Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine

2015

edited by Zelda Lockhart

Winner of the 2015 Women's Writing Award is *Tracy Roberson-Woolard* for her memoir excerpt, "Involuntary Choices."

Finalists are *Maya Corneille* & *Lisa Hosokawa Garber*

Judge for the 2015 Women's Writing Award was Angela Belcher Epps

Angela Belcher Epps holds a BA in English from Hofstra University and an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU. Her novella *Salt in the Sugar Bowl* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company) was released in 2013. Her essays and stories have appeared in several small literary magazines and in *Essence* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

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Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine is an on-line publication produced yearly by LaVenson Press Studios. The magazine highlights the works of women who have taken the Studios' workshops and those who have won the *Firefly Ridge Women's Writing Award*.

From the Editor: Over the past twelve years I have taught countless women to use writing as a mode of expressing their life experiences, as a mode of healing from those experiences, and as a mode of celebrating their gifts, yet much of their writing remained unfinished, because it remained unpublished. *Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine* is one of the many possible conduits for their art to reach you.

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Involuntary Choices

(excerpt from a memoir) by
Tracy Roberson-Woolard

My mother was on the phone and she was frantic. "Come to the hospital now!" She hesitated to catch her breath. "The ambulance is taking Markel to Nash General. He was laying in the middle of the road waiting for a car to run over him." Her breath was coming faster like she was running for her life.

"Okay, I'm coming. Is he alright? I'm coming!" I threw the phone on the bed. I was frozen in place. *He's finally done it.* I was firmly planted and old thickened roots sprouted from my feet and anchored me to the floor. The life force energy that would enable me to walk from my bedroom, out of the house and get in the car was painfully draining from my body. Markel was once again a newborn tumbling from my arms and hitting the brick porch the day I brought him home from the hospital. The ringing in my ears was his voice telling me not to worry about losing everything I owned in the flood. My heart was thumping, pumping sluggish blood through my veins as I felt every slash across his cut up mutilated arms. The energy was coursing downward flowing right underneath my skin like creepy crawly bugs taking Markel back and forth to doctor's appointments, therapy sessions and psychiatric hospitals. I wanted to throw up the eggs, sausage and toast I'd had for breakfast that morning. I swallowed over and over again the sour saliva that had collected in my mouth to try to keep it all on the inside. Nothing felt worse to me than feeling like I had to puke, but couldn't.

The sun coming through the blinds was warm on my face and I just wanted to bask in it a little while longer—to take in this last moment of warm peace before my whole world went to hell. Energy was pooling in my feet turning them to cinder blocks and I needed it not to because I needed to get going. I managed to put one foot in front of the other and began pacing around the room looking for socks and shoes. I was operating in quick sand. Every step was pulling me deeper into the tan carpet.

The longer I took to get ready the longer I could delay identifying his body on a cold metal slab table. I was cold and damp even as the summertime temperatures soared into the 90's. I really needed to wash my shoes. They smelled like month-old sweaty socks. I always forgot about washing them until I was in bed on Sunday nights and by then I was just too lazy to get up and toss them in the washing machine. The phone ringing snapped me back into reality as I pulled my ankle socks on and stuffed my feet in my black Reebok sneakers.

"They finally got him on the ambulance. Are you coming?" Mama was still frantic. "Are you coming?" She screamed into my ear.

"I'm leaving now." I gave in to the inevitable. I was about to lose the first person I had truly fallen in love with. It didn't matter how long it took me to get to the hospital. Whatever was going to happen was happening.

The hospital was a fifteen-minute drive from my home. I felt the car moving beneath me. Outside the window the world was barely moving. Crossing the bridge at I-95 the cars moved like turtles inching along the interstate. The red of their braking taillights asked the question, *Who else's child was dying today?* The pine trees in the woods stretched for the heavens as their roots sank into the swampy ditches lining both sides of the road. In the middle of the wetlands was a damn of sticks and just over the damn a small pond. Beavers had stacked sticks, branches, dead leaves and mounds of dirt into a wonderful architectural barricade that separated the pond from the swamp. Markel loved to fish and this was the sort of place he would beg me to drop him off to slip and slide through the mud and ugliness to make it to the serenity and bounty of the pond. I passed a church on the left and then one on the right. *God, please don't let this happen. Please don't take my baby away from me.* My arms were heavy on the steering

wheel and my eyes were playing tricks on me. I couldn't remember where I had been or where I was in conjunction with where I was trying to go. The fire station on the right wasn't where it was supposed to be and I would have bet money I'd already gone by it. The phone rang. It was Mama again. "Where are you?"

"I'm almost there." My heart was stuck in my throat and the pictures in my mind where suffocating me. I was almost there. Almost there to stand in the basement of the hospital caressing the cold arm of my son, looking into his half open eyes, planting a kiss on his slightly parted lips, whispering in his ear asking why.

"I'm almost there."

Another church whizzed by to my left. That made seven in all. Is this where it would all end? The hours of therapy; hospitals; music therapy; art therapy, medications—all to end at church. Funerals, baby blankets, burial clothes, first days of school, repasts, running trophies, art supplies, condolences all swirled in my head as I frantically arrived at the ER's receptionist desk.

"My son was brought here on the ambulance!" My breath was coming in little burst of air now and with every two or three words spoken I paused trying to swallow enough air to keep speaking, to keep living.

"His name?" the reception asked. She never looked up, her eyes fixed on the monitor in front of her. I inhaled deep while pushing the tears deeper inside. *Don't break down. Don't break down.*

"Anthony. Mar-kel. Davis." I said it with precision as if I was in a foreign country speaking to someone who didn't understand English, as if this might be the last time I spoke his name.

"They just brought him in. They're setting him up in a room. I'll call you up when you can come back," she said handing me a visitor nametag. I shuffled off to a clump of vacant seats in the waiting room. I was going to cry and I didn't want anyone to watch me. A man sitting in the corner started coughing, while a woman wearing pajama bottoms holding a crying baby was complaining about having to wait so long as she rattled off a long list of why the hospital was incompetent. I wondered if she knew you don't have to wait if your heart is hurting, you can't breathe or you try to kill yourself. I slid my body into one of the chairs. The chair was familiar. I'd been in this waiting room with Markel so many times before. When he was around two years old he was admitted to the hospital straight from the doctor's office.

"He's not getting enough air," his doctor said, then she was amazed when her nurses told her Markel was the child keeping all the noise running around playing in the waiting room. "He shouldn't be doing that," she said writing something in his chart. "He's getting so little oxygen he should be in your arms unable to move."

Markel was stooping in the corner stacking alphabet blocks and then stepping back he took a deep wheezy, crackling, whistling breath before getting a running start to kick them down. He shouldn't have been able to do that, but he could. Asthma couldn't put him down. After that whenever we'd come to the emergency room for asthma related problems we were quickly ushered to the back and into a room, much to the anger of people who'd been waiting for hours. You don't have to wait if you can't breathe or you want to die.

***

A steady stream of tears made their way down my checks, met at my chin, merged around my neck and continued their pitiful mournful journey down the front of my t-shirt into the space between my breasts. I didn't bother to wipe them away or stop their steady procession. My breathing eased off to a steady pace, my arms and legs were limp in their places no longer able to support standing up or sitting erect. I was exhausted and crumpled in my seat like a pile of laundry. I inhaled the musty antiseptic smell of the waiting room. All-day bodies and sanitizing spray stung my nose. Not knowing what was going on in the back and my general dislike of all things *hospitally* crept up the back of my neck and settled at the base of my skull to throb into the beginnings of a master headache. *What am I supposed to do now?*

"Tracy." I heard my mother's voice behind me.

"Is he alright?" I sniffed trying to stop my nose from running.

"I don't know. They wouldn't let me talk to him. They wouldn't even let me go back there, so I used my work badge to get in, but they refused to tell me anything. I might get in trouble. I don't know. I don't care." She was angry.

"What do you mean they wouldn't let you go back there?" My voice escalated with urgency. I wiped my eyes and rubbed my cheeks to absorb the tears into my skin. I stood up, pressing my clothes flat with my hands in an

effort to get myself together. I was going back there. I was his mother not some visitor. Plus he was a minor. What were they doing to him? I was just about to head to the receptionist's desk to make my demands when a lady in a white lab coat asked if I was Anthony's mom.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm with Behavioral Services," she said holding tight to her clipboard of papers.

"I want to see my son," I replied.

"You can't see him right now," she said.

"What do you mean, I can't see him?" Heat was rising from my stomach and my heartbeat was increasing. I knew I didn't just hear this lady tell me I couldn't see my own child.

"He doesn't want to see you or anybody else." She was holding on to her clipboard pressing it to her chest. She was dressed stylishly with a black pencil skirt touching just above her knees, sheer stockings and black high-heeled shoes. Her face wore no expression; her voice was dead and monotone, her green eyes cold. "We're going to release him. He's refusing treatment."

She continued, glancing at the clipboard then pressing it back to her chest enclosing the rest of her body with it. She didn't reach out to us in comfort, reassurance, or an effort to instill confidence in her capability. Her tone dripped with contempt at having to work with "these type of people." I suspected she didn't reach out to her patients either, physically or otherwise.

"What do you mean you're going to release him? What do you mean he is refusing treatment?" I was yelling now and the tears were coming in a torrential flow. Someone must have turned the heat up because I was on fire.

"He says there is nothing wrong. He's not thinking about hurting himself or others."

"HE WAS LYING IN THE ROAD!" I emphasized each word since she seemed to not understand the meaning of suicidal.

"Well, what do you think he was trying to do?" Mama asked, "If he wasn't trying to hurt himself?"

"According to him, you guys are the problem." She stared at us twisting her painted red lips. She looked like she was enjoying this.

"I don't know what to tell you." She shrugged her shoulders. "He's sixteen, so he can refuse treatment and leave the hospital if he wants to."

It was clear to me she had failed bedside manner and possibly majored in how to have a major attitude, not show empathy and plain how not to give a damn.

"You're kidding, right?" I asked. "You're supposed to help people, right? How is this helping? You do realize he was laying in the road waiting for a car to run over him? What kind of crap is this? He's sick. You know that right? He's mentally ill and you're going to go off what he's saying?" My mind was having a hard time keeping up with my lips. I wanted to snatch that clipboard from her chest and smack that smug look off her face.

"What's your name?" Mama snapped with one hand on her hip daring her to refuse to give it to her. "This is unacceptable. All of it, your attitude included. I work at this hospital and I know how you guys operate in Behavioral Services. This doesn't make any sense. I will be reporting this."

"So what you're telling me is he can leave this hospital against my wishes?" I started on the lady again.

"Yes."

"But if I don't feed him or clothe him or refuse to take him home with me, you can call Child Protective Services and I can get in trouble for not taking care of him?"

"Yes."

"Does this make sense to you? What is wrong with you people? And you're telling me there is nothing I can do?"

"Yes. The only way we will keep him is if you take Involuntary Commitment papers out on him. But you better hurry up before we release him."

I simply stared at her. She was about two seconds from me and my mother dragging her ass all over that waiting room.

"Are you going to do that?" Mama asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Where do I go for that?”

“To the magistrate’s office,” she replied.

***

The lady in the lab coat pivoted on her black high heels, threw her hair across her left shoulder and walked away after offering absolutely no help, no solutions, no nothing. I practically ran out of the ER’s waiting room. Out on the highway I pressed the accelerator down to the floor. I had to get to the magistrate’s office before the true crazy people released my son. The magistrate’s office was a ten-fifteen minute drive from the hospital, which gave me plenty of time to contemplate what I was doing. What was I doing? Markel would be angry. He hated the hospital. I was sure this was why he lied to the emergency room staff, telling them he wasn’t thinking about hurting himself.

He would hate me. I was convinced of this. Things were already not that great between us. I had sent him to live with his dad. I was forcing him to take medicine he didn’t want to take and as far as he was concerned I was the reason he had this disorder in the first place. What if he never forgave me? Would I be able to live with it? Looking into the blackness of the sky, I jumped ten years ahead of myself. It was Christmas and there was a knock on the door. It was Markel. I hadn’t seen him since the night I’d had him involuntarily committed. He’d run away and now he was standing on my doorstep with a woman and two pretty little kids.

I closed my eyes tight for a split second and shook my head trying to shake loose the thoughts that were going to keep me from doing what I knew needed to be done. I had to take out those papers. Markel’s life depended on it. I peered through the windshield and into the darkness of the night. The tears were back. *Pull it together, girl*. I wiped the tears away as I approached the exit ramp for the magistrate’s office.

Inside was cold and cramped. I folded my arms and held them against my chest. A bail bondsman was standing just inside the door talking to somebody about the terms and conditions of his bailing someone out. I knocked on the door with “Magistrate” printed on it and waited for someone to answer. Inside a man sat at a desk behind a glass window that reached from the counter to the ceiling.

“Come on in. How can I help you?” I could tell he was tired of asking that question and I wasn’t eager to talk to him either.

“I need to take out Involuntary Commitment papers on someone.” I stumbled over the words “involuntary commitment.” I didn’t want to say them.

“On who?” In his head he was going over the list of routine questions he needed to ask and this was the first one.

“My son,” I answered slightly above a whisper. *My son. Who was my son? The boy at the hospital refusing treatment, the kid lying in the road, the artistic one, the athlete?*

“What are the circumstances?” He’d never stopped what he was doing before I walked in. He continued typing and shuffling papers on his desk.

“He’s mentally ill,” I said. *Maybe my son was the baby in the picture in the photo album at home, the one where he was playing on the beach all those years ago or was he the person that blackened my eye and as a result was now living with his father.*

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” he said looking up from his papers. “What exactly is going on with him?” This is what I was afraid of—being more specific. I wondered who the glass was for. Was it to protect him from me or in order to maintain an appropriate distance between him and the people he served? I was feeling like a criminal. Everyone I’d turned to for help that night seemed to be saying I was wrong and Markel was right.

“You have to tell me more than he is mentally ill.”

“He has bipolar disorder. Earlier today he was found laying in the road waiting for a car to run over him. He’s at the emergency room now and he’s refusing treatment.” I paused to think about what I should say next. I needed this involuntary commitment and couldn’t risk screwing it up because according to someone else’s standards I couldn’t come up with a good enough reason to want him in the hospital.

“He’s not taking his medicines, acting erratic and irrational. I’m afraid he might hurt himself or somebody else. Because he’s sixteen, the hospital told me I can’t make him stay there and this was my only option.” I hoped I was being specific enough.

The magistrate took the paper he was working on out of the typewriter and put in new paper. He started typing all the while asking me the rest of his routine questions: my name, address, how I was related to the person to be committed. He snatched the paper from the typewriter and slid it through the slot in the glass for me to sign.

***

Whoever said God never gives you more than you can handle had lied. This was too much. How anyone could deal with something like this was beyond my understanding and if not for the counter attached to the glass partition, the one I was holding to tightly, I would have fallen to the floor. Tears were hot on my cheeks again. Until now I had been a strong woman who had herself together and didn't let anything stop me or stand in the way of the things I wanted. The divorce, the flood, raising two boys alone—I'd pretty much kicked butt in all those situations. But this was different. I was constantly finding myself knocked to the ground by this disorder, getting up and being knocked back down again. I picked up the black pen from the counter and twirled it between my fingers. After tonight things might never be the same between Markel and me.

I touched the pen to the paper, raised it up and then swooped it back down to make the T in my name. Whatever Markel had planned for this night wouldn't happen. I slid the form back to the man on the other side of the glass.

"I'll fax it to the hospital. Good luck to you." He took the paper back to his desk to finish it. And with the confirmation "ding" of a fax machine my son was a person who had to be involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Tracy Roberson-Woolard has had a nineteen-year career in Human Services and obtained her MA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from East Carolina University in 2012. She is the mother of three children and currently resides in Elm City, NC with her husband and son. Her article, "Days to Destroy, Years to Recover," was published in the *Rocky Mount Telegram* in 2009. "Involuntary Choices" is an excerpt from her memoir, *Be Committed: Holding On to Self in the Grips of Mental Illness*. It is the story of a mother struggling to raise her son diagnosed with bipolar disorder, while working to maintain her own mental wellbeing and self-identity.

A House Silence Built

(excerpt from a novel) by Maya Corneille

My obsession with making myself invisible crept over me like eroding soil, unnoticed until the slight shifting of dirt year after year exposed neglected roots and finally toppled a tree. My sister and I rode to our neighbor Leah's house nervously aware of our brown skin that seemed to make little girls' friendship an act of generosity, rather than an expectation. People who would be our friend became a special prize, an honor, especially so after a girl at school told me that her dad said she wasn't supposed to be friends with Black people but she was going to be my friend anyway. Leah's house had white vinyl siding stacked upwards like ours, but red shutters, where ours were blue. Since the houses on the street looked the same except shutter colors; it felt like I had been invited inside them, even when I hadn't.

"The little niggers are here," Leah's brother Anthony said. It felt like his words busted my lip and I needed someone to confirm what had happened. But since I was six and Deanna was only five, I made the decision for us—we wouldn't dare ask each other about this wound; the flies wouldn't be tipped off to swarm us if we didn't speak. We stood on the porch with the taste of sludge dripping into our mouths, our lips pinched together and eyes locked on the screen door.

"Sorry my brother's a jerk," Leah said as she walked out of the house. We pulled our bikes from the driveway and the three of us rode in silence. My thoughts bumped into each other, like the lines on my kneecaps. The brown of those lines was deeper, the way they were on the stump of the pine tree in our front yard. After lightning struck it, we cut the tree down and saw a deep, oaky brown that matched the color of Deanna's skin. The tan circles inside of the stump that we counted to tell how many years the tree had survived matched the color of mine; the two shades of lines repeated themselves, one making the other more visible. I pedaled so hard I felt my shirt ruffle in the wind behind me. I lifted my feet and let myself glide to the end of the street; it felt like a break from my life, how I imagined getting to ride my bike on a street of clouds would feel.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Leah's brother skulking across his yard. He was carrying a tennis racket and tennis balls that he clenched in his hands.

"Bet you're not faster than this tennis ball." He yanked on the clump of hair that hung down his back. He liked to brag about how long his rattail had grown, but to me it looked like a spiky bush of hair with crust from years before trapped in it.

"Bet I am." Deanna said.

"Don't do it, Deanna," I said.

Deanna flicked her wrist to shush me and mashed her feet on the petals; her purple bike tassels flapped in the wind. Anthony threw the balls one after each other, and then the last one, he smacked with his tennis racket. The rubber on the handlebars felt slick in my hands. When Deanna ducked the last ball, she threw her hands over her head to celebrate. I tried to stop myself but a high-pitched squeal leaked out, because it was our victory, for our family, for black girls.

Anthony grabbed his sister's bike. We scrambled for the tennis balls that had rolled into the curb. I could feel my desire to hit him in the tips of my fingers. I scraped the skin of my bottom lip with my teeth, envious of his faster bike. The ball that flew out of my hand sailed in a slow arc towards him. He ducked and then stretched back up in

his seat glaring at me with his hands dangling at his sides. While his head was turned toward me, Deanna slung her ball. The ball smacked his cheek.

"Ha ha!" she shouted. Her excitement poured onto me and it felt as though that day, just for that moment, I didn't need to be invisible.

Anthony jerked his head around to look at Deanna. His cheeks grew red splotches from his inability to uphold the unspoken order of the world— *black girls aren't supposed to beat you at anything, especially if they're younger than you*. "Shut up you burnt biscuit!" Anthony said.

I didn't know an insult for him and when I searched through the ones I knew—stupidhead, pizzaface—the hurt ballooned over my throat and trapped the words there.

I dreamt about running away, not far away, just to the park at the end of the street. Deanna and I could live there, bury tunnels under the ground with the moles, and crouch into the cave we would build to eat our meals. Deanna could fish from the creek that ran behind the park and I could climb trees to get fruit. If we could figure it out, it would be more fun than being invisible, because we could feel like we had defeated the cruelty of life by not having to be a part of it. But two Black girls climbing the trees and fishing at the lake alone would be noticed, reported, like the neighbor who called the cops last year when we hid in his yard during hide-and-seek. All of us kids from the block were hiding in his yard, but he only yelled at my mom, screaming, "Keep those juveniles off my yard." Afterwards Mom said we had to watch ourselves because you can get in trouble for things you don't even do. It was confusing because then she counted out eight M&Ms to make certain we both got the same amount. I wanted to ask her, *if the world wasn't fair, why did we have to be?* I didn't though because it seemed like she would have more answers that made us confused from the way her hand shook when she placed the M&Ms on our napkin.

The last time we snuck off the block; Mom was pacing in front of the house and didn't even try to stop Dad when he used my pink belt to whip our legs.

"You-never-make-your-mom-worry-Never," he shouted. The welts on my calves told me that lying and sneaking were not a problem as long as they didn't make Mom worry. After that day, we made sure Mom didn't worry by never leaving the block and by never speaking of these moments again to Mom or to each other, even though sometimes my silence felt like we had done something shameful.

***

The summer before sixth grade Mom sent us to summer enrichment camp as an excuse to send us to more school. When we got to our cabin, I chose the top bunk of the triple bunks so I could look out over the rest of the cabin. Deanna and I were the only Black girls in our cabin. I rearranged my cubby, putting the bug spray next to my deodorant and hair grease. I wished Mom would let us start shaving our legs and putting perms in our hair. When I got the chance to have other girls come up to my bunk, I didn't want them thinking I was a little girl who didn't know to straighten the hair on her head and take the hair off her legs.

Deanna convinced me to do canoeing for our activity. The lake counselor was also my fifth grade teacher and since we were at camp we got to call her by her first name, Bethany, but I couldn't help but to call her Ms. Bethany. She was my favorite because she didn't make us stick to a plan or say things like, "Safety first." And this day, she was letting us use the tire swing to swing over the lake.

On my turn, I squeezed my fingers around the rope so tight that the white flesh of my palm turned pink. On my third swing, I saw the lake water smacking itself against the shore and called to Ms. Bethany to stop the swing so I could get off. On Deanna's turn, she tilted her head back and lifted her feet in the air. The other kids gawked up at her as she swung over the lake. She released the rope and leaned forward. My stomach tightened. She pushed off the tire swing, extended her legs and screamed, "Cow-a-bunga dude!" My heart froze, waiting for her to hit the water, fearing that the lake was too shallow for a safe landing and also so deep it would send water rushing into her mouth to choke her. After she struck the water, she swam to the edge of the lake where she begged Ms. Bethany to take a turn.

By the time Ms. Bethany climbed onto the tire, I had to jockey for my position to watch. The smell of her perfumed body and the mud clumps that clung to her flip-flops reminded me that teachers and tire swings didn't fit together. Ms. Bethany threw her head back towards the clouds and her long black ponytail flowed behind her, but she took care not to let the tire swing extend over the water. When I thought about the kind of teacher I wanted to be when I grew up it was one like her, a teacher who could be a teacher and a friend.

When she climbed off the swing, everyone applauded. It was as though for a moment, that moment, we were all one together, a family. When she announced it was time to go back to our cabins, we groaned as if she had ended our moment of being children together. To make up for it, she said, "Let's all skip and swing our hair." I lifted my knee up and pushed through my toes to concentrate on doing my best skipping. I jerked my neck back and forth to swing my hair the way she had instructed.

Ms. Bethany's ponytail swung from left to right, looking weightlessly free. I imagined her combing her hair by whipping it back into a ponytail with three brush strokes and petting it like a prized horse's mane. When Mom cornrowed our hair, she treated our curls' defiance as her personal challenge to rip the unruliness from them. Just once I wanted to be able to run a comb through my hair and leave.

Ms. Bethany turned to look at the line of skipping girls and our swinging ponytails, "Michelle and Deanna's ponytails don't swing." She laughed and turned around amused by her discovery. The girls parroted her laughter and so did Deanna. Ms. Bethany had invited the class to laugh at us. I wanted to snatch the cornrows from my hair. I hadn't gotten it right. But this wasn't like science class, no amount of studying and trying harder could fix this. I heard Deanna's laughter over everyone else's. I couldn't tell if her desperation to fit in made her laugh loud or if she laughed louder as a way to mock them.

***

After lights out, I overheard the girl on the bunk below me telling another girl that she had French kissed a boy. I had no interest in French kissing boys because I couldn't figure out how you were supposed to make two tongues fit in one mouth. But I was convinced that the reason why no one had come up to my bunk was because I had nothing to whisper about.

When we heard the door to the counselor's room slam shut. Deanna said, "She's gone you guys. We're free." Deanna ripped out the rubber bands that held her Afro puffs into two separate puffs and spiked her hair over her head. Her feet made a scratching sound on the wood of the cabin as she did the "Running Man" and jerked her head up and down. Four girls climbed out of their bunks. The rest of us stayed on our bunks pretending that we had better things to do and not that we were nervous about what would happen if the counselor came back.

One of the girls reached her hand into Deanna's hair and said, "I wish my hair would do that." I sucked my teeth and went back to rearranging my cubby for cabin inspection. She wanted her hair to do that today and then tomorrow and every other day she'd want her hair back, so boys and other girls would want to touch it with interest and envy and not nervousness and caution like the fur of a guinea pig.

Another one of the girls said, "Hey Buckwheat! Turn around!"

I knew Mom would be upset if she could see this. She had heard Leah call us that before and yelled at Deanna and I. "You never let anyone call you that, you understand?" Mom had said. We replied yes even though after she told us it was the name of a character on *The Little Rascals Show* I still didn't understand why we should be offended.

Deanna smiled for the girl's disposable camera and put two fingers up by her face to make the peace sign as though the girl was her paparazzi. The whole scene reminded of this Michael Jackson concert we had watched on TV. Mom kept saying, "He's good but why does he have to grab his crotch so much?" I couldn't criticize him though because I could tell he was the world's Deanna, from the way he pushed away the jacket his bodyguards slung over his head as the cameras popped like fireworks, and chose attention over protection. But after, he slunk into his limo and watched people return to their lives until his neck strained, that was when he became me.

The next morning I walked out to the lake by myself. Me and the trees looked upside down in the reflection of the lake. The flesh of my cheeks pressed against my cheekbone. I looked lonely, empty. I thought about my failed attempts to make myself match my surroundings, like the times I put a white towel over my head and swung it to pretend it was Caroline's blonde hair. I had looked at myself in the mirror and sucked in my lip to make it look thinner, but remained disappointed by how little it changed how I looked. I figured if I could look like Caroline everyone would be as nice to me as they were to her before she even opened her mouth.

I stared at the circles on the lake that marked the spot a seagull had flown from. I squeezed my body together, fixed my eyes into space and then my reflection disappeared. The emptiness burned in my chest, but I felt grateful for realizing my gift of making myself invisible. I decided Deanna would ruin it all with her boldness and loud

laughing. That day, I felt Deanna and I splinter in separate directions, neither of us with the ability to call the other to just come back.

On the ride home from camp, I stared out the window. I was exhausted from all of the holding in who I was and figuring out the part of myself to expose that I could be absolutely certain people would like.

Dad said, "You're so quiet back there Michelle I had forgotten you were even here."

I know. I thought and celebrated in my head.

Maya Corneille is an Associate Professor of psychology at North Carolina A & T State University. She teaches courses in Black psychology and psychology of women and draws on her background in the psychological and sociological complexities of the lives of Black women to inform her literary work. She is currently working on a forthcoming novel: *A House Silence Built*.

Summer Triangle

(excerpt from a memoir)

by Lisa Hosokawa Garber

At 4 a.m. Daddy drove Mama and me up to the mountaintop to see what we could of the Milky Way. Mama complained about her knobby knees and the protruding bones on the balls of her feet that made walking in shoes painful. In the dark, I saw the whites of Daddy's eyes grow bigger with each sigh of exasperation. He was twelve years younger than her and happily pushing me up the mountain—would have been happier if Mama had shut up.

She sat away from us, closer to the path. Daddy set up the telescope and shushed Mama when she complained that she had to visit her mother's grave the next morning. I was busy gasping at the moon's scars. Their arguing was noise, static, the ubiquitous and inconsequential space dust zipping around the moon.

Later, under the plastic, glow-in-the-dark stars I'd arranged into summer constellations on my bedroom ceiling, I cringed from the wall next to my bed as it shuddered from Daddy's slamming of the wood and glass door downstairs. The glass murmured, shivering after the echo of two metal latches clapping into each other in a military handshake. His English thundered in the living room below me. My mother, rebelling against the unruly language of her workplace and marriage, lashed out in Japanese in the tone she used on my brother when he came by with his head bowed low to ask for money, or when she found weeks-old bags of vitamins she'd packed into my lunch bags hidden in my desk or sock drawer.

I leaned close to the wall like a safecracker, making sense of their muffled words from the vibrations of their native tongues. I wondered if this would be the night that my mother would wrest me from my bed, or if she was crying dramatically and the packing list was for show. My father stomped upstairs, and I yanked the twine hanging from the ceiling light, tucked my book under the mattress, and feigned sleep, daring to blink once he trapped himself in his office with one of his leather bound history books about the Civil or Pacific War.

Sniffling, I tugged at the twine again with the even, sure pressure of a child accustomed to living on her tiptoes, and reopened my father's copy of *A Brief History of Time*. I knew more about black holes than anyone in my grade. Daddy would be impressed to see how advanced my English was. We could speak without slamming doors and packing bags.

So, when they sidled against each other a few nights later in the city and pointed out the Big Dipper, touching cheeks and smiling—no one touches a Japanese woman's face, and my mother was forgetting to cover her big, crooked teeth for once—I felt a knot twist somewhere behind my sternum. I could hear the dust settling around me as I watched them hold hands like other parents did. Unnerved, I turned and walked faster to the car. They wondered aloud why I wasn't pointing out Vega, Deneb, and Altair; or my favorite star, the giant Arcturus; all the Greek and Arabic names of the lights overhead. The truth was that I couldn't stand the alien-ness of their harmony.

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Hiroshima was vast, and while I'd seen Mama in that sepia gray picture she kept tucked away near her dead mother's sewing kit—the picture in which she's about my age with a tear in her big, black eyes, standing in one bare foot on a desolate landscape as she holds her left shoe with the broken strap—its history of fire and ash was fiction to me.

I dreaded any drive with my mother. She braked with panic and her little Toyota was short two hubcaps. Inside, it smelled like my old candy bar wrappings left in the heat. I was sixteen and doing my best to hold my breath in the

backseat when Mama whispered that she was at her mother's breast when the Americans dropped the atomic bomb on our city.

She gawked when she found me skipping class a month later to sit in the backseat of her car and mourn the loss of our dog Charlie. It would have felt like a disservice to Charlie, who seemed so ready to die she wound her leash around any telephone pole we walked near until she gasped. She deserved mourning. The candy-wrapper strewn backseat of my mother's sedan was the only place I could think to do it.

"She was just a dog, an animal," my mother exclaimed.

I recoiled in fear of her cruel eyes bulging a little as she straightened and leaned on the car door. She shouted that she'd had to eat the likes of dogs to survive after the bombing.

"What do you know of love?" she seethed. "Stop your crying and grow up." She slammed the car door just short of the ankles I drew up and shut me out of her world. Hers was my world by right. I had been born in Hiroshima, same as she had.

That night, between paragraphs of an Arthurian novel, I peered behind my curtains looking for Charlie. There was only the moon glowing on her chain stretched before the empty doghouse and a wall of night. I grew short of breath and slept with the light on.

The next year, my mother house-trained a golden retriever my father brought home, the way he might have bought a new suit without considering the dry cleaning fees.

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En route to the Marine Corps base where Daddy worked and I went to school, his station wagon struggled over the cement bridge downriver to the five arches the US Army Air Force had spared sixty years earlier. Japanese children in uniforms raced by my window, their red and black rucksacks bouncing.

"We should have razed Mogadishu to the ground," he said, turning the radio knob to quiet Paul Harvey. "Baghdad, too. Probably all of Afghanistan. Saved us a whole lot of trouble."

I didn't have the sense to argue with him at seventeen. He was a former marine with office walls insulated with leather-bound books on war and history written by old Englishmen. They were too dry for my liking—not enough swords or ancient curses.

When I asked him about Hiroshima, he had the decency to pause. He explained that he thought we did the right thing because it was a military target, a port city shipping off steel and what precious little oil there was left to fanatics on suicide missions. He shrugged when I asked him about Mama—not an easy shrug, like a petulant teenager's in the principal's office, but I knew without him saying that she simply would have been, like the other hundred thousand civilians in the city, a casualty. It would have been terrible. But he would have done it.

The radio switched programs and a lance corporal's voice droned casualty numbers from Fallujah. My softball coach was there. I wondered if he would kill my infant mother if his superior ordered him to. I wondered if other marines would, and when I looked down, my nail polish was chipping against the denim jeans I'd clutched at the knees.

That day, I didn't recite the pledge of allegiance in Mr. Johnson's class. When he sent me a twitchy glare, I glared back because I hadn't been able to look into my father's eyes that morning when he'd executed my mother and reduced me to a shadow.

***

I first visited America with my father to compare college campuses in North Carolina, where there were enough military bases that he would surely find a job in time for my enrollment the following year. "Was it all you dreamed it would be?" my classmates jeered upon my return, and I thought of the *If there hadn't been a Pearl Harbor, there wouldn't have been a Hiroshima* bumper sticker I'd seen in the parking lot of a Shop 'N' Save and said nothing.

Within two weeks of living on a North Carolina campus, a man who had served in Afghanistan mistook my friendship for something else, and I didn't stop him. I began to think of the relationship in terms of years because I was afraid he would do to me what he and his men had done to the Afghan boys in the picture screensaver that lit up his night-dark room in crimson and desert hues—a boy no older than fifteen with spaghetti for legs, an unblinking look of surprise on his dirt-encrusted face, his shins and blood-soaked denim pant legs far down the stone steps of the courtyard he'd been hiding in. He explained that the boy would have shot the RPG at his squad of marines coming from around the corner, but he had spooked and the RPG, pointed to the ground, had ripped off his knees. Seeing the dead boy, my throat muscles stretched so I felt thin, like paper, as if one drop of blood pricked from my

skin might drench my fibers so I ripped at the middle, at the legs. In late spring, once safely through the Japanese customs line, I wrote the veteran an email and made plans to apply to Japanese universities.

But I flew back to North Carolina on the heels of summer, because I was more afraid of not being Japanese enough for Waseda International than I was of him. That's when I met Patrick, a boy mostly legs and neck with eyes as light as my father's, and pale hands that played the same complicated rhythms on the steering wheel as I had heard in the blue Toyota, and I joked that I resented him for cutting short my single life, but in truth I was relieved to have someone to call so I would never sit alone in the cafeteria, someone to sleep next to without a computer screen glowing in the dark, someone to hide behind when I saw the veteran at the grocery store. Three months later, Patrick drove me to Chapel Hill to meet his family. We made the trip every few weeks because his mother sent him long, elegiac emails in purple text.

I wanted so much for her to like me—this ageless golden girl with cheeks more sunken than Marilyn's but with the frivolity and stature of a black and white Hollywood temptress—that I poured her and her house maid tea like a little girl playing geisha. I didn't even cringe when she said it tasted better for my having poured it, more authentic. It didn't matter that it was Darjeeling or blueberry infused black tea. Everything was better served in devotion.

She warmed her long, bejeweled fingers against the Italian ceramic cup and asked me what tea I'd made for them last time.

"Kombucha," I said sweetly, knowing it would do no good to explain it wasn't the kombucha I'd known in Japan. I'd pulled a box of it from one of her many disorganized cabinets and wrinkled my nose at the uncited yogic blessing—"Be a smile. You are true happiness"—at the end of an unbleached tea sachet that smelled of organic Jasmine and white tea infusion. Japanese kombucha—tea of sea kelp—was drunk by people my mother's age to ward off the flu. Mama said there was another word entirely for fermented black tea, but that it wouldn't be interesting to Westerners.

"Say it again for me," she said in her southern accent, tucking her hair behind an ear.

I repeated the word—the Japanese way, even if the name for stuff she'd been drinking was of uncertain etymology. Her housekeeper giggled at the gentle consonants.

"You know I'm going to need you to repeat it again at some point. I'll never learn." She sipped her blueberry black tea and hummed with closed eyes so the mascara clumps became entangled. They caught and her eyelid twitched when her gaze popped open, so she tugged with long, manicured fingernails at her lashes as she laughed, "Thank god I've got you around. I have so much to learn." My skin itched and I felt small and stiff, like one of her new houseplants that hadn't quite grown into the potted soil. I resisted wilting beneath the touch of her warm hand when she moved on and raved about her new aerial yoga class. Her blueberry-sweet words were toxic, like my mother's jade plants the cats would chew on and throw up under the dining room table. But I kept smiling and giggling softly, eating up her poison because I'd never had a white woman's love.

Patrick's family paid for me to swim with dolphins and wonder at stingrays, and asked me to step outside of family pictures. Not all of them. Most of Patrick's pictures had my more easily tanned figure touching his at the shoulders. But for family pictures, Debbie handed me the digital Nikon, not because she didn't know how to use her Christmas gift, but because she wanted one with only her and the boys.

It was just as well: I didn't want to be in pictures in a bikini, anyway. It had been a year since a near-sighted doctor had told me that I wasn't bleeding because I was too thin. I'd walked back to campus after the appointment and broken down in Patrick's arms, admitting to him that sometimes I made myself throw up. It took therapy to figure out that I'd become sick because my mother had grown up on irradiated breast milk and black-rain-soaked carrots, so I deserved to be hungry. And I could never be white, but if I could be thin, if I could be pretty, I could have a place in America. Every picture of me in a bikini was a reminder of that, but it was better to be screamed at in Japanese than be paid and pushed out with a smile, I told Patrick. I wondered which version of the family photos they'd put in their new made-in-China, dolphin-themed picture frames that came with placeholder photos of blue-eyed children splashing in Caribbean waves.

***

I lived with Patrick in an apartment outside Chapel Hill. I made time to sit on the balcony—it was easier to breathe there than in the dim, carpeted space of our living room—to read books my father would ridicule. I pressed down on the paper, blurring my mother's handwriting in the margins with my sweat. Mama sent me books on the

war printed in Japanese, and I relied on her hiragana—the alphabet taught to Japanese children before they learned the legion of Chinese characters—to decipher the meanings of kanji I hadn't stayed in Japan long enough to learn.

When she translated a chapter on the unbearable burning of a peasant woman's empty stomach as she hid her children in vain from the Kempeitai only to lose each of them in the cockpits of planes only half-full of fuel, my mother's pencil did not quiver or sway. Her hand was resilient, and the paraphrased notes spanned from the first page to the last, one end of my shelf to the other. But I, huddled on a folding chair, set the book down after five pages and cried until I ached, and the aching stopped only when I slept. I roused when the mosquitoes came out but the stars yet hadn't, and curled into shapes like hiragana characters and cried some more.

Some months later, my father bought me a ticket to visit home, and despite a delay that had me spending eleven hours alone in Terminal G, there was a strange comfort in watching blinking lights rise and fall outside the darkened windows at 4a.m. These planes weren't made for killing.

In July, my father drove my mother and me two hours south to Yamaguchi to meet Furuta-san, a former flight instructor. He yelled at Mama in the small space of his Toyota when she sniped about the scenery on an unintentional detour, and I grew sick in the backseat—from the winding road, I said when they noticed my reddening eyes—and plugged in my earphones to drown out the static.

I spent most of that summer typing the handwritten or recorded notes of men like Furuta-san who had flown in the second wave at Pearl Harbor, a full hour after the first wave and through air thick with machine gun fire and flak. I'd taken on my new Toshiba voice recorder. Some men vetted me before they allowed me to hit record, to see if I was Japanese enough. When they heard that Mama was a *hibakusha*, an atomic bomb survivor, and that I considered Matsumuro-san a mentor and a friend, they softened. After fifteen minutes, their stories erupted from their lips in a deluge because their own families were too afraid or ashamed to speak of the war. One veteran asked me if I was one of those maligned liberals in America. I lied, and he said, "Good. They're the ones spreading lies about Nanking. Our men would never have done such horrible things, even to China." I swallowed, said nothing, and burned for days later regretting it.

Some days, Mama would coax me from my laptop and drive me to temples hidden in the mountains, where we'd have lunch or afternoon tea in restaurants with only three small tables and an outdoor bench. She insisted on buying me desserts and smiled sadly as I ate, as she had since I'd told her I was seeing a therapist for my anorexia.

When the drive was too long or her knees were too sore, my father drove me to museums and historical sites like Kure Harbor, where Yamato's titanic hull first touched the sea. He was happy, I think, that his daughter had taken on his interests. His joy began shifting into other things that summer.

We drove to Yamaguchi again, this time without my mother because she had grown weary of walking through memorials in short-sleeved shirts that showed her keloids. She was in no mood for a ferry ride to Otsushima, an island once used for launching manned torpedoes.

The sky was bright and cloudless—good weather for bombing cities.

"It was the only way to end the war," he said, snatching the yellow toll ticket slipped out like a tongue from an automated booth. He sped the car in a half-circle up a hill and closed the window. The rubber siding sucked in the glass and I cracked my jaw to clear my ears, wishing my father's tired argument—and that of almost everyone I'd met in America—could be dispelled as easily. I muttered that the strategic leaders of the war—Eisenhower, MacArthur, Nimitz, and Leahy—had disapproved of the use of the atomic bomb, and that I would have thought he'd have come across that in all his readings. He laughed that I should know better—the way the military knew better, the way Groves, Truman, and Tibbets knew better. When I accused him of marrying an atomic bomb victim, and *she* was at least partly why *he* should know better, his eyes grew wide behind the sky reflected on the glasses shifting down his proud nose. "You don't know what you're talking about," his voice boomed. I shuddered, like glass, and I hated myself more than I hated him for it.

Instead of apologizing, he changed the topic. "So, what, you think Japan should have won?"

I glared at the road ahead. "No. All people should be able to self-determinate. The Japanese Empire was wrong but so was America's. There shouldn't have been a war."

"So Nanking would have gone unpunished."

"You didn't go to war to save Asia from us." I'd never said it like that before. *You*. *Us*. "You went to war against racism with a segregated army."

He threatened to turn the car around, like I was ten, and he did once we were off the toll road—without warning, without slowing, the tires screaming as he slammed the wheel sideways and sped into the opposite lane. My head slammed into the window just hard enough to feel as though, for the first time, he'd struck me. In the brief moment of confusion, I dizzied at the vanilla stench of his car—where was the smell of hay and horse feed, like cut grass and herbal tea? I couldn't reconcile the father speeding forty kilometers over the speed limit with white knuckles and red cheeks with the one who promised we would ride horses together in America. I'd spent more time in this car, this unaging blue Toyota station wagon, than in all my college classrooms, and it meant nothing because I wasn't like him enough anymore.

I began to cry—not with my voice, but with a quivering breath I couldn't control and with tears that made a haze of downtown Yamaguchi's scenery.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. He reserved that voice for reprimanding his corporals who left the vault unlocked or got lost on the way to pick up visiting generals. "Stop crying!"

I wanted to stop crying. This wasn't the first time he'd told me to stop crying because I didn't know how to reconcile thoughts of my infant mother's hair falling out between my grandmother's fingers and my father's unshifting assertion that it was all for the greater good. Mama's parents had died of cancers. She had told me, one week before I left for university, that I, too, could go that way, and that I had to be careful because she was one of the first to feel that deadly heat, and I was one of the first to carry it in my bones.

Crying made me lose credibility and respect, he said. But I could think of nothing better to do to draw out the poison.

Lisa Hosokawa Garber was born in Hiroshima, Japan, to an atomic bomb victim and a United States Marine. She's currently working on a yet untitled full-length manuscript regarding her lifelong exploration of the role of race in war, as well as *Sarajevo*, a novella that follows the entangled lives of Londoners carrying firsthand and intergenerational trauma from war atrocities.

MACKRONS

by Faith S. Holsaert

MACKRONS

"... the lame or faulty are set by as Invalides which are here called Mackrons...."
-Dionne Brand

we are set aside
we live in downtown
single room
occupancy
we bring the war home

rage in the stairwells
rage behind the walls
rage over head

we fought in scorpion desert
in cold ass mountains
in tumbled suburban bedrooms

rage in our lady parts

we have scrappy dogs
we have partners
we have children

raging hearts

we are stripped
in our eight by ten boxes
stacked one upon the other

make no mistake

we have people

we have history

Faith S. Holsaert co-edited *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (University of Illinois). After decades in West Virginia, she lives in Durham, NC with her partner Vicki Smith, with whom she shares ten grandchildren. "Mackrons" is from her unpublished collection, *Firebird*. Faith is working on a memoir-ish mostly-prose manuscript during Zelda Lockhart's Full-Length Manuscript Workshop.

The Restless Leg Syndrome Blues

by Gail Jennings

Oh Lord, it's about a quarter to 8,
I feel the twitching coming and the pain that I hate
I know tonight will be another one without sleep
As I toss and turn, my legs'll burn, and I'll throw off the sheets
If I don't' get some shut eye, I'm never gonna beat
These Restless Leg Syndrome blues.

Some say, eat a little mustard, or drink a little wine
Take a little toke before you lose your mind,
Ain't nothing slowing down these legs of mine.
I got the Restless Leg Syndrome Blues.

You can rub 'em, hit 'em, come on and get 'em,
I got the Restless Leg Syndrome Blues

Just when I'd given up and thought there was no hope,
Somebody told me to get a bar of soap
They said stick it in the bed, right under your knee
It will stop the twitching for eternity.
It didn't help at all, so I threw it out the house
I cursed so bad that first I had to wash out my mouth!

You can rub 'em, hit 'em, come on and get 'em,
I got the Restless Leg Syndrome Blues

I asked about a remedy, I need some damn relief
They told me the Big O would knock it out and let me sleep
I said Come on Baby, I got a job for you.
He said, Oh, yeah, Sugar, it'll be gone when I'm through.
Just wrap your legs around me, and hold on tight -
I'll have you sleeping like a baby, all through the night.
Now you just take some calcium, and sip some tea,
I'll provide the heating pad and vitamin D!

I said, Rub 'em, hit 'em, come on and get 'em,
I got the Restless Leg Syndrome Blues
Oh yeah, I got the Restless Leg Syndrome Blues!

Gail Jennings writes and continues to hone her writing skills through workshops and classes such as those taught at LaVenson Press Studios. She retired from TV and film production in Hollywood, CA after nearly 20 years of working on such shows and specials as General Hospital, The American Music Awards, the NAACP Image Awards, the Academy Awards and many, many others. She is known for King's Pepper, her signature blend of herbs and spices based on a West African recipe, and Film at 11, the line of jewelry she makes from 35mm film.

A Haunting: Jessie's Girl

Sheila Smith McKoy

In Memory of Marni Pont O'Doherty, missing and presumed dead, September 11, 2001

I pass by daily, unnoticed
Making my rounds to the spaces and voids
Things I now associate with September
I summon the riffs of Rick Springfield songs
And play them at will
The quality of the sound, impeccable
Death is a much better technology than mp3

I haunt, simply put
Unsure of whether to certify my demise
Or continue with the presumption
I always look skyward where my office once loomed
I see the outline, empty and gapping,
A space amidst the clouds
Like me, the towers are ghosting

I wonder if I shall rise from these ashes
Disembodied, a featherless phoenix
Thinking of it, my dead heart beats
Childlike
A promise

Dr. Sheila Smith McKoy is the director of the Africana Studies Program at North Carolina State University. She holds a BA from NC State University, an MA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Ph.D. from Duke University. A poet, a literary critic, and a fiction writer, her work has appeared in publications such as the Schomburg series *African American Women Writers 1910–1940, Callaloo, Contours, Journal of Ethnic American Literature, Mythium, Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora*, *Research for African Literatures,* and *Valley Voices*.

Love at First Blush

by Meredith Newlin

When I was a junior in high school, a new salesperson in the perennials started working at my parents' garden center. I first saw her on a gray March afternoon. I saw her from a distance as I was walking through the parking lot to the front entrance. I remember that she was unloading a truck, and in my memory, she is a blur of khaki pants and ball cap.

My mom was sure to introduce us because she always wanted us to make new employees feel welcome.

"This is Catherine," Mom said to me, enfolding her arm around Catherine in a half hug. "She's a student at Guilford College."

Catherine had short, sandy-colored hair, olive skin, sky blue eyes, and a dimpled grin. I thought a certain level of insecurity and arrogance seemed to surround her. I instantly knew she was gay. I wanted to seem welcoming and affirming because a certain level of pity came over me. To belie my social awkwardness, I was extra cheerful and asked her what year she was at Guilford College. She seemed a little taken aback by the friendliness and responded, "Senior," a little too quickly. Her eyes seemed to be asking me to stop talking.

That afternoon, I was standing at the cash register as she opened the back door that led out to the perennials. She was carrying a large terracotta planter for a customer, with whom she was chatting as they made their way toward the register. As the customer talked, Catherine Guerrero's eyes bore into mine. I looked away, but she was still staring. In that initial moment, all I felt was flattered. She obviously didn't realize that I didn't "go that way." She obviously didn't realize that I wasn't like her.

The spring season at the garden center got busier and April breathed beginnings of green life in the trees. The mornings started out in a turtleneck and by the afternoon you'd be in short sleeves. On nice Saturdays, we'd open the French doors at the front of the store and the ones at the back of the store, so the breeze came in from all directions. Catherine was like that cool breeze, a breath of fresh air to everyone, but she always made my cheeks turn red when she was around. She charmed the customers and the staff. She'd be going to Africa and wore hiking boots and a tie-dye headband made out of a t-shirt. She always

talked to my sister and me like she cared what we had to say, but I was sure to be standoffish to hide my crush. Everyone knew she was a lesbian, and she seemed open about it; it seemed to make her all the more disarming.

There was a girl who always wore hiking boots and long brown hair in a ponytail who used to come visit Catherine on her lunch break, and they would go sit on the steps that led up to the adjacent strip mall. I would sometimes watch them from the window and wondered if she was Catherine's girlfriend. I wondered what it would be like to be the person close enough to Catherine to share that intimate moment, to be the person she wanted to share a meal with.

I think I fell in love with her hands at first: suntanned, and creamy coral fingernails with dirt underneath that somehow made them look clean. She would place them on the counter whenever she came in to help a customer check out. Confident, kind hands. I wanted them on me.

In March of that year, I'd been to an Indigo Girls concert for the first time. I'd liked their music. When I first heard the song "Romeo & Juliet," I felt guilty listening to it; it was a song of passion from a woman to another woman. It sounded delicious to my ears. After I met Catherine, their music became my valve to her, to her world of which I longed to be a part. Over and over again, I'd play "Ghost" in the car: "As I burn up in your presence/Now I know how it feels/to be weakened like Achilles with you always at my heels/And there's not enough room in this world for my pain/Signals cross and love gets lost and time past makes it plain/Of all my demon spirits I need you the most/I'm in love with your ghost."

In mid-May, my best friend Erin and I met for one of our regular suppers at Garden Cafe. Erin was a senior at Southwest High School, and I was a junior at Page.

I'd always told Erin every single secret since we were old enough to talk, which was how long we'd been friends. She knew me as well as my mom and sister knew me, maybe better. She was with me when I tried to sneak my first cigarette. We had a billion inside jokes. We talked about periods and poops, about sisters and mothers and what made *Cosmopolitan* magazine different from *Vogue*, when we had no business reading either one. We talked about our concrete plan — not dream — to go to New York City and become actresses on soap operas and then eventually make a big break into "something more substantial." We both loved to write and loved movies and loved Julia Roberts with a frenzy. We were able to recite every film she'd ever made, including the year, and every actor and actress with whom she'd ever co-starred.

Most of all, Erin and I talked to each other about boys. Any boy interest there ever was, every flicker, every chance of a flicker: we confided in one another about it. I was seventeen and had never had a boyfriend. There were no boys in my life. At all. But there was an assumption that one day there would be and that I was to be prepared for them.

With Erin, since we talked about everything, it seemed natural to talk nonstop about Catherine Guerrero. I found an excuse to keep bringing her name into the conversation. I mentioned how she was an archeology student at Guilford College and was going to Africa this summer and how she had really blue eyes and always wore cutoff shorts and a tie-dye headband made out of a T-shirt.

This time, Erin didn't let me continue indulging in my endless explanations and descriptions.

"You're in love with her, aren't you."

She glared at me.

I stopped talking and my mouth hung halfway open. I looked to the left and then to the right, and then up and around.

Erin continued staring at me until I answered.

"Um, NO," I said, wincing with an upturned upper lip. It was an immature response. I felt like a little kid again. I felt like we were ten. I could feel my cheeks turn red. I felt a deep sense of shame.

If Erin, my best friend in the whole world, the one I told every single solitary secret to in my entire life, wasn't going to accept this about me, then certainly nobody else would.

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I wonder how many of us know when we meet the person we're going to marry. Back then, such a "knowing" would have never been in my realm of possibility. What would Catherine have said to a person who predicted the future, that she'd one day raise a baby with brown eyes like mine named Eleanor Lucile? Would she have liked the name? I would have believed so, looking at her. I would have thought, yes, she is strong and will definitely find happiness someday with someone. I did not yet know that the person who would love her more than anyone else she'd ever known would be me.

Meredith Newlin is an English teacher at Orange High School in North Carolina, and a graduate of LaVenson Press Studios' Women's Writing Intensive. Her writing has appeared in in-flight airline magazines such as *Delta Sky*, and *United Hemispheres*. She is a native of NC, and a UNC Asheville graduate. She is wife to Catherine, mother to their daughter Lola, and she loves cooking. She is currently working on a book of helpful advise to first-year teachers, titled, *Captured Fireflies*.

Different

by Carrie Reuben

I carried my hall pass in both hands as I moved through the empty halls and into the Woodrow Wilson Jr. High School admin office, glancing around for my mother, but she was late as usual. It had been about five years since my Dad left us, left me, and I had worked very hard to be a good girl, do my homework, join clubs, go to dance classes, try out for plays, practice my violin. While I tried to fit in and be normal, my mother clung to my ankles, keeping me tethered to our broken home, which she now filled with meaningless things: bags upon bags of old clothes, apple boxes full of yard sale rejects, half-naked dolls, and the occasional piece of yellow depression glass.

I wished I had known Mom as she was in the framed picture on my Grandmother's dresser, that beautiful brunette standing in front of a pretty, new, red convertible along the Pacific Coast Highway. She looked happy and free. Now she was morbidly overweight, her hair thinned so her scalp showed, and her pretty blue eyes showing defeat.

Mom arrived and I gladly rose from the uncomfortable, drab leather chair placed under the window in a way that allowed a perfect view for every passerby in the hallway. The academic advisor invited us into her office, ushering us into a sparse but neat room with diplomas framed and hung on the gray walls, assuring us that she knew what she was doing. Mom and I both wriggled in our seats awaiting whatever bad news was about to land on us and pile up on the other unfortunate events of the past five years like stacked stones balancing on our heads.

She asked if we knew why we were there. We didn't. All we knew was that there was some problem with a standardized test our class had taken. Seeing the worried looks on our faces, the advisor quickly told us that nothing was wrong. In fact she was very excited to pull out a manila folder with my name neatly printed on the tab and containing a graph with a hatch mark on the chart.

“This is your daughter,” she proudly offered. “Now let’s talk about sending her to a school in Denver or one of the bigger cities to help her take advantage of her IQ.” Mom and I were equally panicked, she because she needed me at home and had no money for the mortgage let alone some private boarding school. My mother heard the potential of another abandonment.

For me, I had invested way too much towards pretending normal. I heard that I was different, and would have to work even harder to fit in, a young woman with potential afraid to stand out.

Carrie Reuben is a social entrepreneur, author, speaker, activist and producer focused on raising awareness of the connection between health and the environment with a particular focus on empowering women, girls and young families. Carrie holds a BS from Colorado State University and an MBA from UNC. In addition, Carrie is past president of the National Association of Women Business Owners and a certified Climate Leader and presenter as part of the Climate Leadership Corps. She currently lives in Cary, North Carolina with her husband and two sons.

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The Loom

by Aya Shabu

Wal-mart sells them now, the same kit I used to weave potholders for my Dad when I was little. I threw the thin cardboard box with the orange clearance sticker into the cart. I told myself, my daughter could have fun doing this; but it was really for the little girl in me.

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Back then, mine was a bright red plastic kiddie loom. It came with a red plastic hook and dozens of colorful nylon bands. I found peace in the repetition of stretching colored bands from one side of the loom to the other. Nimble fingers lifted the bands one by one threading under over and hooking them onto its plastic teeth, spacey like a middle-schooler with braces. I was eight or nine, and my mother bought me the loom.

There were times when I would churn out two or three potholders on a Saturday and then there were months that I didn't even look at the loom. I always did this work alone. It was a time when I would fix things, miss my Dad and mend my feelings of unwant, imagine bringing Dad home, and tying our family back together. In an hour or less I would weave the bumpy squares and give them to my Dad to hang in his bachelor's kitchen against the polished brick.

Neither Mom nor I was aware of the witchcraft the potholders possessed, but the curse ate us all. Mom encouraged the potholders and so I put all my hope in Dad's hands. He would turn the potholder over and over and notice me in it, smile and thank me.

Before going off to Christian school in the mornings, my mother, brother and I would hold hands in a circle and pray for situations and people, and things. A teacher tried to convince us students that God always answers prayer. It was a rare outburst, but my experience exploded in disbelief. "Well" I told her, "we've been praying for a very long time and my Dad still didn't come back."

Ms. Mesa's severe blush and sickening sweet floral perfume wilted in the silence. After that, there were times when we prayed for Dad to come home and long stretches when we didn't mention him at all. And then, I stopped praying and weaving. In truth, we were praying for much more than his physical return, but for Dad to heal from whatever illness made him wander. Maybe that's why it took so long.

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As kids we were not supposed to feel responsible for their separation. That is bullshit. I know we mattered. We were all in this together, the loving, the fighting, all of it. Mom went to grad school and my brother and I sat many nights at the cold metal kitchen table alone. Mom made casseroles by the dozen and Grandma would send over a pot of stew beans seasoned with salt pork. Eating dinner on our own, we pretended we were "po' " and Grandma was "Ms. Jenkins" (a Cicely-Tyson looking figure) who fed us because we had "no ma" and "no pa". Our self-pity was real.

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One time Dad took us on a road trip to the South Shore. We bought expensive food like cherries and cream cheese. While Dad was driving Sean and I put cottage cheese on our bagels and got so sick our stomachs hurt.

Dad had white girlfriends, but I only ever saw them once. *Where does Dad go when he leaves people?* He moved to 808 high-rise apartments near the river when he left 113 Columbia St. where I used to live. At the top of our long street there was a fire station and the red trucks screamed all the time and we could see them lashing out of a giant brick mouth. *Did Grandma hear all the sounds that we did?* She seemed to know everything. She lived around the corner so we could walk to her house even by ourselves when I was like seven or eight.

We spent most of our time between our two houses. Grandma always made this face and asked, "Have you heard from your father?" Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. I didn't like her accusation. Like it was my fault, like I should know how to make him come back. Like he left because of me.

I used to think I could bring him home. The potholders I made for him were pretty but not pretty enough or useful enough. Whatever I did to make him leave maybe I could undo. I greeted every one of Dad's visits with a bouquet of hope, forgetful that sometimes he stood me up. I learned to enthusiastically wave hi and bye at the same time whenever I saw my Dad. Insecure and without a child's moodiness-privilege I learned to be ever ready to forgive and be loved. Mom resented this. She thought I was simple and weak, and allowed people to take advantage of me.

When my parents got back together I protected myself differently. Dad was more like a stranger, he didn't belong. I don't know how he came to live with us again. Likely something my mother said or did, but it didn't have anything to do with me. Dad didn't seem that interested in Sean and I really. He was dark and serious. I wish he had stayed away. Instead of going home to him afterschool, l I went straight to Grandma's. One day she asked me why I was coming to her when my father was home. By this time I was an acid-tongued middle-schooler and retorted in a surprisingly natural Bajan accent. "My fadda done lef once already."

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At ninety-three Grandma has dementia; she's too busy in a loop of asking and forgetting about other things to pry with any malice or sincerity. Part of me still wants to bring Dad home. But now there's Dad *and* Ali (his new spouse), and now the one year-old twins Mark and Michael. I too am married now and have a son Delacey, and Funmi is my daughter. She remembers most things. Like going to the waterfalls on our trip to Liberia when she was almost two, lyrics to pop songs on the radio that her Daddy doesn't allow, the name of every girl in her dance class, and almost all the wild herbs growing in our front yard. I bet I remembered lots of things then too, but now I have to remember thirty-six years of memories after my Dad left, and I bet my mom helped me forget.

When I was born, I just know I was the most important person to my Dad for a while anyway. He took such good care of me. He even carried me to his classes at Boston State College in his backpack.

I still know his hands well. His fingers are big and smooth like the shell of a walnut. Even when I'm an old woman and I'm dying I will still know my Dad's fingers if he's touching me.

Aya Shabu is a professional dancer, choreographer, and teaching artist living in Durham, NC. An alum of the African American Dance Ensemble, Aya is currently the Managing Director and a performing artist with The Magic of African Rhythm. A 2012-13 Emerging Artist Grant recipient, Aya has choreographed for theatrical productions *The Parchman Hour*, *I Love My Hair* and *The Brothers Size*. Aya is also the creator of *If These Walls Could Talk,* a walking tour and performance of the historically black Hayti neighborhood and its stories.

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