If I don’t, he’ll come out here.” There was a certainty that was frightening and convincing in Nuja’s smile. “Just trust me.”

Nuja pushed back Katurian’s sleeve and turned his forearm in her small hands, looking for the perfect vein. Instead, she found several bruises and scars. They decorated his skin like an abstract painting. She stared breathlessly.

Katurian apologized in his inflection, “My left arm is just as bad.” He fidgeted uncomfortably, as if she was staring at his naked form. “Should I flex or something? Would that make it easier to find?”

“No, it’s alright,” Nuja assured him, her hands suddenly gentler, that breath rushing out of her all at once. “There’s not much place for them to hide, after all.”

After checking that he had no applicable allergies, she wiped his inner arm clean. As she prepared the needle, she habitually recited, “I’m sorry, this might leave a mark.” Katurian laughed, which brought her back to the present. Caught somewhere between a sob and a chortle, she punctured him, and screwed the proper tubing together.

Katurian gulped, transfixed by the image of his blood coursing out of him. “Jeez, that’s kinda scary looking.”

Nuja pulled up a chair beside him. “It would have been scarier with a razor blade.”

Katurian nodded distractedly, gaping at the artificial artery that extended out of him, pooling very cleanly and distantly from him.

The two sat in silence for a long time. The flow of blood began to slow, and before she could stop herself, she told him that opening and closing his fist would help speed up the process. Naturally, he obeyed, and within five minutes, he had given a pint.

“Guess my blood is dying to get out,” he joked.

“Mmhm,” Nuja responded humorlessly, clamping the tubing as she replaced this bag with a new one.

“A quarter of the way through, right? Something like that?”

“Yes, Mr. Napels.”

Katurian did not take particularly well to being addressed so formally. He ravenously pumped his hand in and out of a fist.
“I’m awful sorry, Miss Fola Nuja.”
She blinked. “What for?”
“You didn’t ask to get mixed up in this. I probably ruined your whole day.”
Her eyes locked on him. Katurian sheepishly shrugged and leaned his head back. “Never been dizzy sitting down before. It’s weird.”
Her gaze was merciless. He silenced himself for good under its pressure. His pumping dragged, until his hand merely stayed unfurled.
The realization leaked into Nuja’s consciousness like water into a steadily sinking lifeboat. Why would Katurian use razor blades if he had a working gun? Did he not have a working gun? What had he been threatening her with? Did he have no real ammunition with which to harm her after all? Had she been tricked?
Did he have no intention of hurting her all along?
It was too late. His eyelids drifted shut and his breathing slowed. Nuja jumped to her feet, clamping the tube, preventing any more blood from escaping.
By this point, cops arrived on the scene.
“No!” Nuja shrieked, standing in front of the battered, unconscious boy, “I changed my mind! I don’t need you, I need an ambulance!” She scooped up the blood bags and placed them on top of Katurian. “Put it back! It’s his, I’ll explain it all later, just put it back in his little body right now!”

When the boy was carried away on a stretcher, she was startlingly aware that that murale in her mind had a sharp, new focal point: a stain of Katurian P. Napels. And what was worse was that she had no legal right to ever know what became of him.
She had driven to different graveyards, looking for a new addition before she realized he could never afford it, if he would have even wanted something so honorable for himself to begin with. How would the hospital dispose of someone without a family, without a home? A quick google search illuminated that, if unclaimed, he would be sent to a private morgue and burned after thirty days. She was ready to call off work to hunt down every viable establishment within the city.
But then, he could have lived.
Even so, she found it easier to check if he had died than to even try to see him alive at the hospital. Because even though giving back a suicidal boy’s life was right, it was still a betrayal.
Earl Townsend

Catherine

The empire state building
Shimmering more than ever
As it slowly shatters—

Each falling second   brighter
More beautiful

More blinding.

It reminds me of Catherine Barnett
—barely able to speak
         but still speaking
              all the same.

a brown haired woman in a white room saying,

“shhhh shhhh shhhh” to herself over and over
wanting to be an actress
    and less like herself
but getting closer, nearer to herself
each careful breath.

If a chorus finally comes for her—
Her 5 crystal lives ringing  beaming—

I will understand breakage
The rules of tremendous birth
And the ruthless mathematics
Of naked exchange
I fell down the stairs the morning of the spelling bee, an occurrence that eighth-grade me interpreted as evidence of an assassination plot. Having won my place in the Vigo County Regional spelling bee by defeating the spellers in my middle school one by one, it made sense to me that someone, somewhere wanted me out of the picture.

I marched into the kitchen, where my mom was pulling the high-heeled leather sandals that she affectionately called her “hooker shoes” onto her feet. I rubbed the part of my leg I had landed on and made a face the way little kids do when they want mom to know that they have a boo-boo, but she didn’t notice.

“Ow,” I said, fishing for sympathy, “I think I just survived an assassination attempt.”

“You what?” she said, looking up at me. “I doubt it.”

“I fell down the stairs.” I showed her a patch of skin that had started to bruise slightly, tinged a light purple.

“Ouch!” she said. “Doesn’t look like you broke anything, though. You’ll be just fine.” She grabbed her pocketbook and tucked the wide metal ring that held her keys into her back pocket, letting the keys hang and jingle as she walked. “Let’s get out of here,” she
said. “You don’t wanna be late.”

I spent the weeks leading up to my school’s spelling bee utterly immersed in words. The bee’s coordinator had given me a photocopy of the official Scripps word list for that year, all 20-plus pages of it. The words were printed in a small font, in several columns across the page, further defined by difficulty. The pages were grouped into categories and then by difficulty (1, 2, or 3): “Food for Thought,” a collection of cooking words like mixer¹, casserole², and fricassee³; “Shake a Leg,” which included dancing words like quickstep¹, dervish², and zapateado³; and “Watership Down,” a list of words having to do with rabbits and nature, such as hare¹, gossamer², and rhododendron³. At nearly 4,000 words, it was a lot to take on all at once.

I’d already read Watership Down—Mrs. Cahill, a teacher I had for both first and fifth grade, read it aloud to the class after recess every day. She read each character with a different voice, giving the seagull Kehaar, who speaks with an accent, a guttural German voice. Whenever I could, I convinced some unsuspecting soul to help me study. They read and I spelled and we moved word by word down the list, marking those I missed so I could return to them later. One by one my friends got tired of helping me and conveniently found other places to sit during lunch, at least until after the bee was over. It was nearly impossible to test myself, since reading the word gave away its spelling.

The one devoted word-partner I found was my mom.

“Membranous²,” she said, and scooped a bite of casserole² into her mouth. About halfway through dinner, once everyone else was done, we’d start practicing. I spelled the word and rewarded myself with a bite of dinner. Often, we’d leave the empty plates on the table as we worked, unwilling to pause, should it break my winning streak.

“Scrupulously²,” she said.

Though you win spelling bees by spelling words correctly, it’s just as much a test of endurance. Often, the bee comes down to just two spellers, taking turns until one misspells and the other spells an additional word correctly. After being bested my sixth and seventh grade years by someone who could hold out longer than me,
I finally won in eighth grade after relatively few rounds on stage. Sweaty and shaking and then smiling as I stood on the worn stage of the auditorium we shared with the connected high school, I reveled in the applause as they announced me as the winner.

After the school spelling bee, I began studying for the regional bee, redoubling my efforts. This time around they had given me the actual book from which my photocopies had been made. It had a bright yellow cover and was covered in images of bumble bees and honeycombs. In tall, thin letters across the front it read “Paideia,” which I learned from inside the book’s cover was a Greek tradition of providing children an education that left them well-rounded, intellectual individuals. The word is derived from two Greek words, “pais” and “paiduein,” which both mean “to educate the child.”

Spring break came, and we drove north to Valparaiso, Indiana, to visit my grandma. Even there we studied. I sat in my spot on the white-and-blue linoleum, directly in front of the dishwasher in my grandma’s cramped kitchen. I had to scoot aside every time someone wanted to open the fridge, but other than that it was fairly comfortable. My mom and grandma sat in tall chairs backed up against the walls in a small alcove that contained the sink. Mom topped off her coffee from the brewer near her elbow every once in awhile, and my grandma crossed the kitchen to get her mug of instant tea from the microwave. We called it her “crappuccino,” since that’s what it tasted like. After 1 p.m. or so she transitioned to box wine.

“Bubbly,” my mom read, this time from the “Mood Swings” section of the book. I tapped my fingers on the linoleum as I spelled the word. Lots of the words were easy, but a few were difficult enough to make up for it. “Rutabaga” got me nearly every time, and it wasn’t even the hardest.

“Listless,” my mom said.

“That one sounds easy,” my grandma said. “My Carey Lou can spell that one, easy.” She had much earlier stopped trying to spell along with us, claiming that she had learned to spell phonetically as a child and it hadn’t helped. Deciphering her handwriting was like trying to read the original copy of the Declaration of Independence—her curly handwriting was fraught with randomly capitalized words and
sprinkled with extra letters. She had grown up in an era that didn’t place any value on educating women past childbearing age.

“Testy.”

Oh, I knew that one. It was easy. “T-E-S-T-E,” I spelled. My mom laughed into her coffee and had to set it down to keep it from spilling.

“Now that’s a word I should know!” my grandma said, leaning forward in her chair. If I had been sitting next to her, she would have elbowed me for effect. Seated on the floor, I blushed, ashamed that that’s the first spelling that popped into my head.

Though food had motivated me throughout my studying, I didn’t eat any of the cookies set out for the participants and their families at the regional spelling bee. The cafeteria at Otter Creek Middle School was unfamiliar and much larger than the cafeteria we shared with West Vigo High School. Most of the long tables were filled with other spellers and their families, eating cookies and doing some last-minute word-cramming. Instead of benches or chairs, the tables had built-in stools, and my mom and I found two unoccupied seats and sat, waiting for the officials to usher us into the gymnasium.

Otter Creek’s gym had a basketball court painted with extra lines so that it could also be used for volleyball, soccer, and other sports. A large rope cargo net for climbing hung from the ceiling, bunched together to keep it out of the way. Two of the six basketball hoops around the court’s edge had been folded up toward the ceiling in a similar manner. On one wall was a tall mural of a dog poking its head and front legs out of a doghouse, which I thought was a strange choice for a school with a different animal in its name. My mom was led to a stretch of fold-away bleachers that had been pulled out, intended for the audience, and an official pointed me toward an arrangement of plastic chairs set in rows out on the wooden gym floor. At the far end of the chairs, there was a table where the judges and pronouncer sat. Front and center stood a single microphone.

I was so nervous that I shook in my chair and ended up sitting on my hands to keep them still as I waited for my turn at the mic. After taking a turn, a speller had to return to his or her seat and sit there until the round was over, whether they spelled the word
correctly or not. The first round wiped out about half of the twenty or so participants, and within a few more rounds it was down to me and two others. I stood and received my word.

“Chunga,” the pronouncer said.

Oh, God, that word wasn’t on the list!

I asked for the definition: a type of African cricket. I asked that it be used in a sentence. I would have asked to phone a friend if I had known it would work. I readied myself, nails digging into palms.

“C-H-U-N-G-A,” I spelled. The buzzer trilled and I sat down in my chair, tears beginning to spill from my eyes. I sat there until the bee was over, trying to remain professional in front of a crowd of about a hundred. The two remaining spellers had to battle it out until one of them misspelled a word and the other spelled two words right. Once they announced the winner and released me from my chair, I rushed to the stands and into my mom’s arms, the tears flowing freely.

In the years to come I would search for that word, for its spelling. My mom claims that the pronouncer said it incorrectly, which led me to misspell it. I read the book back to front and front to back and didn’t find it. I checked all the dictionaries we owned. I searched all over the Internet, to no avail. A disclaimer in the book read that local competitions are not necessarily limited to the words in the book, and that they can use words from outside sources to narrow down remaining spellers. To this day I still can’t spell it—it’s the only word that has ever defeated me.

“Look,” my mom said, nudging me. “Go back up there—you won something.”

Smearing the tears off of my face with a shirtsleeve, I trudged back out onto the gym floor and stood next to the first and second-place spellers. The first-place speller would be invited to the National Bee finals in Washington D.C. If she were unable to go, the second-place speller would take her place. If neither of them could make it, well, I’d be able to go. I tried not to imagine them getting into car accidents on the way home from the bee.

In my mind I had lost, but in reality I was the second runner-up, which is a fancy way to say “third place.” I came out of that middle school with a plaque verifying that I was a third-place nerd, a $50 savings bond, and an official Scripps National Spelling Bee fanny pack.
I wake up at 4 o’clock
after a forgettable dream,
thirsty.

I got my hair cut last week
and the girl told me it was dry

because conditioner stops working
once you’ve been using the same kind
for too long.

I could get a glass of water
but then my cat would wake up
and also it’s dark

and what if the Zodiac Killer is in my kitchen
eating a bowl of Froot Loops
(which I don’t even buy)

so I just go back to sleep.
Tonight I will fill a glass
and take my vitamins
and the water will stay there,

watching 3 o’clock come and go,
knowing it will be stale
when the sun comes up

and not being able
to do a damn thing
about it.

And if that were true
wouldn’t the shampoo do the same thing
and just give up

instead of stripping everything away
like it always has?

I will remember my dream.
Interview with

lev Grossman
Introduction by Cassandra Christopher

I’m not an especially emotional being. But when I first read *The Magicians*, I was furious. I spent thirty minutes trying to explain my anger to my family and to my best friend. I felt that Lev Grossman had soiled Narnia, the most precious world I’d ever known, with a protagonist, Quentin, who was a self-absorbed ass. My advisor, who had recommended the series to me, suggested that perhaps it was an homage rather than a deconstruction, that Lev Grossman loved this world as much as I did and wanted to work with it in a wholly new way. At the time I couldn’t have disagreed more because I, like Quentin, could not see past my own perspective.

But the reality of Quentin’s world is so much more than his own selfishness and depression. When I say I’m not especially emotional, it’s only to illustrate how powerfully consuming these books are, because once I got over my initial anger I couldn’t put a stopper in my excitement and enjoyment. In *The Magicians* and its sequels Lev Grossman created a world rich with varied and nuanced characters, all of whom could have been people I’ve known. And these characters are the most special thing about *The Magicians*; they are real, and true, and they screw up their lives terribly. They learn, and move on, and grow up. In this series Lev Grossman has done what I think every writer sets out to do: to create an emotional reaction in their reader. I have felt raging anger towards these books, but I have also been consumed by love in a way that no other book series has accomplished. I have seen a terrifying reflection of myself in each of the main characters, and I have been completely won over despite my desperate attempts at detachment.

Lev Grossman has done other things, of course. He’s written other novels, he’s the book critic for *Time* magazine, and he was the first journalist to make a call on an iPhone. He even got to be a consultant and make a cameo appearance in the television adaptation of *The Magicians*. But for me, the most important thing he’s done is this series. Magic doesn’t come from dead languages and complicated hand motions. It comes from the ability to imagine the inner life of someone else. It comes from empathy.
Cassandra Christopher: You leave a lot of unanswered questions in the first book, a lot of dangling threads and holes that were never filled. Did you ever intend to fill them? Or did you have something in your head that filled those holes?

Lev Grossman: Somebody once said to me, “Writers love ambiguity and readers love closure.” Writers do this thing, and I’m really guilty of it, of leaving things dangling and unexplained and unresolved because, you know, that’s what life is like. Not everything gets wrapped up neatly, so why should I do that in my books? We sometimes forget that that’s why we like art so much, because it’s not exactly like life but it is, in fact, different. And yet, you don’t want everything to be too neat and tidy because then it would feel too . . . fake. So it’s true, I leave some things unresolved. I have a bad habit of leaving things unexplained. Sometimes I think it creates a nice atmospheric effect and sometimes it’s just annoying—I’m willing to admit that.

CC: You’ve talked about how it was like an exercise in fanfiction, writing The Magicians in relation to Narnia. And I read your piece on fanfiction, which was almost a defense of fanfiction. So what I’m wondering now is how you feel about fanfiction of your own work?

LG: Here’s the thing: I love it. It means so much to me that anybody would feel invested enough in these characters and this world to want to play with them in that way. I love it. While I was working on the trilogy I was steering clear of fanfiction, as I think a lot of writers do, because we run into a problem which is that if somebody has a really good idea you find yourself feeling that that idea is now ruled out for you because you didn’t think of it, and you find yourself wondering, would I have thought of it if I hadn’t read this? It gets quite confusing—there have been lawsuits over it. So I steered clear of it. But now I look at it.
I haven’t spent a lot of time reading it—I probably should. I sometimes check to see that it’s there because it makes me feel good. I’ll admit, I sometimes get annoyed when people make continuity mistakes, and it’s a little bit like nails on a blackboard. But sometimes I’ll read them—and people write the characters so well—Janet will be so funny, and Josh will be so funny, and Alice will be so eloquent, and you realize that you don’t fully own these characters. When people read, they create their own Alice, based on the few words you put down. They extrapolate a whole person; they extrapolate their own Quentin; they do so much work to bring their stuff to life, and you really see that in fanfiction. It’s great.

CC: Quentin in the first book especially is kind of an anti-hero—he’s never set up to be the hero and in the end [of the first book] he’s not; Alice is. Did you set out to create an anti-Narnia or did it just happen?

LG: It didn’t just happen. One of the earliest things I thought about when I looked back at my very earliest notes was different ways to come at the Narnia question.

And in fact, I wrote the first draft of The Magicians, and they went to Narnia, so it used to be much more directly an engagement with Narnia. I don’t think of it as an homage or a critique; maybe it’s both, I don’t know. I always wanted to talk back to C.S. Lewis. It was something that came to me from Phillip Pullman, actually; he’s really engaging with Lewis too. And it was really reading his work and talking to him that kind of emboldened me to say that I could actually talk back to C.S. Lewis too if I wanted to.

CC: Narnia is very much about venerating and respecting the reigning god, but your books are not as much. There’s a lot of killing of gods, and at the end it’s actually like the age of no god. I wondered whether there was an actual religious connection
with that or if it was just another step in the way that Fillory was supposed to be.

**LG**: My engagement with the religious argument put forward by Narnia is limited because I grew up in a house from which religion was almost completely absent. The strong engagement with the god figures in my books partly comes from some unresolved feelings I probably have with my parents. It’s a very Oedipal struggle. There are a lot of father figures in the books. Quentin struggles with Mayakovsky and Fogg and with his own father. It’s not so much a religious argument as a way of reframing some personal struggles I had in my own life.

And then there is a level in which I do struggle with the problem of evil and suffering. If there is a god, why is there evil and suffering? I don’t think anybody has ever resolved this. If there’s a god who is omnipotent, why do people suffer and why are people allowed to do evil? We hardly ever see Narnia when things are peaceful; we tend to see it when things are going terribly wrong. I found myself wondering, why does Aslan allow that to happen?

So one of the great things about writing a world where the god is present and clopping around on four hooves meant that you could talk to him and say, look how terrible this world is. How could you do that? Having a god in the books allowed me to do that a little bit, which was satisfying.

**CC**: Along the lines of craft, your characters are really distinct and developed and the reader gets a really solid sense of them right from the beginning, and I was wondering how you develop them, and if it starts with a baseline and then you build from there, or if it’s like a jumble of character traits that turn into a person. How do you do that?

**LG**: Really, it’s all of that. Writing characters I find very,
very hard. What frequently ends up happening is that I’ll introduce a character who is undifferentiated, and I’ll march them around through the scenes and they’ll start reacting and start talking, and they’ll start having feelings inside them which I can describe, and slowly I’ll begin to understand, and I’ll have to go back and fill in the early bits where I didn’t know who they were. But it’s a really slow process.

The way that characters are made on the page is very weird because it is out of these little touches and little moments that really define the character for you. It’s not as though you’re saying, this person has this trait and this trait and this trait, it’s honestly that you’re constantly describing what’s happening with them. It’s really only just a few moments. It’s like you’re doing a portrait with just three or four lines, and then the reader has to make a face out of them. So those lines have to be very, very exact. And I spend a lot of time tinkering with them. If you go back and look at a novel and think, this character I really like, how do I know what they’re like? You are only pointing to three or four or five moments that really define them.

**CC:** With the actual casting of the magic, you’ve said that you wanted to know what it would feel like and know what they were doing and have a solid handle on the practice of magic. What kind of research did you have to do? There are so many different languages mentioned, different hand motions--

**LG:** I didn’t do any research.

**CC:** None at all?

**LG:** I mean, where would I look? I’ve read a lot of fantasy novels. I think everyone has a primal sense inside of them of how magic works, how magic ought to work. And, you know, reading fantasy, you mentally say, oh they got this bit right and this bit wrong, that’s sort of it, that’s not quite
right, that’s completely wrong. And then finally you have a chance to say, this is how I always imagined it. And I imagined it that way as a child. It’s not that much different than when I was eight years old running around summer camp acting out whatever Dungeons & Dragons we were doing.

A lot of it comes from Dr. Strange, which was one of my favorite comics growing up. A ton of it comes from D&D. I knew that I wanted magic to be difficult. I knew that I wanted the characters to have to work for it, I wanted it to be like an academic discipline. But it’s one of those things you know, but you don’t know how you know. But I really, I wanted to make the magic feel real and concrete. And a lot of that just came down to playing with it. It’s not like King Arthur—there’s so much research in King Arthur, oh my God.

CC: So you are writing a novel on King Arthur. How related to The Once and Future King is it? In other interviews, you’ve said that TOAFK was a huge influence for you and at one point you mentioned that you wished you could have written it, but you couldn’t because T.H. White had already written it, so you wrote The Magicians instead. Is your King Arthur novel going to be in that same vein or, how much from White is it pulling?

LG: It’s difficult about White. I mean, when I wrote The Magicians I felt like I could write against C.S. Lewis because I had a lot of problems with Lewis and a lot of things that I felt like I would have done differently. With White, there’s not that much I would have done differently. I don’t push back at White that much because he’s so much a better writer than I am. And yet, there were certain aspects of the story that wouldn’t leave me alone. I’m going to be writing about knights in their thirties, the ones who came up with Arthur who were thoroughly middle-aged. I was attracted to writing about characters who were closer to my age.
And you know, King Arthur is such a funny mixture of the real and the ideal. Those books are so much about how to be a perfect knight, trying to be a perfect Christian, conform to these ideals. And these knights try and try and try and they never do, except for Galahad, and what happens to Galahad? He immediately dies once he’s perfected.

You know, this play of the real against the ideal is part of what drove *The Magicians* because we think of Narnia as this ideal and what if you play that ideal off against a very fallen version of it? There’s that same tension in the Arthur stories, and I find it very exciting and very interesting. But you do have to find your own place in that tradition, and there are a lot of people in there already.
Where I grew up down south of Indy, there below the overpass now, kids would eat asparagus from Wheatly Cemetery on a dare, or double-dog dare. We would sneak under the thundering overpass, past all those trollish hobos sleeping with their dogs in rotten trash-bags. Maybe someone had some whiskey—a flask or two of warm Jack they snatched from the top shelf of some old pantry. Cats meowed from under dumpsters while you climbed the rusted chain-link fence, and down across on the other side and grown knee-high over the lopsided graves—most you couldn’t even read the names of, they
were so worn to the bone—grown above
all those graves was green asparagus

most of us would never eat, even if
our holy mothers cooked it up! But when

your older brother said, “A triple-dog
dare then, you pussy,” you best believe you picked

the largest weed that you could find and stuffed
roots and all like a wad of chaw across

your teeth. You’re thinking all the time that all
the bodies must be old enough—I mean

they had to be there long enough it didn’t
matter anymore, as old as all

the graves looked. But just standing there in the dark
listening to cats meow and hiss

and hobos snoring in their boots, and cars
flying overhead—just standing there

chewing on the cud of old Wheatly
and sipping on the chilly end of someone’s

stolen flask, it’s all that you could do
to pinch your nose and cross your toes and pray

and tell yourself those salty roots didn’t taste
half as bad as your father said they would.
The felines outnumber humans six to one.  
They drive the boats and rule the sun in this sleepy fisherman’s town.  
They crowd the streets and beaches and docks and take out seagulls by the flock.  
They creep along the rooftops and yowl cool-cat jazz under the moonlight, with tails in the air because they just don’t care, and even the mayor is covered in cat hair.  
Yesterday he made a PSA, and though it was only meow-meow-meowing, he really meant to say

*Please don’t litter in the bay-
Let’s keep the harbor clean so that the fish will stay.*
Contributors

SARAH BAHR
Sarah Bahr is a sophomore at IUPUI studying English, Spanish, and journalism. She hopes to eventually become an editor at a newspaper, magazine, or publishing house.

CLAIRE CHRISTOFF
Claire Christoff is a junior at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, where she is studying English with a concentration in creative writing. She often wishes she were more like Joan Didion, but she laughs too easily at bad jokes and has never been to California.

SARAH COFFING
Sarah Coffing is a junior English-creative writing major and history minor at Butler University. She grew up on a farm outside Covington, IN, and loves to spend time there making homemade maple syrup or hunting with her family. Her other hobbies include drinking coffee, writing, reading about Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and cuddling with her two black Labradors, Boone and Molly. Wherever Sarah finds herself after graduating from Butler University, her ultimate goal is to always continue learning.

CAREY FORD COMPTON
Carey Ford Compton is a senior English major and creative writing minor at Indiana State University. She serves as Editor-in-Chief of the student newspaper, the Indiana
MEGHAN L. DAVIS

Meghan Davis is a junior at Purdue University North Central. She is working towards her Bachelor’s Degree in English, along with a minor in creative/professional writing. Meghan serves as the Treasurer of PNC’s chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, Alpha Mu Pi. When Meghan is not tutoring students at PNC’s Writing Center, she can be found laboring over short fiction pieces and poetry. A selection of her works can be found at mldaviswriting.wordpress.com. She also interns at Blotterature Literary Magazine.

ELENA DECOOK

Elena is a sophomore at Butler University, where she studies writing and Spanish and is a member of Kappa Alpha Theta. A connoisseur of garbage television and a raging narcissist, she hopes to study linguistics in graduate school and someday get paid to yell at people about books. She can be found wherever you walk your dog, scratching its ears and ignoring you completely.

COLE HARDMAN

Cole Hardman is an undergraduate electrical engineering student at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, IN. His works attempt to capture the local voices of Southern Indiana before filtering them through his unique mathematical and scientific perspective with the hopes of blurring the lines between STEM and the arts.

ASHLEY J. JUNGER

Ashley is a biology and English writing major at DePauw University. She dedicates her time to participating in the environmental movement on campus and is an executive member of the university’s outdoors club.
MIKAYLA MARAZZI
I have been enchanted by words for as long as I can remember. Growing up reading books and listening to song lyrics that left me speechless or in tears, I decided that I too wanted to create beautiful things with words. Studying literature in college, I have fallen in love with poetry specifically—how it gives a voice to particular moments, ideas, or emotions that would otherwise go unheard. I echo Audre Lorde who wrote that poetry “[gives] name to the nameless so it can be thought.” Poetry has the power to cut through our silences. Currently, I am studying English and philosophy at Indiana Wesleyan University, where I play for my university’s tennis team. My teammates would describe me as a bookworm, coffee drinking, deep-thinking, and free-spirited individual, always absorbed in a book, my computer screen, or headphones. At present, I am a junior, and after graduation, I intend to go to Law School and use words to give a voice to those undermined or oppressed by the legal system. As I believe words are a powerful and often unappreciated means of inspiring new perspectives, ideas, thoughts, and ways of living, writing will always be central to who I am.

ALEXANDREA MICHELLE
Alexandrea Michelle resides in Indianapolis, IN. She is 21 years old and an aspiring artist, writer, and musician. She has studied poetry from a young age and continues to pursue it through college.

CAMILLE MILLIER
Camille Ashley Millier was born in May and has birthdays on Friday the Thirteenth every seven years. Growing up, she wrote first chapters of many unfinished and forever-lost urban grunge novels. Now she is a student at IUPUI studying writing and film.

KAYLIE ANN PICKETT
Kaylie Ann Pickett is a musician, writer and senior at the University of Indianapolis. Before her undergraduate career, Kaylie moved around the eastern part of the United States,
collecting stories and writing songs. She now resides in Broad Ripple, trying her best to exercise everyday.

MARISSA PRUETT
Ms. Pruett is a senior at Huntington University. She is studying animation.

MARIAM SAEEDI
Mariam Saeedi is currently a sophomore at Butler University majoring in Art + Design and minoring in marketing and digital media production (for now). She comes from a diverse ethnic background and is fluent in three languages, including Persian (Dari), Uzbek, and English. She hopes to unite people and help them see the world more open-mindedly through the visual arts.

ALEXANDREAA SANDERS
Alexandrea Sanders is from Vallejo, CA. Her main medium is graphite, but she works in photography and graphic designing. In her spare time, she writes prose and poetry.

KATHERINE SHELTON
Katherine is an honors student majoring in theatre and creative writing. She is also partial to pigs and tea.

MICHELÉ STRACHOTA
Michelé was homegrown in Milwaukee, WI, but resides in Valparaiso, IN, as she works toward a creative writing degree. She likes to run almost as much as she writes, but probably doesn’t spend nearly enough time doing either. Although she prides herself on being a happy person, her characters would probably disagree since she is constantly cruel toward them. In the future, when she gets paid to write, she plans to demand compensation in watermelons instead of money.

EARL TOWNSEND
I do things and this is one of those things----
CHELSEA YEDINAK

Chelsea is a sophomore member of Manuscripts serving as publications chair. She studies English literature and German and spends her free time reading and writing. After graduation, she wants to pursue a career in editing.

Photo inserts in this issue from VintagePrintable.com:
“Educational Plate, German”
“Educational Plate, German 2”
“Garnet”
“Pearls and Beryl”
“Precious Stones North America -1(2)”
“Precious Stones North America -1(3)”