manuscripts
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Welcome to the most recent volume of Manuscripts.

Starting the academic year with an almost entirely fresh executive team and ending it with COVID-19 has definitely made for an interesting year. With all of the challenges and changes that we have faced over the course of this year, there are many ‘thank you’s in order.

To the executive team, I want to thank you all for your hard work and your patience as I learned the ropes this year. To everyone on the reading staff of Manuscripts this year, thank you for keeping my Tuesday nights lively and having great discussions about the plentiful submissions this year.

I would also like to give a big thank you to Anne Minnich-Beck, Nancy Colburn, and the English Department as a whole for the continued support this year. A special thank you to both Adrian Matejka and Brian Furuness for supporting our contests this year as guest judges and for meeting with our team to share your thoughts.

A special shoutout and warm thank you to the MSS faculty advisor, Jason Goldsmith, are much needed. The smooth transition into this year with both a new team and advisor was made possible because of his energy and dedication. I appreciate his hard work and am grateful to him for helping us learn, grow, and laugh through each obstacle we faced.

Within this volume of Manuscripts, we have teamed up once again with the W.I.T.S. program through Butler English Department at Shortridge High School to present the Shortridge Spotlight, in which we honor a talented high school writer. The annual fall
poetry contest and winter prose contests were held, through which we received many wonderful works. Finalists and winners of each respective contest can be found marked with a Laurel Wreath above their titles.

Being Editor-in-Chief this year has been a whirlwind, as well as one of the best experiences at Butler. I look forward to seeing where the talented executive team will take Manuscripts in the future.

Without further adieu, I present to you volume 85 of Manuscripts.

Enjoy.

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Contributors
I want November candle wax to pool
in bare hot spaces along my spine.
  I want fingertips that plead, yawn
for the bodywine of lost lovers
  congealed and sunk below
torn coverlets of leaf and muck.
  I need a love that can wither,
being once wet and alive.
  I want color to slough away while
raw layers unwillingly pupate.
  Let the fertile vine end its year,
no thought for future growth—
  thin pelvic wings pressed
down to where worms roll.
  Let me forget the sun and its stories,
cling instead to damp memory.
  I want the star signs to search for me
and finding aught, speak no future.
A Collection of Letters I Have Not Yet Received from my Former Love

Andie Klarin

Dear Former Darling,
Late November- I left you 3 weeks ago
Fucked 3 people since then
Sent their bodies to you
cold white flags sticking out of your mailbox.

Dear Former Darling,
Here are the silver hoops, the black belt, the journal you left at my house.
You never asked for the last one back but I have read it through and I am bored

Dear Former Darling,
Here’s your stuff, dyke. Here you are crying in the back row of a crowded plane. Here you are familiar with the smell of me. Here’s where it ends.
Here you are writing a poem about missing somebody who never wanted you in the first place. Here’s another reason to feel sorry for yourself. Here’s a picture of a man: 22, Jewish, liberal, handsome. Here are the things I needed to get rid of before he came over. Here’s a blunt. Here’s a good kiss with a stranger in the parking lot of a coffee shop. Here’s to never going back to New York. Here’s Iowa or Scotland or somewhere we won’t ever walk down any street at the same time. Here is the most embarrassed I’ve ever seen you. A new pimple, bad breath, suitcase packed too quickly. You can’t focus on that book and you can’t write a poem that isn’t bad or about feelings that are unreciprocated. Here is all of your shit.
choosing to ignore
what i found under
water

Erin Morrisey

there is this face i see underwater, shrinking away, the cheeks hollowing themselves. she’s gnawing at her own flesh. you’re looming funny, she calls, her words gurgles in the water, is something the matter? she takes a bit of her flesh, chews it, then spits it in front of her to admire. no, no, i call back as she chews another choice cut. you look divine, and i take a spoon. and i feed her another piece. and i turn my back. and i watch her in my gilded mirror.
Fragility

Erin Morrisey
23 Days
Zoe Wilkinson

Orchard’s grip is tense, pen shaking, knuckles white, skin itching. His thoughts, full of step-by-step solutions; hands too slow to respond. Frustrating. His face stays scrunched into a panicked concentration, a migraine pushing his eyes out of their sockets. He rescans his exam, workflow ruined due to his muddled thoughts. He remembers clearly the day he learned this material, February 10th. It was snowing outside, -8 degrees Fahrenheit. He’d checked, on his phone, before he left the house, and chose his outfit accordingly. The exact problem the teacher used as an example was simple, and the answer was \( \sqrt{3} \). The girl sitting in front of him that day was wearing a light grey shirt with six bright purple, glittery stars on the back in the shape of a cross. He remembers her as quite religious, and childish; her name is Annie Causa. She broke her dominant wrist right before Christmas break, on December 9th – Focus. Focus. Focus.

He finishes the problem, and moves on to the next; a word problem, which requires more thought, more critical thinking. “A Ferris wheel is built such that the height \( h \) (in feet) above ground of a seat on the wheel at time \( t \) (in seconds) can be modeled by: \( h(t) = 53 + 50 \sin(\pi/10 \ t - \pi/2) \).
(a) Find the period of the model. What does the period tell you about the ride?
(b) Find the amplitude of the model. What does the amplitude tell you about the ride?”

His breath starts to quicken, eyes running across the sentences several times. His brain catches on the phrase “Ferris wheel,” and refuses to let go of it. Eight years ago, he went to an amusement park with his father for the first and only time, and he was terrified of the Ferris wheel
for its height. His father was gentle with him, explaining patiently that it moved slowly, standing and watching it with him for 12 minutes before Orchard believed him. When he was convinced, they rode it together, and Orchard stared out of the window in awe of the cacophony of light below. He was scared of everything, crying at the slightest inconvenience. He hoped his father was proud of him for trying something new.

His mind jumps again to Annie, tears burning the backs of his eyes as he remembers the way her wrist had looked, swollen to the size of a golf ball on one side, as she unwrapped the brace to show her friends on December 15th. Orchard’s hands hit the table hard, and the nearly empty roomed echoes back. He’s there after school hours; he can’t take tests with others present. His brain can’t handle the distractions. They trigger memories, thoughts and ideas that don’t matter, leading him to forget the problem, the answer, the time, his process, his thoughts. The door squeaks when it’s opened. Mrs. North comments every day she “wishes they’d oil it,” but never makes a point to ask anyone to.

“Are you finished? It’s been 35 minutes,” she says, making her way to his desk. She’s wearing a pencil skirt, which is too bright a blue to considered professional, and a blouse that doesn’t fit her shoulders, like always. Orchard isn’t finished, in fact there’s still 5 of the 30 problems left, but he nods anyway. She doesn’t acknowledge him any more than that, as per usual, placing the paper on her desk and reorganizing the mess in the top left drawer. He’s an inconvenience. Orchard hurriedly grabs his bookbag, struggling to zip it up before jogging out of the room.

Sarah Carlson’s phone has a kitty keychain with four pink beads attached to the top left corner of her sparkly white phone case. Ryan’s eyes shine bright green when he wears dark colors, but stay a neutral mid-grey when he wears pastels. Once, Allan broke a test tube and got a piece of glass stuck in his arm, and it was never removed because it was so small. So, there’s a tiny bump in his arm, that he often picks at. Orchard has never spoken to any of these people. These are the things he thinks of when Mrs. North hands back their exams, a week later. A bold, black “D,” a failing grade at his school, scars the top right corner of the first page of his test. This is the last exam before they take their final in less than a month. His brow furrows as he stares down at the mark; the ink has bled into the page a little, feathering out. If he was an artist it might bother him. Annie likes to draw, and she’s mentioned something like that before.

“I really should’ve gotten the marker one,” she’d said, waving
around her mixed media sketchbook with a grimace on her face. Her friend, Bea, nodded. She’d been wearing a jean jacket and denim shorts, which Orchard’s sister would think was too much.

“23 days isn’t enough time,” he says, to his sister, Mala, once he’s gotten off the bus and she’s greeted him at the door. She’s leaning on the frame, looking tired despite it being her day off. Orchard doesn’t want to worry her, but she’s the only person he has to talk to. After how poorly he did, he’s sure he’ll fail his final. There’s no way he won’t, and it scares him. All his effort will have been for nothing.

“You’ll do fine. I can help you, if you want?” she says. Orchard doubts that; he shrugs. He’s not smart enough for that, he thinks. Mala always offers to help, even when she’s just gotten off a 12 hour shift, is backed up with art clients, and hasn’t slept. She knows he needs her. “I’ll make mac n’ cheese, and we can make up a study plan,” she continued, tone confident. Orchard barely hears her but nods, letting his bookbag slump to the floor. “What kinda art are you working on today?” he asks, forcing a more cheerful tone.

When their parents died, Mala moved herself and Orchard into an apartment, lucky she’d recently turned 18. She claimed her father’s life insurance, put some into rent, some more into a cheap car, and put the rest into her savings account. Mala was sure she could keep up with rent on her own; she’d had a retail job for a while, and was in a decent position there. Orchard worried they were doing something wrong; was he allowed to be under her care like this? “We won’t get in trouble, I’m an adult,” Mala had told him. When they moved in, with what furniture from their parents’ house they could fit in one moving truck, Orchard had bleakly picked which of the two small, identical bedrooms was his, and he and Mala had spent all day pushing too-big furniture up against the thin walls. They’d had microwaveable pot pies for dinner in silence, and he spent the following three hours doing his homework.

“Baked mac n’ cheese is always better,” Mala says, hours later, with a satisfied hum. She pulls her legs up to cross them in her yard-sale armchair, stuffing another bite into her mouth. Orchard just nods, pouring over the scribbly notes he’d written on November 4th last year. He’s unsure how well he’d need to remember derivatives for the final. He’s not sure how to delegate time to each topic. He asks Mala if she
remembers her high school math final; which, of course she doesn’t. That was six years ago.

His mom would know more. His mom would tell him to study everything equally, just in case the teacher decided to be a bitch about it. She’d laugh and tell him that he’ll pass no matter what; that he’s a smart boy and always has been. He’s not smart. Her saying that made him feel bad about his mediocre grades. He didn’t want to disappoint her.

“It’s called hyperthymesia,” the doctor had said. Orchard was playing with the toys in the corner of the room, especially the spindly one, with the metal, noodly paths for the wooden beads to travel along. His mom asked more questions: “What does that mean? Is it going to be permanent? What will he remember?” Orchard wasn’t paying attention – the fish in the tank across the room had intrigued him, particularly those bright orange goldfish that he’d wanted badly for his most recent birthday. He passed the doctor and his mother, abandoning the toys to press his hands against the glass and stand tall to look at the fish. They darted away from the intrusion, and he followed them with his eyes as they weaved around the fake plants, and the plastic shipwreck.

His fascination was interrupted by mention of medication, and he’d turned abruptly to shout, “I can’t swallow pills, Mommy!” twisting his lips into a pout and looking at the doctor fiercely. He had to take pills once when he got really sick, when he was three, and he screamed at his mom when he discovered one hidden in his yogurt. He slammed his fists into his high chair and gotten his food everywhere. His mom cried.

She cried too, when their car crashed into a wall, because his father had a heart attack while driving, and died on the spot. He’d been born with a heart condition, and the tired organ had finally given up. His mom screamed and tears decorated her face, tinged pink by the blood dripping from her hairline. She had glass from the windshield sticking out of her, making her sparkle. Orchard stared at her once his vision stopped swimming, captivated by shock, unable to tear his eyes away. Mala had smacked her head into the back of his mom’s chair and blacked out, but suffered no long-term injuries. His mom bled out before help arrived minutes later, sleeping peacefully with her head rolled back against the headrest. Orchard stayed silent, buckled safely in his carseat. He was ten, but he was so small and light that he still needed one. He didn’t scream, or cry; not until an ambulance arrived. He was frozen, unable to process what had just happened. The volume of the sirens was deafening, sending him into a fit, and he screamed at the top of his lungs.
wordlessly. He pulled at his seatbelt until he unclipped it, but was unable to get up because his father’s seat was so far back.

Orchard screams again, now 17, in his room, trying to fall asleep. The alarm clock on his nightstand reads 2:36 AM, and it’s pitch black. Mala scrambles out of bed and through Orchard’s open door, clumsily rushing to his side. He practically falls into her embrace, clinging to her like she’d disappear. He’s stopped screaming but now he’s bawling, sobs wracking his chest. “Shh, it’s okay,” Mala says, her voice hazy though she’s trying to sound reassuring. She sounds the same.

As the sirens cut off in favor of the metallic cracks of a stretcher being opened, Mala had woken up to Orchard’s tantrum, and he’d instantly quieted. He didn’t resist her as she picked him up from the carseat, refusing to let the paramedics lay a hand on him. She’d jiggled the locked car door, which had confused him. All you had to do was press the button, why was she having so much trouble? She’d screamed, face angry. Glass had somehow found its way to her left shoulder, and Orchard, without thinking, had pulled it out and cut his fingers open. Mala had shouted at him, ripping it from his grasp and cutting herself too.

“It’s okay, I’m here,” Mala repeats, rubbing Orchard’s back and managing to sit on the bed beside him. His breath is ragged, and he buries his face in her neck, the chain around it scratching at his cheek. Of course she’s here, where had she been before? The clock decorating the otherwise barren wall which bridges their doorways fills the silence, ticking loudly and fulfilling its purpose. They’d gotten it from one of Mala’s friends, who received it from her parents and didn’t want it. The clock requires triple-A batteries.

Orchard never does fall asleep, even after Mala brings him a drink and goes back to bed herself, hoping that he’ll be okay. He isn’t, though he pretends that he is. He desperately tries to distract himself, and to tire out his brain; he works on math. Going through his newly made study plan, starting with the material he learned on August 23rd of last year. They’d done a group activity the week before, introducing themselves to the class. He’d told them his favorite color, because he couldn’t think of anything else. He found the material easy, and made it a point to tell Mala, “This year is going to fly by.” This year was going to be so easy. He was going to graduate a year early, and then he’d graduate college a year early, and then he would have an extra year.
“It’s hard for him to focus. He gets distracted by random memories – Even ones from when he was a baby! He really can’t help it,” His mom had gone on and on, listing off the symptoms of his condition to an uncaring principal. She told them how he had trouble remembering things like math and couldn’t help remembering the first time he’d tried green beans, or every single one of his birthdays in detail. He was starting fifth grade soon, and his mom had decided he required special treatments after his grades began to flatline. He’d protested; he didn’t want the attention. But, she didn’t care. He was quiet while they’d talked, sitting in a chair in the corner. He had excellent grades before, and he wasn’t sure why he was suddenly having so much trouble. He felt stupid, because he’d been doing all his work and still didn’t understand things like long division and fractions. The lamp on the principal’s desk was dim, and the folders on her desk were askew.

Once they’d left the school, his mom looked back at him from the front seat of the car with a soft grin on her face and asked, “Wanna go to the park? We could meet up with your Dad downtown and get lunch after.” Orchard had perked up a bit at the suggestion and nodded, smiling back at her. He sometimes wishes that he was still young enough to ask Mala to go to the park with him. He wishes they had more time together in general. When Mala was starting high school and he was younger, they played video games together and she tried to get him to draw. Now they never have time.

Orchard can’t listen to music while he works, because it’s too distracting. Especially if it’s a song he’s heard before. The first time he listened to Mala’s favorite song, he’d been in the car. They were going out to eat, for the first time in weeks, and she had played it from her phone. He didn’t like it, but he liked the way she’d shouted the lyrics and turned to grin at him every so often. He’d smiled back at her, sincerely, and even laughed a few times at how happy she was. They’d gone to a restaurant, rather than getting fast food, and it was nice. He’d worn one of her hoodies, which was black with color block sleeves; bright turquoise. They’d gone home, watched a movie, and she’d fallen asleep before it ended. He made her get up long enough to walk to bed, her grip on his hand loose as he guided her there.

The memory comforts him as he refocuses on the problem he’s finishing.

“Jamie went on a road trip with some of his friends. The trip
to the campsite took five hours and the trip back took four hours. He averaged 35 km/h on the return trip. Find the average speed of the trip there.”

That’d be nice, he thinks. To go on a road trip. He’ll ask Mala in the morning if they could save some money for one. Hopefully he’ll have time with her rushing off to her morning shift, him tiredly getting ready for school; Mala tossing a granola bar at him. At 8:03 his bus will arrive, and he’ll fall asleep with his face slouched against a dirty window.

And in the days following, he’ll keep studying, and he’ll trick his brain into remembering the unimportant specifics of basic calculus. He’ll graduate in June, so his life isn’t wasted, and neither is Mala’s. He’ll go to college, he’ll get a great job, and he’ll move the two of them into a better place – a house, and Mala could focus on art. That’s the way it’ll go. He needs it go this way. “23 days is enough time,” Orchard says, quietly to himself, with finality.
undoing

Courtney Worley

at night i braid my hair and unbraid it again.
the butterfly outside my bedroom window
folds itself back into a caterpillar.
the chrysalis consumes it whole.
how can i fall asleep when
every breath that exits my body is
shaped like undoing?
i am hungry for belonging.
your greeting hangs suspended and heavy.
somewhere, my present is half
a second behind yours;
the earth cannot make its way toward us;
i have not yet become accustomed to heartache.
i wait until after i become alone
to decide i no longer want to be lonely.
i unbraid my hair and bite my fingernails
until the tips of my fingers sting and bleed.
how can i sleep when there is the opportunity
to count the woven threads of my pillowcase?
here is what i see:
something crawling around inside my stomach.
the sun coming up dull from the wrong horizon.
this is easy for me now. i find revival
slow and stifling. i no longer feel the need
to prove my suffering or to feel more pain
than the child who has accidentally let go of a balloon.
this morning, i wake heavy, then numb.
i wake alone. i have learned the essence of absence:
it is hole-shaped and hungry. it is not merciful.
i am being eaten alive.
Stirring Movements

Brian Clow

In my head
my mind holds only shadows
of memories that sway my motives like water ripples
brushing on sand grains.

But—while to be swayed best by rippling
a grain must lift and float alone—
to be swayed best,
I must be buried
and let rest,
with time and
with grains and
inside myself
to feel.
Peanut Butter
Madeline Eary

As girls, we sat on our swing set and ate peanut butter sandwiches. Slowly but surely, we made out way through the soft white bread as Gran watched us diligently from the window. The gooey texture made not smacking impossible. Dry bread and peanut butter cemented itself to our throats left our mouths dry like an Egyptian summer. Only a tall glass of milk could ease the constant need to swallow. Then we would be outside again, staring at each other through thin wooden slats, scaling walls, and fighting pirates.

Sometimes, when the sky danced from the heat, we sat under the ugly green tarp above the slide and made each other laugh. Not on purpose, we just loved each other so much and were so happy that even colors were funny. Her gap-toothed smile and tiny white teeth lit up the shade brighter than any sun, and her giggles shook us both so hard our bellies ached, and the world around us spun. Sometimes, if I looked at her just right, I could see the sunshine turn my baby sisters hair into liquid gold, and her brilliant eyes shine impishly with possibility.

By the time we had both started school, we were eating peanut butter sandwiches with jelly. Gran no longer watched from the window. The sweet grape goop made a world of difference and left our fingers sticky with glee. We didn’t mind so much that the peanut butter still got stuck our throats. Instead of hiding from the sun, we ran toward it, shivering in the matching magenta jackets our mother had impulsively bought. As hard as we tried, there never seemed to be enough sunlight in the day.

Eventually, I outgrew the playset. Sprouting up six inches in one season meant that not only were my pants too short and shoes too tight but that squeezing under the tarp left no room from laughing.
“Don’t worry,” She told me, her smile still gaping. “We’ll just find somewhere else to play.” We tried the stairs, wedging ourselves against the wall, and moved our barbies from one floor to the other. And then her bed, stuffed full of toys. The railing on the side was the only thing that kept it all together. It wasn’t the same, but neither of us had the courage to admit it.

At school, I found friends of my own to play with; only instead of dolls, we crammed ourselves into our parents’ desk chairs and watched YouTube until our eyeballs hurt. All the while, my sister ran around the yard in circles with her friends, taking turns on the rope swing and jumping from the ramp. Eventually, her voice echoed through the hallways of our home in the mornings, talking to a camera as she made videos of her own.

When I was in high school, we ate peanut butter with a spoon. Scooping mounds of the smooth, slightly sweet substance, off with our fingers and smearing it on to the roofs of our dogs’ mouths. Their bright pink tongues moved frantically, and we fell to the floor laughing, and it was almost the way it used to be. But we both knew the only time we spoke was during the few minutes it took to drive to school and back.

Her eyes didn’t light up the way they used to. I knew the gaps from her smile had been closed with braces but didn’t see it often enough to remember what it looked like. She laughed, but never with me.

When I came home from college, we ate peanut butter in our oatmeal. The Nutella our mom mixed in changed the texture, there was no need to smack, or compulsively lick the roofs of our mouths. Yet, the reality of what we had become stuck itself in the back of my throat. I had crafted a sweet illusion that she was fine, and nothing had changed. But in reality,

Giggles had been replaced by empty looks.
Her eyes held the fatigue of a thousand childhoods.
Silence left my head spinning,
The truth was too hard for me to swallow.
Snow at the Cemetery

Anna Swenson
Out of the Wasteland (An Easter Song)

Darby Brown

A distorted tree, ravaged and torn
from the ground, sculpted by unclean hands
made clean at last by crimson burning snow,
reaching upward always, falling
into the sky.
I will show you hope in a handful of dust.

Breath of thunder exhaled by darkness,
the stirring of the earth, causing the cracking
of cloth. Cold distance transformed
into the warmth of a hug, and
commands that competed with the wind become
the whisper of a kiss.
I will show you love in a handful of dust.

Three rusted nails, cast off into the dirt
to wither and decay and nourish
earth with blood.
I removed the blindfold from your eyes,
replaced the hammer in your hand with flowers
from my vine.
I will show you grace in a handful of dust.
A hollow cavern where knowing rocks blink
but do not speak.
Wings brushed the ceiling, tears cleaned the floor,
sunlight bursts apart the rain as feet run
and run and run
to overfill the world.
I will show you joy in a handful of dust.

Where are your shackles? Where are your chains?
Rub your wrists to find the rash
where you used to be a slave.
Do you remember the whip upon your shoulder blades?
The scars upon your heart?
The sand shifts and swallows pain.
I will show you freedom in a handful of dust.
What I Do

Miriam Berne

I walk to elementary school every day with my mother, we look forward to whatever carcass was on the sidewalk, one corner never disappoints and the image of the rubberized sewer rat stays in my mind.

I write poetry about things I haven’t learned how to say out loud, letting insects and heartbreak take the lead

Maybe this time I will

Read the yellow notice posted in my dorm, it encourages a thick drip from the faucets

Cracking open the red shell, watching the seeds burrowed into their homes, a shape like a honeycomb, drowning in honey and pomegranate juice, sometimes I think I hear a buzz.

I talk to myself in languages a human cannot even fathom

Sitting on my bed I meditate, I focus on breathing, I let thoughts invade, and when they do I come back to the weight my body imposes.

Sometimes I hear only the slow trickle as it falls from where tears do

Perhaps I was coerced into the thought that language has just one meaning, but hi is not always an invitation, a hum is not only the sound of a bee, no doesn’t always mean no.
To Break a Music Box

Ellie Allen

Odette:

My fingers trace the delicate plastic figurine. Her neck is long and proud, and her hair is whisked into a neat bun. She doesn’t smile. Haunting eyes peek out from under her thin black eyebrows, and she balances on a perfect pointed toe. I watch her spin round and round. Clara twirls in circles to the rhythm of the tinny music that floats out of the little white music box. Her bright blue eyes are alive like crashing waves, and her thin blond hair bounces from side to side as she sways. She has high cheek bones, and I’m sure her now plump cheeks will one day settle into strong, precise lines. Thin lips press together as she concentrates on raising herself onto one foot like the figurine. She falls softly on the stained white carpet. She laughs, and I can’t help but smile.

Clara is six years old and has just lost her second tooth. I am eight and far smarter than she is, so naturally, I am in charge of protecting her. Clara is more than my sister, she’s my best friend. I have her, and she has me. It’s always been that way.

“Dettie, come dance!” she squeals. I would prefer to watch the ballerina spin, but I take Clara’s sticky hands in mine, and we move across the room like two ballroom dancers spinning and twirling to the music.

The door to our small bedroom bursts open. He stands in the doorway with a maniacal smile. We stop in our tracks and stand at attention like military cadets. I don’t let go of Clara’s hand. My father is an ominous ghost with dark eyes and a gray beard. His hands are hard and callused, and he wreaks of cigarette smoke. His shadow engulfs the
room, and we don’t dare to breathe. I squeeze Clara’s hand as he grabs the box forcefully. He runs his hands over the smooth surface and grins. In one quick motion, he throws it at the wall. I bite my lip to keep from screaming, and my mouth is filled with the taste of blood. The splintered fragments of my most prized possession are scattered across the floor. A faint melody sputters weakly from what remains of the box. The tiny figurine is split in half. Her torso remains with the rest of the crumpled box, while her head rolls towards me and stops at my feet. She will never dance again. I look up at my father. He frowns grimly and stomps the box until the music stops.

“Don’t dream girls, it’ll screw you,” he says as he walks back to the kitchen. Clara lets out a wail, and I put my arm around her small shoulders. I pick up the head and hand it to her.

“Look, it’s okay. You can keep this, and I’ll keep the other half. That way together we will be whole,” I say. She takes the head and wipes away her tears. She nods, and I squeeze her tightly.

“Don’t worry, Clara,” I say. “We’ll figure this out together.”

7 Years Later:

I sit with my legs crossed on the edge of my pale pink bedspread. The tiny white flowers have faded over the years. Clara sits below me on the floor and leans against the edge of my bed. We listen to the rain on the window, and the yelling match down the hall.

“One day I will find a husband, and he will never treat me like that,” Clara says looking out at the window wistfully.

“Why do you want to be married?” I ask looking down at the crown of her head. Her blond hair has darkened to a golden brown.

“Because I want someone to always look out for me and protect me,” she says softly. There’s a loud screech and breaking glass. We don’t flinch anymore.

“What about me?” I ask.

“I’ll have a simple dress with a long veil. Probably a spring wedding when all the flowers are blooming,” she says ignoring my comment.

“I’ll never be married,” I say as another scream echoes down the hall. I don’t want to be the one screaming. Clara jumps up onto the bed with an eager look in her eye.

“Oh Odette, can’t you see it? Can’t you see the roses and the little white church?” I can, but I don’t want to.
“Sure, I can, Clara,” I say faking a smile. After all, it’s just a childish whim, what does it matter what she thinks now, she’s just a kid. “There will be tons of people and a giant white cake with thick creamy frosting.”

“Wouldn’t you rather get out of here?” I ask with a sigh. My own dream involves this town in my rearview mirror. I have only just begun piecing together how it could work, but I know Clara will be with me in the passenger seat.

“You can be my maid of honor!” she squeals ignoring me.

“Wouldn’t you rather focus on college and a world beyond this?” I ask gesturing to the small dark room with beds on opposite walls.

“No, Dettie. I don’t dream like you. My dreams are here,” she says looking away.

“You want to be stuck in this town forever tied to someone who doesn’t love you?” I ask my voice getting louder than I intended. She doesn’t say anything, she just shrugs. I sigh deeply and remind myself that she doesn’t know what she wants yet. Someday she will, but for now, she sees flowers and pastries while I see bruises and yelling matches. Despite my self-assurances, I can’t deny things are changing, so we sit in silence watching our once inseparable paths begin to fork.

3 Years Later:

My hands shake, and I grab the steering wheel tightly to steady them. In the soft gray passenger seat, a black duffel bag takes the place that was meant to be hers. I look into the rearview mirror and watch the little white house with a sagging porch and faded red shutters become smaller and smaller. Clara and my mother stand at the end of our cracking driveway. They don’t wave. I take one last look at her. She’s tall and graceful like the figurine from the music box. She is confident and smart but hopelessly naïve. I blame myself for that, I protected her too much. Her words echo in my mind like shattering glass.

“No, Odette, I’m not coming,” she said when I begged her one last time to change her mind. She gave me a million excuses, her life was here, mother needed her, she didn’t want to leave her friends, and worst of all she stayed for a husband. Tall and handsome she would say. She didn’t know who he was, but she knew she would meet him. She made her choice. I should accept it, but there was still something inside me that wondered if I was the reason she wasn’t coming. Did I push her away?

I dodge potholes as I make my way down the streets Clara and
I used to run down chasing the energetic melody of an ice cream truck. I pass the house with a white picket fence that I used to think was the epitome of the American dream. I turn out of our neighborhood and pass our old school with brick walls and a large sign that reads, “Home of the Tigers.” I graduated just days before, but only Clara came. I stop at the big stoplight and see the coffee shop with a blue awning and a display case featuring fresh pastries. I worked at that coffeeshop for two years to save up for this old car. It’s a pale blue Toyota. It’s old and rusted, but I had a full tank of gas, and I knew it would get me as far as I could go. I drive over the railroad tracks and between cornfields of little green stubs waiting to grow in the hot summer sun. Clara and I used to run through them feeling the rough stalks on our open hands. I pass the wooden welcome sign and let the tears fall hard and fast. When I make it to the highway, I dry my tears and head south. I press down on the gas and set off to make myself a new life. If I have to do it alone, I will.

2 Years Later
Clara:

The moon creeps over the shadowy silhouettes of broken homes. My own looks small and decrepit from here. David’s isn’t much better, but the pink flowers planted in the front yard point to happiness. I can’t see them in the dark, but I know they are there. They always remind me there is a better life somewhere. That’s what Odette went to chase, but I don’t have the stamina. My back is pressed against the cold metal of David’s chain link fence. I scaled it just moments before. His hands are strong and warm, and my entire hand disappears into his. We stare up at the glittering constellations and dream.

When did the boy next door become my world? It was the day Odette left me alone with nothing but shattered dreams. I gave her every excuse of why I couldn’t go with her but truthfully, I was scared. This world might suck, but at least it’s mine. Out there I have nothing. Still, I didn’t think she’d leave me. Not like that. She didn’t even look back, but I watched her car until it was a blur in the distance. I refused to leave the yard just in case she came back, but she didn’t. David asked what I was doing in the dark staring at the road, and I sobbed as I told him the whole story. He held me tight, and he hasn’t let go since.

He stretches his long thin legs across the prickly grass. I run my hands through his shaggy red hair.

“Clara?” He whispers into the night. I look into his deep green eyes.
“Yes?” I ask. The cool air sends a shiver down my spine.

“Clara, I’m so glad you came into my life. The first time I saw you when we moved in four years ago, I thought you were the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. I was too shy to say anything, but I’m so glad fate brought us together. When my dad left, I thought moving into this house would be the worst thing that ever happened to me, but it turned out to be the best. I know we graduate soon, and it seems like life is coming at us so quickly, but I want you to know it won’t change how I feel about you. I love you, Clara,” he says looking away. He runs his hands through his hair nervously.

“I love you too,” I murmur wondering what the purpose of all of this is.

“Clara, will you marry me?” he asks pulling a dainty silver band out of his pocket.

“I know it isn’t much, but I promise one day I’ll get you the one you deserve,” he says nervously. I look at the ring, and I think of what Odette said about marriage. She said it was a trap. Was this a trap? I look at his sweet face and pale skin lined with freckles, and I can’t imagine David as anything but harmless. I push her from my mind. This is my moment. She can’t have it.

“Yes,” I breath slipping the ring on my finger. David beams. His long arms reach out and surround me. I let myself fall into him.

“I wasn’t sure you’d say yes,” he says with a laugh. It’s the laugh I fell in love with. It starts soft at the edges of his mouth like a quiet hum, but then, he opens his mouth widely and his dimples peek out from either cheek. The sound flows like a raging river. It’s a rich mix of warmth and deep melodies. His voice is smooth and deep like that too. I wonder if it’s because of the pain he’s endured. Pain has a way of making everything go deeper. Voices, emotions, thoughts. They all plummet somewhere deep down. The moon is big and full. The cool spring night surrounds us, and no one else matters, not even her.

**Odette:**

I look into the smudged mirror and sigh. I move my hands through my dark brown hair and pull it into a tight ponytail. I try to cover the bags under my gray-blue eyes, but it doesn’t work. I slip into a mustard yellow polo shirt and squeeze into my tight-fitting jeans. I swear its harder every day. I give myself one last look and practice my smile. I grab my keys and jog down the concrete stairs of my apartment building. I jump into my car and pull out of the parking lot just like I do every
morning.

The diner is only a few miles away, and when I arrive, the parking lot is packed. The old sign reads, “Coney’s Diner: A Taste of Mama’s Cookin.” The paint is beginning to chip, but the customers don’t seem to mind. I pull behind the medium sized brick building and hop out of my car. I open the back door and clock in.

“Odette, thank God. We need you at table five!” Abbi, my boss and fearless owner of Coney’s, yells. I nod tying my apron around my waist and grabbing a little black notebook that has practically been my bible for the past two years. It’s only six in the morning, but Coney’s Diner is famous around here. Probably because Coney was the mayor’s wife back in the ‘70s. Abbi frantically runs into the kitchen filling her tray with pancakes and coffee.

“Odette. I needed you like yesterday, get moving!” she yells teetering between annoyance and anger.

“I’m on it,” I say. I saunter over to table five. I make sure to grab a few extra straws and sugar packets to stick into the folds of my apron.

Tea can never be too sweet for a southerner. Mother used to make it without a single drop of sugar. It didn’t matter to me, but I couldn’t drink it plain now. The bitterness reminded me too much of how Clara and I used to sip from little plastic teacups with our pinkies pointed outward.

“What can I get for y’all today?” I ask. I always enhance the little bit of a southern accent I have picked up.

“I’ll have biscuits and gravy, two slices of bacon, and a coffee,” a man wearing faded blue jeans and cowboy boots says to me. I nod writing down his order. “She’ll have scrambled eggs and a slice of toast,” the man says. I hate when men do this. It reminds me of the rare occasions when we ate out, and my father insisted on ordering for my mother. It was never what she wanted, and she tried to hide her disappointment. Still, she ate it all. What else could she do? Her life had become minimizing blows. I want to say something, but I need the tip money. Plus, if I couldn’t save my mother or Clara, how could I save this woman?

“White or wheat?” I ask.

**Clara:**

“You should call her,” my mother says as we sit at the kitchen table awaiting my father’s arrival. This is the last night I will ever have to do this. The thought makes my stomach fill with butterflies. My mother’s comment surprises me. She has never once mentioned her since she left.
We just accept that it happened and leave it. After her car left our line of sight, my mother took down all of her pictures. It was like she never existed.

“I don’t know,” I say hesitantly. I’ve wanted to call her for weeks to tell her the news, but I don’t know how to start. What will I say? Sorry I didn’t call. I thought you were angry, and I couldn’t bear to hear the disappointment in your voice. Maybe I would say do you remember the music box? Why can’t we share our dreams again? No. It was too hard. Anyway, she left not me. I shouldn’t be punished for that.

“You’ll regret it if you don’t,” my mother says. “Do you really want to walk down the aisle tomorrow without her there?” I don’t. I can’t imagine it without her. She has always been there in all my dreams. I sigh and slowly walk to the room we once shared and pull out the little scrap of paper tucked under my pillow. She said I could call this number. It was the phone she bought for herself before she left. I take it out and study the numbers. I hold the scrap of paper in my hand tightly. I pull down the handle of our old phone that is still mounted to the wall. I press the numbers carefully, and the phone rings. Each tone makes my heart beat faster.

“Hello?” she answers. I almost burst into tears right then. Her voice vibrates through the phone, and it’s like she’s here. Almost like she never left.

“Hi, Odette,” I say my voice shaking. There’s a pause. The background is noisy. Where is she? What beautiful life does she have without us? She always said she’d leave this place behind. I guess she did.

“Clara?” she breathes unsure if what she’s hearing is true.

“Yeah. It’s me,” I say. She doesn’t speak. The hum of the exotic world behind her grows louder, and I hear her breathing hard. Maybe she’s crying. No. She can’t be. She doesn’t miss us. We are the ones missing her not the other way around. She left us.

“Hey, Clara. How are you?” she says gently.

“Good,” I say softly. “Yeah. Um. I called to let you know that I’m getting married tomorrow at the church at 4:00, if you want to come.”

“Married?” She asks clearly trying to process what I have told her.

“Yes. I’m marrying David tomorrow.” Another pause. This time I don’t think it’s happy.

“David from next door?” she asks.

“No.” I have a sinking feeling.
“I guess this is what you wanted...” she says her voice trailing off.
“It is,” I say.
“Good. Listen, Clara, I have to go,” she says her voice short and
distracted.
“Can you come?” I blurt out.
“I don’t know. Maybe,” she says and just like that she’s gone. The
tears prick my eyes, and I don’t hide them.

Odette:
I look into the deep black abyss of my coffee. The diner has
quietened, and the night surrounds me. I slump against the hard booth and
contemplate what she said to me just a few hours ago. Her voice sounded
older on the phone, more mature. How much has she changed since I
saw her last? The thoughts swirl around my mind as I stir sugar into my
coffee. Really, the gawky kid from down the street? Of all people that’s
who she’s staying for? I guess I always knew deep down she would never
come back to me, but part of me always hoped that when she graduated,
she would call me up and come to stay with me. I always made sure to
keep a stock of her favorite foods in my fridge and rented a two-bedroom
apartment despite the fact I didn’t have a roommate. How could I be so
wrong? What happened to us? Two girls from the same broken home
taking completely different paths. I guess we both got what we wanted
all those years ago. Abbi slides into the booth across from me and sets
her notepad down on the table. She looks at me with deep brown eyes
and a mothering look, one my mother never gave me.
“What is it?” she asks.
“My sisters getting married,” I let the words fall from my mouth
as I stare at the table.
“That’s great news! Why are you so upset about it?” she asks. I
meet her gaze and immediately regret it. Her eyes are full of concern and
warmth. I can’t lie to her.
“Because she’s my baby sister. She’s only eighteen, and now, she’s
stuck in that town forever. Nothing will ever be the same,” I mumble.
“Looks to me like nothing is the same now. I’ve never heard you
mention your sister, and lord knows you never take a day off,” she says
with a soft laugh.
“I’m saving up for college. You know that,” I say defensively.
“Yes, dear, I know, but that doesn’t mean you have to throw your
life away,” she says.
“I’m not going, Abbi,” I say. I couldn’t go. I didn’t support her
throwing her life away like this, and as much as I loved her, I couldn’t let her think that I did.

“I didn’t ask that,” she says looking at me seriously.

“I know you didn’t, but I’m just telling you, so you can stop looking at me like that. You aren’t changing my mind. She’s throwing away her life, and I don’t support it,” I say taking a big gulp of coffee. It burns my throat.

“Okay, then,” she says taking my hand gently. She doesn’t say anything. I don’t say anything. She just held my hand, and I just let her. It was a small comfort. We sat in silence, and in that moment, it was enough.

Clara:

I slip into my smooth lace dress, and my mother begins fastening the white buttons that line the back. I study myself in the mirror. My lips are coated with shimmering gloss, pale pink blush runs up my cheeks, and an even softer pink coats my eyelids. Small pearl earrings are placed in my ears and a matching necklace clings to my throat. I touch the smooth beads to stop my hands from shaking.

“They were your grandmother’s,” my mother says peeking over my shoulder. I nod which makes my loose curls bounce. Small white slippers are tight against my feet. I wanted to wear heels, but mother warned against it. When she finishes with the buttons, mother fastens a flower crown made out of white roses and leafy green plants to my head.

“Beautiful. Now take these,” she says handing me a bouquet of white roses that match the crown. She smiles happily, but I notice a hint of sadness behind her eyes. I take one last look at myself. The A-line dress is covered with lace and long sleeves stretch almost all the way to my hands. I take a deep breath try to hide my nervousness.

“It’s time to go,” my mother says taking my hand. We leave the backroom of the church, and my father stands in front of the doors to the sanctuary in an old black tux. I can tell he’s drunk because he stumbles slightly. My mother kisses my cheek and smiles.

“Good luck,” she says. I ignore my father and wait anxiously for the doors to open. I just want Odette to be here. Music begins to play on an old croaking organ. The doors are thrown open, and my father gives me his arm. I know I should be looking at David, but I scan the old wooden pews for her. She isn’t here. I try to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach. I look up and see David. He is smiling widely. He wears a finely tailored black suit and a black bowtie. His hair is slicked back.
into a smooth wave. I didn’t expect him to cry, but he wipes away a tear. Everything else disappears, and the only thing I can think of is his beautiful emerald eyes. The steps to get to him seem so long, and I want to drop my bouquet and run to him. Instead, I walk slowly with my eyes locked on him and only him. Steadily, with a huge smile on my face I walk towards my future.

**Odette:**
I climb the stairs to my apartment and fall onto my bed thinking of Clara and her wedding. Eventually, I drift off. I wake up with a start, and my clock reads 9:00 a.m. She’s getting married today. It’s like a bullet to my heart. I bet she looks beautiful in her white dress just like she always wanted. I want to be happy for her, but I know she’s gone forever. After this, she will never come back to me. Overwhelmed with helplessness, I do the only thing I know how to do. I stuff all the clothes I can grab inside my old duffel bag. I take the small black picture frame with the photo of Clara and I from my nightstand and grab my keys. I carefully place the picture frame in my passenger seat and start my car. I head west this time. Now that I can afford gas, the world is truly my oyster. I watch the scenery change, and I only stop for gas and food. I wait for the wedding bells to sound. The clock on my dashboard reads 4:00, and I know she’s gone. I turn up the radio and roll down the windows. I let the spring air fill my lungs. I let it swirl my hair, and I smile. The long highway heals my brokenness. The sky in front of me changes from pale blue to deep pinks. The bright colors ignite my soul. I take the picture frame and smile at it.

“Good luck kid,” I say throwing out the window. It falls fast, and I imagine the glass shattering. Splintering into small fragments just like a little wooden music box. I smile at the bright colors of the sunset. Endings are always bright. Explosions. Supernovas. Sunsets. They are always the most vibrant and beautiful and the most painful. Beginnings are the softest and sweetest. Maybe in the pale light of tomorrow I will get my beginning. Maybe I can finally stop running. Maybe.
Jekyll and Hyde

Lauren Bear
tiger lilies

Courtney Worley

she’s here somewhere.

climbing the iron spiral staircase made my heart pound to the soles of my feet
my presence heralded by dull clanging and the stench of dead ladybugs.

once, i ran down a hill too fast.
when i fell, tiny rocks lodged deep in my knees.

there was a fountain with spitting fish
murky glass and an old ice cream maker
wild mushrooms and kittens
a statue of a proud native american man with a feathered headdress
who guarded the front door
and whose eyes followed me.
she wore silk and maroon glasses.

she smiled when she cried. sometimes, i thought she was laughing.
she spelled my name wrong in my birthday cards.
she drove a sports car and made mac and cheese with noodles shaped like seashells.
her handwriting was loopy. she was proud of me.
i didn’t see her often. i didn’t know how to mourn.
still, she is here.
she lives in tigers and lilies and the color red.
Sophomore Josie Levin sits down with Meg Wolitzer, New York Times bestselling author, to talk about feminism, writing, the #metoo movement, empathy, storytelling across generations, and why the study of literature matters now more than ever. Wolitzer’s works include: *The Wife, The Ten-Year Nap, The Uncoupling, The Interestings,* and *The Female Persuasion.*

*A lot of your work is about feminist issues, do you have a personal definition of what feminism is or what you think feminism should be?*

I feel like the word “equality” is really useful and durable. I just think about equality and fairness, those are the qualities that I want to see active in the world.

*Do you try to write those into your books? I know you talk a lot about inequality.*

No I wouldn’t ever say I try to write anything into my books. I mean if things aren’t organic to the book then it’s going to feel like you’re pushing a point or that the book is a message book and I certainly would never want to write a message book. People say to writers “write what you know” but I think it’s “write what obsesses you” and I’ve been thinking about these issues a lot. I always say to students if there’s something you’re thinking about a lot, it’s going to be interesting in a book.

*Do these issues manifest in your books organically?*

I think so, sure. They’re things that characters, in *The Female Persuasion* the characters are struggling with.

The Female Persuasion was released right as the #metoo movement got off its feet. *How comfortable are you with where the movement is now? Do you think it needs to catch up, because you’ve been writing about topics like sexual assault for a long time?*
Yeah, obviously, I was working on this book for three and a half years before #metoo became this big thing so these are old issues. I mean, I don’t know that #metoo is one thing so it’s hard to say. People are going about it in different ways. Its messy, its early stages, when you think about where we are, how quickly things have moved (and in some cases, stalled), but now there’s been this sudden change that these issues around assault became front and center in a way that they weren’t for a very long time for the way the media covered it. So it’s hard to know, it’s a lot of things.

*In relation to that, there’s obviously a big issue with college campuses and sexual assault. Your first novels, Sleepwalking as well as The Female Persuasion, both take place on college campuses. How has the setting changed for you?*

It’s not that the campus in *The Female Persuasion* is political but that [it] wouldn’t even have been a thing that I was dealing with, particularly in *Sleepwalking* although when I was at Brown, I graduated in ‘81, divestment from South Africa was something that was front and center. And as I came of age in the ‘80s anti-nukes was something—these were things that I saw on the campus. But I don’t think that ideas around sexual assault were front and center. Dealing with the politics of a campus would be something I have to do now that I didn’t think I had to do then.

*Is that the politics of a campus as opposed to politics on campus?*

I mean politics on a campus, but I also mean because of the way that a campus and a community deals with matters of import and I just didn’t have a sense of a community. I didn’t understand that a college is an organism, is a community, must conduct itself in a certain way. I didn’t understand that, even think about that in the ways I do now.

*When did you start understanding that?*

As the sexual assault stories started coming in over the years and the ways that colleges could handle it as they saw fit was wild to me. I didn’t understand that all kinds of things could happen. So when I wrote *The Female Persuasion* and I have a sexual assault on campus and I have the
college dealing with it in a wrist slapping way as I had heard and read about my eyes were opened. I would say in the ‘80s and ‘90s and as time passed.

*How has the world changed, do you think, for female writers since you published Sleepwalking?*

There was a kind of golden era in fiction, I would say. The women’s movement and the civil rights movement sort of shines lights on communities that people hadn’t written about a great deal and you had voices that would have been marginalized [in the past] paid attention to and there was a sense that was part of the public conversation. I think that fell away as fiction has seemed to be a special interest, like a luxury item for a lot of people. To me it’s a necessity because it’s about empathy it’s about understanding how other people live, what it’s like to not be you, what it’s like to be in a community or to be a person living in a certain circumstance that you’ve never really thought about. I think that as the world becomes really anxious people cling to facts a lot but there’s such a truth in fiction—in good fiction—that I can’t imagine trying to understand the world without it.

*In the foreword for the version of Sleepwalking I read, which I believe is the most recent published version, you talked a lot about how on its initial release, it was put in the YA [Young Adult] section and it had a cover that you really didn’t like. What do you think is the difference between Sleepwalking and YA books that you’ve written [since then]?

All things being equal, books would be available to all people. A lot of adults read YA; these are categories that help people find books and help publishers and bookstores bring readers to kinds of books that they think they want. When I wrote this book, *Belzhar*, there’s almost more of an immediacy to it, like the character is very in her own contained world and she has to get the story out and there’s a sense of it spilling out. I think *Sleepwalking* is more discursive and takes its time—which isn’t to say that young readers don’t want to take their time—but it was just my instinct to write that way for my teenage self.

*Sleepwalking you wrote for your teenage self?*
No, Belzhar. *Sleepwalking* I was a senior in college when I sold it. I was reading adult novels. I hate saying adult fiction, it sounds like I’m talking about porn.

*A little bit, yes.*

I know, right? I was an English major and I was steeped in literature classes and I was reading *Wuthering Heights* and I was reading *Middlemarch* and I was thinking about what I wanted a novel to be. In a sense, I’d rather focus on what they have in common. It’s easier for me to articulate.

*Yeah, of course.*

With my YA, with my middle grade, with my adult books it’s about who are these people, why are they telling this story, why are we in their world? Who are they? If they don’t stand out, if I don’t remember them, I don’t know that the book has been successful in the way I want it to be.

*So that’s an overarching theme for all of your books?*

Yes, I think that characters become a vessel, not for messages but for ways of thinking about the world. And just to go back, I’m not sure I answered your politics on campus question articulately.

*Oh, go ahead.*

I was going to say when I think about the ways I didn’t really think about what a college campus should be, of course [in] the ‘60s, I certainly had that in mind too. It’s not like I’m an idiot about what a campus could do and could be, but I guess I would say that I was very much in my own writing world at the time. What I really did when I was in college was write a lot, and my interior life probably dominated my college experience more than I wish it had. There was politics going on on campus, less at Smith [College], although feminism was interestingly happening, it was the late ‘70s, and I saw that an all-women’s college is an interesting environment for that. But it’s really only later that I saw that campuses could be really political. I don’t think I was aware of it in the same way. I think that campuses as a testing ground and enactment
of political ideas is certainly an exciting thing. I started to see that over time, but for me [in college] I was writing, I wasn’t engaging that way.

*Going back to when you talked about characters being vessels for viewpoints, you write a lot in multiple perspectives. Do you write that way to explain different perspectives?*

My novel *The Wife* was written in first person and it’s kind of an angry screed, but it’s funny and angry. My yardstick for how to figure that out [is], first of all, its connection to voice. Is there a singular voice that is the only voice that could tell this story? If the answer’s no, then I’m not sure why you would do it in first person. Either you haven’t figured out who that voice is or it shouldn’t be in first person. Also, third person does allow you that kind of wide, telescopic, panoramic view. You can sort of go anywhere and the freedom of that is, to me, not to be God but to be kind of a lesser god that knows some people, but not every person. That is a powerful thing to me. I like to use it. For instance in [*The Female Persuasion*] we would have had Greer’s story if it was in first person but not Faith’s back story. People wouldn’t feel fleshed out to me. Because I’m not trying to damn my characters—they are imperfect, of course—but I think my big mantra is, “what is it like, what is it like for these people?” So I’m trying to show what it’s been like as much as I can.

*Do you feel like the story’s incomplete if you don’t have all these different viewpoints?*

No, but it’s a different story. Every novel is really different depending on the choices, of the way the writer goes about it. Like if [*The Female Persuasion*] had been in first person from Faith Frank’s point of view, we would have been looking at Greer. It could have felt completely different. That’s why people have played with a novel from the point of view of the wife of a famous person as opposed to the famous person, whatever it is.

*When you’re writing a novel, how does the idea come to you? Do you think of it in broad terms? Do you have specific scenes that come to your mind first?*

I like to think about an idea that I want to, not solve, but work on. In the case of [*The Female Persuasion*] it was a couple of things. It was about
making meaning and also the person you might meet when you’re young who sees something in you. So once I have that, characters almost come up out of the primordial ooze and say “I can handle that.”

_With that mentor/mentee and also the subsequent disillusionment of that in The Female Persuasion, do you think that is cyclical? Do you think that successive generations are always going to find fault in their predecessors?_

Well certainly we’ve seen that happen quite a bit. To a certain extent, the media likes to play up cat fights between generations, but of course there are real tensions because one of the things that I realized was that people grew up in a different world, so their sense of the world is different based on the world they saw when they were young. Yeah, I think it’s a part of sticking your place in the world, but there are real legitimate criticisms.

_You write a lot of characters who walk the line between sympathetic and unsympathetic, how you keep [the line] so fine?_

I guess I do it because that’s not the way I see it when I’m writing them. I’m not thinking “now they need to be unsympathetic because I’ve been too sympathetic.” I’m just trying to understand who they are and if I really let that happen then you will see these signs. I don’t even think it’s about walking a fine line. I think it’s about being honest about “who are these people?” If you really could write who these people are and let us see moments that—even moments that they’re not proud of—moments where they are vulnerable. Whatever it is, let [readers] see important moments. You will get to see a more complete picture than you generally get to see when you don’t know [the characters].

_Your novels are a creative form of fiction but you also write essays and some historical [writings]. I see a lot of that kind of writing in your [novel] writing. How do these different mediums interact for you?_

Well, I should say that I really prefer writing fiction to anything else. I’m better at it. I still have a part of me that feels like she’s writing a book report when I’m writing other things. I always say to people, “where are you freest? Where are you freest to explore? That’s maybe the medium
you should look at.” But some writers are very free in several, in all [forms]. There’s a line in an essay by Zady Smith called “Fail Better,” she says something like ‘I’m trying to express my way of being in the world.” So I guess that you might have an overarching feeling of what feels just and what you care about, and that can go into all your work—in terms of what you choose to write about, not just your opinions. You know, [if] somebody offers you a book review assignment and it doesn’t speak to the things you really care about, you might not do it. But if it does, you might. Or if it doesn’t, you might be open to that. I like that, actually, about reviewing, because it’s not a book that I’ve chosen. Somebody’s said “do you want to read that?” And I do not prejudge it, but take it on its own terms, which is in a sense a kind of fairness.

*When you’re writing, do you ever feel like there’s a story that you have to tell or there’s a story that you should be telling, or do you feel that freedom?*

I feel free, I feel freedom. I think people go to the writers they love for the writer’s freedom, for the surprise of what the writer will do. I hope so.

*In your novels you write a lot over decades, is that another freeing thing for you?*

Yeah, I think one of the things a novel can do is deal with time. Time can go back and forth, it can be compressed. [In] my novel *The Interestings*, I really jump forth back in time and it was something that critics talked about a lot which I realized, yeah okay, that makes sense, but I wasn’t thinking of it as a tricky way to do it. It was just the most right way to do it because there was this experience that the characters had, when they were young teenagers and how their lives spooled out but they always pulled back to that moment, too, so I would do that freely, I would use it as a kind of touchstone and go back and forth, back and forth. I love the way the novel can deal with time; the great novel *To the Lighthouse* certainly does that. You have Mrs. Ramsey dead and time passing and it’s so shocking. That’s right, that’s what it’s like. That’s what time is like.

*Do you see expressions of yourself in your writing? In your characters?*

Yeah, sure. I mean they’re not piped in like Muzak. They really do come
from you, even though you’re not them. I mean, you might be them. I don’t ever like to write autobiographically. It’s not interesting to me. I like the challenge of inhabiting these worlds and these people. But yes, absolutely, there are observations that I’ve made or someone in my family might have made. You know, you use what you can. Again, I don’t mean autobiographically. Were just sort of marinating in everything and then, once in awhile, you’re like “oh right, that’s something that would work well in this book.”

*On the subject of family, your mother, Hilma, is also a writer. Do you read her books?*

Oh, sure.

*Do you ever find any similarities that you don’t expect between the two of you?*

Yeah, I think the thing, we’ve both been interested in different ways of humor, which I think is important because there’s this notion that there’s serious fiction and ‘funny’ fiction. Of course, what’s funny can be absolutely devastating and important and I think she’s really captured humor and I’ve gotten quite a bit of that from her.

*As a Jewish person, I see a lot of Jewishness in the background of your novels—is that a reflection of the way you grew up with it?*

Yeah, it probably is. I haven’t explored the Jewishness front and center in any of my characters particularly. I may someday if it feels right for that character but yeah, absolutely, my background affects the things I’ve become preoccupied with. Hearing stories from my grandparents and my parents—it’s all part of who I am.

*Do you think the generational nature of that is important, that stories are passed down?*

Oh absolutely. I loved hearing my parents’ stories. My mother’s stories of growing up in Brooklyn in this warm house of lots of people and being Jewish was part of that, for sure.

*Do you feel Judaism more as a culture than a religion?*
Yeah, it’s more secular, more of secular humanism, absolutely. That’s my own experience, sure.

*Do you have any advice for writers, here or anywhere, of the future?*

I think that there’s a couple of things I would say. Obviously reading good things, but if you’re in school you’re probably reading good things, but the idea of having some time, like a bracketed four-year period where you’re allowed to read and think and write and learn is tremendous. I think reading or even seeking out those things when you’re not in school—that’s an important thing because people leave school and enter the job market (if they’re lucky). [And then] there’s less time for [reading], of course, and it can take a lower priority. But I feel that, when I don’t have a good book going, I feel a loss of a connection to something that is free from the world of the madness that we’re living in right now. I mean I’d rather go into another madness of the world of that book or whatever it contains as a reminder that these books are there.

I edited *The Best American Short Stories of 2017* and I wrote the introduction right after the 2016 presidential election, and I was looking around at my office filled with these stories, and I was thinking “how could these things matter?” We’re in this swirling time, this time when the country’s completely divided and what’s the relationship of reading to the sort of chaos that’s going on? And I realized you have to think back to the reading experiences of the past to imagine the reading experiences in the future.

Reading offers solace, knowledge, depth of thought—so many things that we need, just to live in the world and understand our world now. So I would say, even when you come out of school, try to have something wonderful to read. Even if it’s just a paragraph before bed.

Another piece of advice, I’d say—and this is really more for writers who already are writing: when you get stuck (and this, of course, happens), I think that people shouldn’t beat up on themselves, which they do, or sometimes they force themselves to stay with the book, story, poem, whatever it is they’re working on. Give yourself a little break from it. But one thing you could do is find a passage in a work that you love,
where you feel the writer was excited when he or she wrote it, because there’s something about it. Beginning writing is sort of like falling in love, there’s a grandiosity and a sense of “oh this could go anywhere, I’m going to do so much with this.” Of course, that starts to fall away and you think “oh, wait, I don’t know what I’m doing.” But try to find a passage where the writer was really going full steam and you feel how exciting it must have been to write that poem or that story. And just read that passage a little bit because, even if you didn’t write it, a connection to something that is exciting will help you connect to your own excitement.

I think there’s a connection between those two pieces of advice: they’re [about] connect[ing] yourself to other writing experiences. You’re not alone. There are a lot of people out there doing it, it’s a long haul.

*Do you think reading or writing is more fundamental? Or do you think they go hand in hand?*

Definitely go hand in hand. I don’t know any writers who have not been readers, whereas most readers are not writers. But I think they go hand-in-hand because you’re part of a tradition, you want to be a writer because of your reading experiences, often. You think about books you’ve loved and sometimes, you’re riffing on them. They’re in you, in a way. You see the influence of x on x. You see that in other writers too or when they break out of that. I think they have a very special connection.
Different Perspective
Lauren Bear
Mannered Rejection

Sarah Seyfried

Come back when you’ve found a younger you
The office is closed for age 22

Had you been someone a few years ago
or written prose in utero
we swear we’d give you an honest go.

But, for now, our answer is no.

Had you led ten toddlers covered in goo
to the heat of battle in World War Two
well then, of course, we’d have something for you.

Thanks for your time, that’ll do.

Had you come to us with a little preparation
a mission trip to some tragic destination
we’d take you on without a moment’s hesitation.

Just work on that application.
Up! to Sacred Grounds

Erin Morrisey

I’ll climb up—all the way up to the top of yellow
and celebrate the breathing I can only taste here,
at the top of the world, where leaves are lifting.

I’ll become so soft color can’t stick to me anymore
where my hair melts and all falls to feathers
and my bones will become threads of music
woven together, each thread a different phrase,
tones flittering together to make my body a concerto.

Years ago, I placed a rock on my feet
to keep me grounded
but it rose despite my pleadings
drawn by an invisible friend
who thought the world needed more music
who points to the sacred ground and says,
up!
The Nose Inheritance
Josie Levin

There are a dozen noses living under mine
When this one dies (by which I mean I kill her)
Another will rise from underneath,
shed her mother’s skin,
and snort out the afterbirth

What’s up my nose, if not a prophecy?
From my wide nostrils spill forth Something Unsightly.

In snorts and sniffs against my upper lip,
Something Unsightly says:

someday somebody will finally take a scalpel
to this unfortunate schnoz
and snip away at everything inside that feels

It is more a hiss than a whisper,
like my grandmother when I ask her:
where did your nose go?
White Walls

Sierra White

Note to Self: Grey shoes seem like a nice balance between black and white shoes. But white shoes are the foundational blank canvas I feel that I need. Tan is also a neutral—sometimes it feels equally as foundational as white without the worry of keeping them clean—sometimes.

I wonder sometimes—well a lot of times if the things I think look good on others will also look good on me. I am also super self-conscious of my skin. It’s a weird thing really. I always wonder if certain things look good on others because of their skin. Because of the color.

Maybe it is because of the “neutral concept”. White is the foundational blank canvas after all. HGTV says that white is the best color to paint your walls. They say it is perfect to show off your style. White allows you to experiment and redecorate with contrasts and pops of color. With a blank canvas, you can pair it with anything.

That does sound perfect.

Maybe I am crazy for listening to home improvement magazines. Our bodies are not a house—are they?

In 2016, white Van shoes became the fashion piece of the year, 2018 became the year of the revival of Stan Smiths and Adidas Superstars, and 2019 had “Best white sneakers to buy” as a top search on Google. White has been the wardrobe staple for decades. In 1960, Converse Chuck Taylors were seen on everyone from athletes and everyday people alike. In 1969, Yoko Ono wore a pair of white Keds canvas sneakers in
her wedding to John Lennon. In 1987, white Keds returned on Dirty Dancing’s character Baby.

Better Homes and Gardens magazine says that my perfect style house would include a Scandinavian design: clean, crisp, minimalist. This also includes lots and lots of neutrals—like white.

Maybe white really is more beautiful. It certainly gives you more options.

House Beautiful wrote an article on how white walls open up a small space and how some of the best bedrooms make use of a calming color palate. I really like navy. That’d be my choice. But hotel beds are usually always white, and I like how luxurious they seem. They’re always so comfortable and clean.

Now, I want white bedsheets too.

I’ve been looking online for months at pretty beds. I really like a messy-styled, linen-clad bed because they look cozier. White bedsheets allow for transition and change. With white I could change my style as much as I like. Grey sheets seem like a nice balance between white and a little color. But I only really like light grey. It feels softer than white, less sterile. Less of a worry to keep clean. I like that.

Sometimes I wonder if those are even my ideas or planted there by someone else. And sometimes I wonder if they would look good on me. It’s a weird thing really. Or maybe it’s just a culture thing.

After all, tan is also a neutral and feels equally as foundational as white. At least, that’s what I keep trying to tell myself.
If We Had a Kid

Darrell

If I had a kid I would be there like my Father was.
If I had a kid I would run.
If I found a gun I would keep walking.
If I found a gun I would cock it and Put it in my pocket.
If I lost my life I would be remembered By my family.
If I lost my life I would be on t-shirts Across the hood.
My legacy will be as an outstanding Citizen.
My legacy will be as a man who left his Daughter to protect her from knowing daddy Was a drug dealer.
A man who would kill for his family.
When I lose my life I’ll be known As a man who brought joy to the hood.
So tell me who you would Rather be!
Walmart

Garrett Davis

All my lines lace together
Still singing country in the backseat
of my Red Camry
Foggy noise and holding half-friends

Not in my grandma’s garden anymore
But I still own the gun
With nerf branded across its side
Been playing war before I could understand it

With honey, sweet and sticky
Each step of summertime followed by a stutter

Lick the dust cause it’s kicked up just for us
I promised you Chicago
But you never got those city lights
Left alone with your own Illinois

Never believed in road names
Only ever had to worry about four
But I like the way these twist and dance
So I give Meridian street my heart

It’s not prom, the glitter is real this time
And Jesus isn’t here to get between our hips

Grain silos and trailer parks
Trace the poverty line
Of my spine
With Pockmarked preachers praying for me

Sell the strobe lights
For a stretching stream
And instead, dance under the Walmart sign
Because it’s where you were always gonna be tonight
Traveling into the Unknown

Lauren Bear
Of Blessed Memory

Miriam Berne

My mother never bought Pop-Tarts or fruit snacks
To this day it is a special treat to see Lucky Charms
sitting in the highest cabinet
and we never had cable, my sister and I had to sleep on pull-out couches
over at my grandmother’s one-bedroom apartment
to watch “SpongeBob” for so long
that we had headaches
My grandmother let us eat breakfast for dinner
and put as much Cool Whip on our frozen fruit as we wanted
and we could eat in front of the television
“They need this” she’d tell my mother
At five am we would wake to the sounds of clanging pots and pans,
an alarm that meant we’d be going home in just a few hours, in time for
her to go visit my
grandfather
in the nursing home as she did every day, alone
in her silver Saturn
-
We go sometimes, making the trek from Evanston to China Town
in my mother’s new blue Mazda,
not being in the Honda
it doesn’t feel right;
not seeing my grandfather in the apartment
or walking down the steps he hit his head on so many years ago,
the steps my sister and I used to hide on, him playing along,
or the wall still lined with blood
from a fall that let my grandmother stay in the apartment but
not him
-
We no longer visit my grandfather
At least not near Chinatown
He has since been moved
six feet under
But I still talk to him through photos of us writing together
and summer camp rabbi’s
who tell stories of him,
my eight-year-old campers confused
why their counselor is crying

this summer my sister and I slept over
at my grandmothers for the first time
in 10 years
SpongeBob was already playing
and Cool Whip waiting on the table
Ode to a Pianist’s Identity Crisis

Alexa Quezada

I perch on the piano bench, and I’m a painting by a Renaissance man who knows the posture

but not me. Soon, I will become imperfect motion—hunched shoulders, trembling wrists, and flapping fingers.

Until then, I sit in stern anticipation, waiting for Schubert to finish the symphony that lives in his mind.

I don’t know who I am until I start to play. They tell me I’m a natural because I taught myself

Für Elise within a month of learning to read sheet music—because I’m fluent in the language of ebony

marks woven between staff lines on an ivory page—but I say I’m a mirror. And I’m the vampire

studying my own maple-backed surface for a glimmer of me. I don’t see myself

until I start to play. I’m electric flow—conductor and current—zipping from keys to fingertips

and back again, searching for a wire to ground myself before I lash out. I don’t know

where I’ll go until I start to play. I’m a pockmarked teenage moon, shining brightest with Debussy’s light

on me, but watch as I direct the tides with each press of brass pedal. They rise and fall as blood pulses
in my ears, a steady rhythm for the music rushing through me, carving me into myself: a canyon cut through until my deepest layers lie exposed under hot stage lights. I don’t know who I am, but then I start to play.
Manifest Destiny
Lilly Hinckley
Fragment from a Weekday Morning

Stephen Miner

Across the parking lot
is a row of maple trees
lifting up the sugary morning,
measuring out the breath of the universe
to those watching from windows
or walking. If I were to start a religion,
That is to say, if I had the time to start a religion,
It would be a religion of hot beverages,
Of steam climbing out of mugs, into the cold rays of a weak sun,
Burning fingertips and burning tongues—salvation is a burning thing.
The only religions I recognize exist in the morning
And are burned up with the mist and the dew by the midday sun.
I trust no church that meets at night.
I trust to man that walks without a skip or glance.
There is something deeply wrong with me.
Helpful people with useful things to say
Are here to cause me pain.
I trust no god with eyes.
Paris

Lilly Hinckley
**Hunger**

A.M. VandenElzen

Every morning is the same. In the pre-dawn darkness, a figure rises. Sometimes from a chair. Sometimes from the couch. Sometimes from the floor. The blankets and comforters have become wrapped around them, nestlike, in the night. Like the swelling over a bad bruise. The mornings on which they find themselves waking in the bed are becoming less and less frequent. Wherever they are hauled out of sleep, the morning is always the same.

A yawn.

A stretch.

A check of the day’s weather.

The human dresses. The cat unwinds itself from its own nest beneath the twin bed. It looks up and yawns, then hops to the windowsill. It preens in the dusky morning. The human wonders briefly who exactly owns whom; whose routine has been shaped by the other. Food is next.

The cat eats shreds of meat in gravy. Dollar-a-can wet food bought on deep discount. It likes the fish. Dislikes the chicken. Perhaps it has been fed too much real bird for its own good, thinks its human as they fill the dish.

Keys.

Bag.
Wallet.

Time to leave. Keys in hand, the human picks up the cat and holds it before the mirror for a short time. They sit there together and observe their collective reflection. The cat perches on the human’s arm the same as on the windowsill. It blinks. They blink. The relationship is small, unadorned. Unpresumptuous. When the human holds the cat, they are focused primarily on making it comfortable, ensuring it does not run away. Before the mirror, this is a great gift. It draws their attention away from their own face and the too-strong lines of the chin, the too-square frame of the shoulders. The human pats the small feline on its head on the way out the door, instructing it to be good while they are away. The door slams behind them.

On weekdays, the human is gone after this; not to return until the late evening, save for a brief stop over what is ostensibly lunchtime to put out more food for the cat. The routine deviates slightly for the workless weekend, when the human leaves with the laundry and returns after starting the machines.

The human walks to the gym on weekdays. Down a short street, across an intersection that is semi-busy on the heaviest of days, and through the campus of a small business. They work. Hard. Kettlebells, ropes, freeweights, punching bags. Soreness of muscles: internal screaming. The mirror behind the bags is fit for critiquing form and footwork; but is more often used to identify the features that will one day be thrown into the fire. The human rages.

After, water. And then work. A short walk from their gym. The nature of the work is unimportant, both to our ends and to the human themselves. They often daydream at their desk. Idle thoughts are interrupted at semi-regular intervals by a well-intentioned but politically outmoded boss who believes that “chromosomes determine the gender of the person, full stop.”

Since that day of conversation, the human has been very careful to avoid the topics of personal politics and identity.
A notification from the News Center on iOS: Trump Administration orders sweeping ICE raids countrywide this Sunday. The human contemplates the town where they grew up. Where each summer they learned the rough Spanish spoken by migrants thousands and thousands of miles from the border and further thousands, they are sure, from their families. Strangers in a strange land, to the last. The human contemplates riding an unairconditioned bus, robinegg blue chipping off the sides, the 20 hours to El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville. They cannot imagine that each of these people makes that trip, even once a season. They think of the families they grew up going to church with. The kids they used to smoke weed with, more paranoid than even stoned stoners should be.

Someone has to do something.

But the human cannot even fathom doing something about their own life. The boss comes in once again.

Can you stay until 6?

Sure, I guess. Anything you need done?

Just data processing. I’m sick of having to do it in the mornings.

The boss is not a bad person. He stays and works with his employees, especially if they are staying late. They discuss spreadsheets. Baseball (the Tigers are bombing again). Briefly, the topic of scheduled ICE raids appears on the horizon, but the human takes the opportunity presented when their phone buzzes to duck the conversation. One can only hear “Go back to your own country,” so many times before becoming numb to it. For while the human has been a legal resident of these United States for the entirety of their twenty-five year existence, they have not once felt American.

The year is 2010. The human and their mother stand in front of a tired DMV bureaucrat named Richard. The human is exhausted. A day of golf workout and play rehearsal. *Comedy of Errors*. They are Angelo, the goldsmith. A bit part, which means running around dressing set. Getting strong from
carrying props. They stand mute as their mother goes through
the proof of citizenship and documentation necessary for the
acquisition of a first driver’s license.

We can’t accept a Korean birth certificate.

Okay, well we don’t have an American one. He’s
adopted.

The clerk sizes the mute teenager standing at the Polish woman’s
side. His eyes narrow.

Does he have a green card? He asks, looking straight at
the human.

The mother is silent.

Does he speak English?

*Does he speak English?*

In the human’s life, appearances have been the ultimate downfall. In
America, no-one knows the difference between Korean and Japanese,
Japanese and Vietnamese, Vietnamese or Thai. The black-haired, yellow-
skinned, squinting ones are always simply “Asians,” or when feeling
courageous, “Chinese”. Several times, especially in previous work as a
cashier, they have been called “oriental” to their face. To square this, the
eternal feeling of being an import, a coolie with no railroad to build, they
have put on airs of occidentality like layers of callous. They have studied
comedians and philosophers and all of the classics. They have learned
the history of Rome and its fall to autocracy, idolized Cato and Cicero and
the classical Republicans of antiquity. They have learned the American
Constitution article by article, Federalist paper by dogged Federalist
paper; dreamt of themselves in the halls of that Pennsylvania State
House, arguing how the meaning of the word ‘militia’ might be brought
down through the anteceding generations.

It is as though all of this is kindling – no, gasoline – on the fire pile. A
lifetime’s worth of acquired value and learning turned to fury and self-
hatred at as simple a question as ‘does he speak English?’ One which, no doubt, was posed without malintent – simply in the interest of efficient communication.

The memory, or some fragmented part of it, returns to the human as they leave the office and bid the boss goodnight. Silently, their sinuses clear and moistness creeps to the edges of their eyes.

When they return home, the cat is, again, hungry. Always hungry. The human feeds the cat, whistling when the dish is full to attract the cat, then sets about making their first meal of the day. It is well past 7:30 by now. The gradual progression of summer sunset has reached its golden climax outside the bay windows of the small apartment. Their stomach no longer registers hunger, but the need to eat is immanent. Sitting at table, they contemplate their ever-burning desire to be seen and taken on their own terms. Another day, perhaps. The cat mrrrrrrs and pokes its head at the human’s shins. The human wonders at cats for a moment. How little they seem to comprehend compared with their canine counterparts. How little they have been domesticated when compared with the same. How connected they have become, despite the cat’s eternal attitude of independence. They imagine an Egyptian pharaoh stroking a Nile mau. Little wonder they were once worshiped as gods.

Staring out the windows at the golden sunset, the human again sets the cat on their arm, as steady and stable as a shelf. It presses itself against them, uncomprehending, for a moment, of the drop to the tile floor as it rubs the top of its head into the crook of their elbow. The cat purrs. The human brings it to the mirror and again eyes their collective reflection. They are focused primarily on making it comfortable, ensuring it does not run away. This is a great gift. It draws their attention away from their own face and the too-strong lines of the chin, the too-square frame of the shoulders.

The cat blinks, long, slow, maintaining eye contact.

The human blinks back, just as long, just as slow.

Their gazes remain this way, intertwined as the arms of the Gemini, for an interminable amount of time.
Underground Lipstick

Garrett Davis

Caught in the shag carpet
Navy blue baby
Wrapped in my denim
Wearing my mother’s worn out heels
Walking like a baby horse

It’s saintly, I look important
Under my closets’ fluorescent lights
Heaving back and forth, left and right
Hot as the sun, hotter still
Heavy and honest, if only for an hour

Kiss me till the skin breaks
Hold me like Mary held Jesus as
Tight as the underwear I’m wearing
Teach me to burn away and be bright
Touch me until I’m the only thing in the world

Sunlit shadows
Were meant to sink or swallow
Apple trees like these
After all, it’s a golden hour
And I’ve never been happier
I Can’t Ignore This

Erin Morrisey
Who: Lilly Hinckley, a lowly undergraduate student, and Madeline Miller, American novelist and author of Song of Achilles and Circe. Her impressive list of achievements also includes being awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction (one of the United Kingdom’s most prestigious literary prizes) in 2012, and receiving an Alex Award (which recognizes adult books with special appeal for adolescents) in 2019. Location: a room on the second floor of the Efroymson Creative Writing Center. When: a sunny afternoon in September

So, to begin: I know you talked about this last night [at the Visiting Writers Series presentation], but could you tell me another brief summary of how you came to be a writer?

I have loved writing since I was a child, and I read every book by writers on writing that I could get my hands on. You know, all the classics—Stephen King’s On Writing and Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird and The Forest For the Trees [by Betsy Lerner], and Ursula K. Le Guin Steering the Craft. This was pre-internet, to date myself, and so I would just go to the bookstore and buy whatever they had, or go to the library and take out whatever they had about writing. Mostly, I just read and read and read. That’s something Zadie Smith says that I really like. Someone asked her, how do you become a writer? She said something like, “Go back in time and read everything you can.” I read very widely as a child. I read everything from non-fiction to memoir to pulp to high literary fiction—and I just kept writing, mostly contemporary stuff, and mostly bad. But I kept at it. Then at the same time I was studying classics, and eventually I figured out that I wanted to put my writing and my love of classics together.

And that was with the production of the play, right?

Yes. I directed Troilus and Cressida, which is Shakespeare’s version of the Iliad—a terrific play—and it was a revelation to be a part of telling these stories that I loved. I had been teaching Greek mythology at a local
independent school, and I had begun editorializing, shaping the story, choosing between versions... but directing the play made me realize that I wanted to go further and write an adaptation myself—the story of Achilles and Patroclus. I had been so frustrated by the fact that the interpretation of them as lovers had been basically erased and closeted. I realized in that moment that the things I wanted to say about them I could better express in a novel than a master’s thesis.

*Nice, that’s awesome! So, question number two: since this is a college magazine, I feel obliged to ask: how did your undergraduate and graduate studies influence your career as a writer? Did they help you?*

So much, yes. I had some really outstanding classics mentors—Michael Putnam, Joseph Pucci—people who supported me from beginning to end and really invested in me as a student. I also took many eye-opening classes, particularly in classical literature and poetry. I feel like everything I know about close-reading I learned from reading *Virgil* with Michael Putnam. So aside from the subject matter, the classes taught me how to be a good reader, and being a good reader is instrumental to being a good writer, because you have to be able to notice what good writers are doing in order to be able to learn how to do it yourself. And the classics department was also small, and it was lovely to be part of such a passionate and tight-knit community of learners.

*Hmm-hmm, that’s a lot like how it is here at Butler, too.*

Yes.

*That’s actually one of my other questions. It seems to me that classics as a field is shrinking every year. Do you have anything to say on the importance or relevance of classics in the world today?*

I think it’s totally relevant. Culture has changed and technology has changed but people have not changed. Read any ancient text and you will see humanity in all its pride and folly and virtue. People will sometimes ask me, “How do you make these myths feel relevant?” But I feel that I don’t have to change anything, just allow what’s already there to bloom. Or maybe it’s more like pulling off the veil — the veil of time. Women have struggled with being belittled and undermined and abused for
millennia. *Circe* in the Odyssey is presented as a figure of anxiety about female power. She has the power to strip men of their selfhood. We still fear women’s power. We still like to “tame” them as Odysseus tames Circe in the *Odyssey*. One of the really exciting things about being a classics teacher is having students come on the first day, thinking “this is going to be boring,” and realizing that these stories are anything but boring—they are vital and resonant. One of the most startling experiences of my life was reading the *Philoctetes* and then going to visit my grandmother who had broken her hip and couldn’t get around. She was so frustrated by the limitations of her body and by the fact that she couldn’t do what she wanted to do, and she felt abandoned by some of her friends. That’s what *Philoctetes* is about. It’s all there.

*It’s still there. Yeah. Awesome. This next question goes along with that.*

In many of your interviews and in your presentation last night, you mentioned how Greek myths have a sort of timeless universality in what they tell us about humanity — and that’s something we would very much like to believe — but, clearly, there are flaws and missing perspectives in Homer, in Ovid. So, how do you grapple with that? And in your perspective, does that lessen the value of those works at all?

I think it’s important to be really honest about it. I definitely don’t want to sugar-coat the fact that Briseis is being kept as a sex slave. There have been so many adaptations that take a romantic view, where Briseis falls in love with Achilles. But that’s a very disturbing interpretation. So I think we have to be willing to confront the things that are disturbing in the literature. It’s important to keep engaging with it honestly. And it’s extra important because these works are the foundation for so many later works of literature, from James Joyce to the *Penelopiad* to Shakespeare. It’s okay to be ambivalent about them, to love them and still be frustrated with them.

*Oh yeah, definitely. This is a more technical question, I suppose, but to what extent are your adaptations or re-tellings true to the original? How do you choose what to cut out and what to include? We already have the Iliad and the Odyssey, so why do we need books like Circe and Song of Achilles to tell us the story?*

The key thing is that there is no “original” for any of these stories.
You can talk about the earliest version, Homer’s version, but Homer is coming out of oral tradition anyway, so these were stories that had been told and re-told and re-told already, before they were crystalized into what we now know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And then immediately you have other authors riffing off of them, retelling them, from the tragedians to Ovid and Vergil, to the Christian authors after that. In other words, “adaptation” is baked into classics. It’s been there from the beginning. I think it shows the richness of the original material, that it can hold so many different perspectives. And it’s particularly important to think about the stories that are implied but not told—the silenced voices. There was a poll by the BBC which asked “What’s the greatest tale ever told?” and the winner was the *Odyssey*. Everyone loves Odysseus because he’s smart and he’s an underdog and he’s got a great wife. But he also has a violent temper. He’s very erratic. He is an aristocrat who thinks nothing of murding slaves. He’s clearly struggling with multiple layers of trauma. In my opinion, it makes the work richer to include all of that. I am a firm believer in novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ideas about the danger of a single story. If we just tell one story, then that becomes objective truth, and it’s really important to hear from different voices and different perspectives.

*Hmm-hmm. I love that TED Talk. We see that in a lot of classes.*

Yes, it’s terrific.

*Now, going along with that... would you say you see yourself as part of a dialogue that’s been going on for thousands and thousands —*

Oh! I forgot to answer your question about how faithful I was being. Let me take a shot at answering that, and then I’ll answer this next one. I don’t think an adaptation has to be faithful to be successful. But I like to write close to Homer because I like to be in conversation with him, pushing back at moments, elaborating in others. I follow his basic structure, but I also change things. For example, my Circe does not kneel to Odysseus as she does in the *Odyssey*. I decided that that was Odysseus’s spin on the story (since he narrates the Circe section), and I didn’t have to consider it objective truth. Odysseus it the great liar of the ancient world, after all! It’s a constant balance—adhering to Homer, while giving myself freedom to follow what serves the story best. I am a
lot more relaxed about this than I used to be. With The Song of Achilles, my first novel, there were things I changed that I was very anxious about changing. My Briseis is a farmer’s daughter, rather than the princess that Homer makes her. And that was because I wanted to make room for the collateral damage of the Trojan War, the suffering of the non-aristocrats. How are the Greeks camped out there for ten years? It’s because they’re destroying all the Trojan farms in the area. So it was important to give voice to that experience. If I’m going to make a major change to Homer, it has to be something that is deeply felt.

For a good reason.

Exactly.

Recently, Emily Wilson came out with a new translation of the Odyssey. Do you see any similarities between your work and hers? And, as a follow-up question: do you see yourself as a feminist and did you intend for Circe to be a piece of feminine literature?

I think that she and I are both looking at these works and trying to find the silenced voices, and other perspectives. I love that she names the Cyclops chapter, “The Shepherd and the Pirate” — meaning Odysseus the pirate and the Cyclops the shepherd. She’s also looking at how we “otherize” people. Odysseus feels entitled to come in and loot the Cyclops’ land, and because he’s telling the story we go along with that view of the cyclops as villainous. But Odysseus is the one invading his land.

Emily Wilson and I are also both interested in the women that Odysseus orders to be killed at the end. For generations, they’ve been translated as “the maids.” The word in Greek “slave,” and using that word, “slave,” as Emily Wilson does, reminds us that this is a slave society—that Odysseus is a slave holder. And as much sympathy as we have for Penelope, she has it a lot better off than the slave women, who have no power at all. I think Emily Wilson is brilliantly attuned to all those things.

And yes, I call myself a feminist, and yes, definitely, I think Circe is a feminist work. To me that means that Circe is the center and subject of her own story, as opposed to being an object in Odysseus’ story. One
of the ways Odysseus describes her is having this beautiful, ornate hair. And he presents it as if she’s all dressed up in her fanciest outfit with her fanciest hair, just waiting for him to show up. That’s clearly a straight male fantasy of how women spend their time. In restoring subject-hood to her, I asked myself: why would “Circe of the beautiful braids” have braided her hair? Well, she spends all her time in the woods, she’s digging up herbs, she’s hanging out with her lions — you’d definitely put up your hair.

That’s what I mean when I say I like to write close to Homer. I like to take that detail and flip it so she’s the subject and she looks at him as the object and she assesses how attractive he is. I don’t know why, but there’s a lot of fear around people calling themselves “feminists.” I think that there’s all this anxiety that it means that you hate men, which is also what Circe has been accused of over the years.

I’m one of these people who believe that feminism helps everyone. As a teacher, I see young men being pushed into roles that don’t fit them all the time. When we loosen up those strictures, everyone benefits.

*I think you said last night that if 50% of a society is oppressed, it’s never just 50%.*

That’s right. It’s never just 50%; it’s everybody. Men are being constricted, as are women, and wouldn’t it be nice if everyone could chose what they wanted to do.

*You also mentioned last night that, in some of your classes in college, you were the only female student. And obviously there are more women in the study of classics today than there have ever been before. How do you think that is changing or possibly improving the field?*

I think it’s terrific. I’m thrilled. In the last twenty years there has been a flood of women into the field of classics. Then it feeds on itself, because the more women who are visible in the field, the more women will be encouraged to pursue classics. My two mentors in college were both male, and I had a wonderful experience with them and they were incredibly supportive of me — but I know that that has not been the experience of every female classics student. So I am thrilled that there is
a lot more support. But I still think there is a ton of work to do. I don’t know if you have heard of the work of Donna Zuckerberg? She has an online classics journal called *Eidolon*, and she’s written about how the alt-right community has embraced classics as their own. There are a lot of things to say about that. But the point is the work is ongoing, and the more diverse perspectives we get in the field the better our understanding of the past will be.

*Yeah, for sure. So, more about you specifically: what do you think the “you” of ten years ago would be most surprised about what you’re doing now?*

I feel incredibly privileged that I am able to make art, and to talk about the things I’m passionate about. The fact that I am able to pull that off would definitely have shocked me ten years ago! Everyone has passions and everyone has a job, but those things don’t often get to be the same. I think I would feel a lot of gratitude that for me they have been.

*Most definitely. Now, what does the writing process look like for you?*

A lot of revising, especially early-on. Just trying things and throwing them away, and trying things and throwing them away. I like to write in a dim room, because I like to be able to picture the scene in front of me. I have a theater background, and so sometimes it feels like I’m directing the scene in front of me, and I need to see it. It’s a bit like getting into character, and being part of the scene myself. I cannot write in cafés at all because I can’t have distractions or music. I find that it’s very important for me to write a little bit every day. Even if I can’t put in a full writing day, just checking in with the story feels really important. I also love to write at night when everyone’s asleep.

*I know a lot of authors who love to wake up first thing in the morning, at like 4am —*

Yeah, no, I can’t do that. I do it on the other end.

*Yeah, that’s understandable! What do you think is the most important message in your books? When people finish reading, what do you want them to come away with?*
Unlike Horace, I am not a didactic poet, so there isn’t one message that I want to teach. But I want people to feel that they have lived in a fully three-dimensional world, that they have experienced this person’s perspective and their life. I want them to feel that they have been immersed in a rich and complex psychology. Both of my novels — and really all of my work — is about empathy, which I think is the great work of literature: to experience someone else’s life. That’s what we do when we read. We’re putting ourselves into someone else’s perspective and we’re imagining our way into their story. I think empathy is the great saving virtue of the human race.

*Beautiful point. This leads me to my final question: do you have any advice for aspiring writers who may be reading this one day?*

Don’t give up. One of the hardest things when you are starting out as a writer is that it’s really easy to feel that the bad draft is forever. But it’s just another part of the process. That bad draft will lead you to a better one, and a better one, and every time you sit down, you are advancing your understanding of the story, even if it’s by figuring out what you don’t want to do. All writers have bad days. All writers struggle. And I think the difference between people who go on to actually be writers and those who don’t is that, after a bad draft you go back the next day and try again. And that is really the main difference. You have to be willing to sit with that discomfort. And it is uncomfortable. So just know that all the writers that you admire are doing the same thing.
Regarding Ari, Who Works at a Laundromat in Central Florida
Andie Klarin

Who fishes quarters from lint traps
And slips them into the back pocket of her khakis
Where they roll against the seam until little holes form
And they slip through
Bumping up and down on the linoleum floor
with a sad clinking sound

Whose long hair sways against her four-foot frame
like a metronome sweeping up dried chunks of detergent
waiting in the stale air
Which stick to the tips of her split ends
Riding a stretch before slipping off

Who has worked here just outside a swamp
And remained immaculately clean
Among masses of bloody sheets and mud-stained shoes
Scrubbed down on all of everybody’s shit until it was better

Who isn’t scared of a backroom flood
Business suits soaked through till the fabric weighs down
To thick blue whale skin
Or wedding dresses held under an iron
Until they erupt into a fit of white ash

Who has stood here so long
the blood blisters on the back of her heels
Have burst and then been reborn
Red pus oozing into her socks
And eventually drying down
72 Orchids

Lilly Hinckley

I will never need 72 orchids
but that’s what I have
on the mantel in the living room
on the dining room table
on the bookshelves
on the window sills.
long and knobby, like skeleton fingers
reaching up
all of them waiting to die
by some forgetful hand
gifts from well-wishers
($16.99 at Target)
who believe
that temporary beauty
will make the disease die faster.
if they stayed long enough, they would know
72 orchids
cannot fight a war
Untitled

Jose Martinez
Florida Man Plans Wasp Extinction

Zoe Hanquier

“I got stung once and it hurt more than my divorce.” Tim won $76 million. He is funding the wasp genocide. Cans of wasp spray will be shipped to every American household (he’ll tackle Mexico next), and removed stingers can be traded in for a nickel at your local Walmart. Look for yellow-jacketed employees in the gardening section.

Scientists predict that the air will be 25% wasp spray in the next year if every family hunts for 15 minutes a day. But don’t worry. Face masks come free with each can. “No one deserves to be stung by a wasp. They are ruining the earth.” The birds and the bees population are also expected to drop. They are noisy little rascals anyways. We just need a new metaphor. Maybe something more natural: the smog cloud and the acid rain.
**Ellie Allen**
*To Break a Music Box*

I am a sophomore at Butler University. My major is Journalism and Strategic Communication. I am from Decatur, Illinois, and I write for the Butler Collegian as the assistant news editor. I am also a member of Tri Delta. I love reading, bookstores, and coffee.

**Lauren Bear**
*Jekyll and Hyde*
*Different Perspectives*
*Traveling into the Unknown*

Lauren Bear is a sophomore at Butler University, currently studying English Creative Writing and Human Communications.

**Miriam Berne**
*What I Do*
*Of Blessed Memory*

Miriam Berne is a sophomore at Butler University, majoring in Criminology, with a minor in English Creative Writing. She is from Evanston, Illinois and plans on returning to Chicago for law school after her undergrad education.

**Darby Brown**
*Out of the Wasteland*

Darby Brown is a junior at Butler University, majoring in English Creative Writing and Spanish, with a history minor. She loves writing both poetry and prose and dreams of making a living as an author. Darby is also interested in publishing and has been able to express this interest with her work in Manuscripts. In addition to writing, she enjoys the creative outlets of music and photography.
Brian Clow  
Stirring Movements

Brian Clow was born in Las Vegas, Nevada and transferred to Indianapolis to complete his undergraduate studies. He is currently working on a novel about finding purpose. In his free time, he enjoys contemplating objective truths and discussing with others the mechanisms by which one might discover those truths. Brian and one of his childhood friends co-host a podcast where they have such discussions: “The Metaphysical Podcast.”

Garrett Davis  
Walmart Underground Lipstick

Garrett Davis is a sophomore at Butler University studying Critical Communications and Media Studies. He grew up on a farm and has never been happier than when he is at Butler where he can hang out with all his friends. He is a man of many words, but mostly just says “Good Vibes Only”.

Madeline Eary  
Peanut Butter

Originally from Colorado, Madeline is a Freshman and Butler University. She is currently studying English on the Creative Writing Track with a minor in Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies.

Zoe Hanquier  
Florida Man Plans Wasp Extinction

Zoe is a second-year Creative Writing major and Business minor at IUPUI. Writing poetry is her passion, but she has recently been exploring creative nonfiction. Zoe had her poem “wandering eyes” published at IUPUI’s literary journal genesis last spring. She is studying to be an editor and writer.

Lilly Hinckley  
Manifest Destiny  
Paris  
Interview with Madeline Miller  
72 Orchids
Lilly Hinckley is a junior studying English literature and classical languages. Don’t ask her about her plans for the future, because she has none. She hails from the great state of Ohio and loves dogs, Kurt Vonnegut, and tea. If she were a rapper, her name would be Lil Lil. She can often be found sniffing library books or wandering the third floor of Jordan Hall like a ghost.

**Jordan Kalt**

[under] loam

Jordan Kalt is an Indianapolis editor and writer of prose and poetry currently finishing a degree in Creative Writing through Indiana University and has worked for the past year as a managing editor for genesis literary magazine. He enjoys writing from spaces between the sensual, spiritual, and psychological.

**Amanda Klarin**

A Collection of Letters I Have Not Received from My Former Love
Regarding Ari, Who Works at a Laundromat in Central Florida

Andie is a sophomore at Butler University who is studying creative writing with a particular interest in poetry.

**Josie Levin**

Interview with Meg Wolitzer
The Nose Inheritance

Josie Levin is an artist and writer living in Indianapolis. She likes reading large books and attempting to write her own. She has been in several publications including The 2River View, Slaughterhouse Magazine, and Carthexis Northwest Press. She is active and has a link to her website on her instagram: @bemusual

**Jose Martinez**

Untitled
Steven Miner
Fragment from a Weekday Morning

Steven is a Minnesotan who reads and writes in order to find those things which the open market can’t produce. In his free time he enjoys drinking things and looking at birds.

Erin Morrisey
choosing to ignore what i found underwater
Fragility
Up! to Sacred Grounds
I Can’t Ignore This

Erin Morrisey is a southern Illinois native and Indiana enthusiast. She majors in Middle-Secondary Education and English at Butler University and dedicates her spare time to making food, slowly sipping coffee, and being involved with the Butler Catholic Community.

Alexa Quezada
Ode to a Pianist’s Identity Crisis

Alexa Quezada is an avid reader, poet, editor, knitter, and student. She is currently a senior majoring in Literature at IUPUI, and she hopes to eventually go to grad school, publish a book of poetry, knit an entire sweater, and become an editor for a literary journal—not necessarily in that order.

Sarah Seyfried
Mannered Rejection

Sarah is a junior at IUPUI studying English with a concentration on Creative Writing and a minor in Literature. She is an editor for genesis Literature and Art magazine and a student web writer for IUPUI’s School of Liberal Arts. Her inspirations include (in no particular order) Kurt Vonnegut, Josh Gad in a wig, Kristen Wiig, people who put vegetables in their smoothies, and Trey Parker’s album of love ballads.

Anna Swenson
Snow at the Cemetery

Anna Swenson is a Junior at Butler University studying English Professional Writing.
A.M. VandenElzen
Hunger

A.M. VandenElzen is a Senior at Butler University. They thank their parents, TL, and RJ for making this work not only possible but urgent and necessary.

Sierra White
White Walls

Sierra is a junior Creative Writing major at Butler University. She enjoys being with friends and having time to create something new.

Zoe Wilkinson
23 Days

Zoe Wilkinson is a Sophomore at the University of Indianapolis. She was interested in creative writing from a young age, telling her Grandma stories before bed rather than being read to. Her ideas tend to be character driven, and she expresses them through writing and the visual arts.

Courtney Worley
undoing
tiger lilies

Courtney is a current Junior at Butler University, studying creative writing and neuroscience. She would like to credit Professor Lynch and EN218 for introducing her to the captivating world of poetry.
prose & poetry
interviews
artwork