



2014

# THE SCARAB

OKLAHOMA CITY UNIVERSITY

2014

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SIGMA TAU DELTA



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Editor's Note:

This year, *The Scarab* underwent a transition. One of the most exciting changes is the new Outstanding Faculty Selection Award. OCU faculty members awarded one outstanding piece for each category. The winners are the first piece in each section.

*The Scarab 2014* was completely student run. We had a wealth of support from our student editors, faculty panels and advisors. These people made *The Scarab* possible, and we are deeply appreciative for all the time, effort, advice, and hard work we were generously offered.

The works that follow are daring, warm, scary, funny, sexy, beautiful, witty and refreshing. They encapsulate the vast range of voices, emotions and genres that make Oklahoma City University truly diverse. We hope you enjoy reading this publication as much as we have enjoyed working on it.

-Theresa and Jason  
*Editors-in Chief*

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# FICTION —————

# Brunch Thesis

FACULTY SELECTION  
*OUTSTANDING FICTION*

By Lauren Lynn Matheny

*Junior/BFA Acting, English Minor/Middleton, Wisconsin*

The clinking of the bowl wakes me up: the crack that shatters the still Sunday air like a cheap fork dragging across a plate, and the muttered curses that follow. The creaking resistance of the fridge weaves its way beneath the door, and I can picture the jars of pickles and assorted take out boxes being thrust wearily aside as he searches through the culinary dregs of a long work week.

Brunch was mentioned last night, over the final beers. Mimosas beckoned sunnily, and piles of golden French toast with succulent summer berries were dangled under my nose like a carrot, the promise of a beautiful morning to come. He has learned the lingua franca of our urban campus: softly whisper “brunch,” and you’ll have hoards of 20-something hipsters crashing down upon your head, uploading lattes to their Instagram as they ask about your most elusive haunts. As for me, I instinctively feel the urge to blurt out the unspeakable truth that I will always prefer the mediocre pancakes of my mother’s kitchen, dappled with Aunt Jemima instead of fair-trade out sourced maple syrup from Quebec. But that is not something you blurt out at the fanciest dive bar on College Row. That is for the third date, when you’ve both had enough of each other’s company to know that stale coffee and possibly some toast can get you through the day as well as sriracha eggs benedict.

That is why, I think, I find my head buzzing in a mixture of hangover and delight this morning. Well, not quite. Delight is what I might call this feeling of bees humming in my cranium, if I were not a sadder but wiser jaded senior class soul. “Perhaps,” the bees buzz drunkenly, “this is the guy who means it when he says, ‘I’m not like all the rest?’ (But men do not even do you the favor of announcing that trite phrase, these days. Trite has become trite; what is the single girl to do without an episode of *Sex and the City* to guide her?)

I stretch and yawn, arching my arms over my head, secretly loving the feel of his t-shirt that I stole off a dresser top last night. It’s soft from too many washings, the cotton slippery and worn. Down by the hem I can snag my thumb through an ever-expanding hole. It gives me comfort, somehow. I think I feel closer to him, as though I can absorb the moments that he’s had in this shirt through my skin. Smiling to myself, I envision booze-soaked nights with his British Literature 401: Milton’s Ideal study group, or trips home to Rhode Island (that is what he said during the ‘where are you from?’ portion of the evening, isn’t it?) where he spent the weekend cuddling with the dog.

I swing my feet out of the bed and pad slowly over across the wood floor. It’s the kind of old campus house that could betray you with a creak at any step, so I move slowly, testing my weight as I go. Hearing him putter around the kitchen is sweet in a way that I haven’t felt in a long time. My roommates and I are used to swapping stories of sneaking out back doors in stolen coats, or crunching down the sidewalk in last night’s costume party leavings, with random phone numbers scribbled across our palms.

This morning is new. I think to myself that I won’t tell the roommates this one. I’ll keep it locked up safe in my memory as I sit at home with my too-stale cereal and expired skim milk. It’s a story too special to be wasted over a few giggles at Starbucks.

Sneaking over the bedroom threshold, I pause to pick up my coat, flung drunkenly to the floor in last night’s fumbling. In

passing, I catch sight of the bookshelves lining the wall...and I realize that I am doomed.

Eyes have never been the window to the soul in my world. For me, it's the cracked spines that war for space along windowsills or end tables. Seeing the new *Twilight* in prominence will damage my respect, no matter how much I repeat the (somewhat ironic) mantra of not-judging-by-its-cover. Likewise, sneaking a glimpse of a dog-eared copy of Dumas or Dickens creeping out of a bag and I'm suddenly intrigued. Class assignment? A bit of light reading? Give me the book title and I'll invent the personality.

His bookshelves are just the way I like them. Messy, with a little bit of everything smattered here and there, the ephemera of a life well-read. *Game of Thrones* jostles for position with Thackeray, and a complete Shakespeare bookends one side of a shelf, with several volumes of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* supporting the love-wounded paperbacks on the other. A coffee table book on architecture of the Pacific Northwest sits next to a barely touched economics textbook. *Be still my heart*, I think, and then have to stifle a laugh. Because I am not that girl. Shrugging, I pull on my coat, before I catch sight of the most offensive thing I have ever seen.

It's on the bottom shelf, stuck underneath some used notebooks and coffee-speckled binders. I wouldn't have recognized it, if my dad hadn't given me the exact same copy for my fifteenth birthday. The engraved flowers and blue leather are a little harder to distinguish underneath the shrink-wrap that clings to the cover like lichen, but I'd know the sight anywhere. When I have it in my hands, after slipping like a spirit across the scratched wood floor, my suspicions are confirmed: not by sight, but by weight. The volume has the same space-filling heft that has belabored all of my bookshelves since I've owned a copy. Feeling a rising curdle of dread deep in my stomach, I place the book back gently. My coat slips to the floor, and, without volition, I'm headed back to the bed before I know where my feet are taking me.

He finds me there a few minutes later. I'm momentarily distracted by the sight of his bedraggled brown curls, swirling in whorls around his ears and across his head like a disturbed wheat field. I do not appreciate nature's cunning in giving him that sweet head of hair to weaken my defenses. He wears red and green plaid boxer shorts and a grey zip up hoodie, and I give a moment of praise that his dishabille is equal to my own: I would not want to go to war in only a T-shirt if my opponent is dressed for the day.

"So. Do you just hate Austen, or have you never read her?" I ask, my opening volley slicing through the chilly air.

"Um...I'm sorry?" he asks, his labrador eyes widening in surprise. I can imagine that he expected this encounter to go differently. Some snuggling, maybe. A couple quick kisses. A shower, even, if he was lucky. But instead he's found me sitting up in bed with my arms over my chest and bloodlust in my eyes.

"Jane. Austen. I couldn't help but notice." His eyes register a modicum of understanding, but by the way he leans on the wall, I can tell he is still out of his depth here. I take a deep breath and try to make myself a little more understanding of his confusion. He did, after all, imbibe more than I last night. "It's interesting. You've got an eclectic collection out there. But the Austen's untouched. I was just wondering why."

He actually smiles at this. The bastard.

"Wow. You have the chance to riffle through my possessions unobserved, and you choose to go through my literature collection? Usually they choose the desk drawers or my iPhone or something," he chuckles (actually chuckles; I don't think I've heard anyone do that before) and relaxes his shoulders onto the wall, his spine cracking audibly. I wince.

"Wow to you. I have so many issues with that statement I can't even begin."

"Let's start at the very beginning, a very good something place," he sings off-key. Incorrectly quoting *The Sound of Music* might have charmed me in other circumstances, so I'm almost regretful about haranguing him now.

Almost.

“First of all, that only leads me to assume you’ve had many girls in this same...situation. Not exactly what I want to hear, but seriously, let’s not delve deeper than we have to, okay? Secondly, I was not ‘riffing.’ I don’t make the habit of going through my hook ups’ personal items. Or anyone’s, for that matter. I just observed. I do that. You know. Observe things.”

I realize halfway through that I sound a bit crazier than I meant to. But at this point, it’s all or nothing. I begin to regret this decision. At this point I could have been halfway home, possibly sipping a latte I spent my last four dollar bills on and smiling languidly and secretly about the handsome biology major that I spent one Naragansett-soaked night with and promptly forgot to call back again. Even my stale Cheerios would be better than his current bemused expression. He runs a hand through his hair, and his curls dissolve further into madness.

“I do, in fact, see your point. You were not so much snooping as making an insightful scientific theory based on careful observation. I might be making an assumption here, but I would assume it goes something like this: unopened Austen shoved under shelves full of great male authors equals chauvinistic, typical college frat-boy mentality. Previous experience with night at bar and one night stand would seem to provide evidence towards this conclusion. Am I moving along the right track here? Batting in the ballpark?” he asks, as he begins to pad across the floor to sit on the corner of the bed.

The movement surprises me more than the clever commentary. It’s what I liked about him last night, even when I was hopped up on cheap beer and the smell of a million Marlboros: the way these high-flung phrases flow past his lips like smoke rings, dissolving beautifully into the air almost before I can grasp their meaning. I have to struggle even harder this morning to put verb to noun and noun to adjective, so I remain silent for a few moments as he begins to fuss with the fraying edges of the blanket that has somehow remained, clinging, to the last vestiges of

the bed. I sit up a little straighter, and delicately move my left foot away from the encroaching proximity of his hand.

“I suppose, in simplified terms, that might have been what I was implying,” is the most dignified retort that I can summon at this moment.

I almost don't catch his smile as it flickers its way onto the fibers that are slipping between his fingers. Little prickles of annoyance run down the back of my neck, matching pinpricks of color that are blooming on my cheeks. Who does this boy think he is? Actually, that's probably where all of this stems from. He's a clean, white, privileged, no-nonsense WASPy king-of-the-suburbs; my parent's dream boyfriend and, therefore, the encapsulation of what I'm supposed to be avoiding while I pursue my liberal arts, far-from-the-maddening crowd ideals.

The words leap from my mouth without volition. “Actually, I didn't really need you to come in here and state the obvious. You're not exactly a Masonic secret, you know. Pretty easy to read over a few beers, a quick walk home, and a couple of hours in bed.”

As soon as the words slip out of my mouth, I want to drag them back in. Another result of my perfect ability to say exactly the wrong thing at the wrong moment. Or, maybe the right thing, in this case, where victory was my aim. Where a sly smile was slipping across cheeks before, little frown lines are back in residence, and he's set down the blanket. He's running a hand through his hair again, and probably wondering what in the hell motivated him to bring this crazy woman back to his apartment in the first place. The way he's sitting obscures his face, and I decide I will count to ten before I move to get out of bed and grab my coat and try to leave this scene with as much dignity as I can muster. I've reached five when I start hearing him laugh.

It's exactly the kind of laugh you would expect from this boy. It's loud and different, more drawn out; as if it's coming from inside of his bones and his belly, deeply ingrained as breathing. Somehow, that laugh turns the dreary, blustery day outside into

English moors in the springtime, and the whole world is country dances and hurried courtship and beau. And that Austenian thought makes me smile, too, despite myself. He turns around, his eyes a little more sparkling, and I can smell the fresh roasting coffee in the kitchen. My stomach growls and that makes us dissolve into laughter again.

“Despite the fact that you hate me, and I doubt there is anything I can do to change your rock solid and cleverly constructed opinion, I would like to state that: one, that is not, in fact, my copy of Jane Austen, but my roommate’s, upon who’s literary attributes I can’t comment except to say his Netflix queue is full of Family Guy and American Dad. And two--and I state this with the full comprehension that you will soon be walking out that door and thanking God that you did not sign up for this-- but I have not read Austen. Some part of my education has been extremely lacking, I know. I can only hope that you will leave my house without castigating me too harshly. I am, remember, a poor Biology major. If you would like to hear my concise and well developed opinion on any of the major science fiction authors of the past hundred years, or possibly a romantic history of my childhood obsession with the Hardy Boys and Jack London, than I promise I can satisfy you on my literary credentials,” he says, and his crooked grin is back.

I think back on last night, and rapid-fire conversation points spark through my mind like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. I remember us laughing about the hype over the newly released chai tea lattes in the cafeteria. I remember grabbing his hand as he related that mac and cheese was also the staple of his diet. We both shared memories of horrific family vacations spent gloomily camping in the Adirondacks, of catching and releasing fish that we were sure went to watery graves. I remembered how I’d been impressed with his intelligence and his wit and his humor and, yes, the glimpse of smooth stomach I’d seen when he’d stretched up his arms and raised his sweater.

Perhaps I was going against the grain of institutionalized literary elitism. Perhaps I was reversing the work of four years of college courses and training that stated to be a “real” person, you had to have at least sampled the greatest points of *Pride and Prejudice*. For a certainty, I was going against my modis operandi of leaving the scene of the crime before my involvement got too deep. Old me would have laughed a little more, grabbed my coat, and declined the proffered burnt toast and scalding coffee combo, preferring to write an amusing little anecdote in my journal later before I started my homework.

But new me smiled, laughed, and took the ink-stained hand that he held out like a peace offering across his grey duvet. New me followed him to the kitchen, and felt the simplest form of pleasure flush across my skin as she took in the table, set for breakfast and laboring under the weight of a plate of inexpertly cooked French toast and bacon. New me let her hand linger a moment too long under his as we participated in the age-old ritual of handing over a coffee mug, careful not to spill a precious drop. And she delighted in the sound of his fork scraping awkwardly across his plate as he got too distracted from looking into my eyes to pay attention to his brunch.

# The Shirt

By Audrey Harris

*Freshman/Biology/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

I walk into the red brick split-level house, bracing my lungs for the invasion of smoky air. Even though I always ready myself, it's never enough to prepare me for the influx of the cancer-scented atmosphere that pervades the house, settling over everything. Like an old friend, it greets me with open arms. It creates sallow circles under my eyes that make me look years older than I am. The odor gently circles and grows roots in my hair, my clothes, my skin; it steps in my mind. For the next five years, I will catch whispers of it at random. I will come to believe it resides in my veins.

I dully trod up the steps to the living room, where a hospital bed sits adjacent to two olive green couches against the wall. A nebulizer machine lies under the bed, along with a blood pressure monitor and a pair of beat up house shoes. A woman with a hugely rotund belly is sprawled on the couch, mindlessly munching on Pringles straight from the can. She looks up at me with empty eyes, and I can tell she's taken all her Xanax again. Her name is Logan, and she's my stepmother. She has cancers of her own: greed and addiction. She lives to seek attention; I can't watch her destroy herself any longer. I turn toward the bed.

"Hi, daddy," I say to the gaunt man who lies practically unnoticed in the folds of cheap white sheets. His skin is translucent; I could reach out and trace the vessels and capillaries right back to the original tumor that resides in his lungs. He weighs fifteen pounds less than I do, and he's at least a foot and a

half taller than me. Ernest, my father, grunts his acknowledgment of my greeting and closes his eyes again. He is wearing the Olympic t-shirt I got him in the airport while I waited for my flight home. He was wearing it last night when I left, which is not a good sign. Today is one of his bad days; it's one of my bad days too.

Hope, my sister, comes barreling through the door. Late, as usual. She's followed shortly by my brother, Troy. We all gather around the hospital bed, except Logan. I have a well-founded feeling she's trying to steal the liquid morphine from the medicine lock box. The hospice nurse put in a catheter today, and my father won't stop trying to pull it out. Life's unfair that way. You can't get up and walk to the bathroom, but you can't piss yourself either. So we improvise.

The truth is, we're all improvising.

Hope speaks first. "Daddy, we want you to know," but her voice trails off, and she begins to cry. I grab her hand—squeeze once, pause, squeeze a second time. My brother clears his throat; emotion makes him uncomfortable. I pick up where Hope left off. "Daddy, we want you to know that it really is okay if you're ready to, well... Go." My throat is closing in on itself, and it's all I can do to spit the next sentence out. "We'll be okay if you're ready to pass on. You fought for so long. You fought so hard."

His eyes flutter open, brilliantly blue. I look at Hope; hers are precisely the same hue. We will move on from this. We will find remembrances in small things every day. The skeletal man peers at me and my siblings. He doesn't do much talking these days, but he manages to croak an "I love you" to the three of us. I can see a grateful glint in his piercing gaze. He is undeniably ready to leave this time, I can tell. We step back, together. He closes his eyes, takes a shuddering breath. The cancer weighs heavy on his chest, but grief weighs heavy on ours.

A few days later I get the call. He's gone, he's disappeared, ta-da! It's a magic trick, it is. Death's a shoddy, cheap magic trick. Sure, he disappeared, but death left reminders and clues to him all

over the place. The biggest clue of all is the Olympic t-shirt I managed to snatch from Logan's greedy hands. Sometimes, when I'm having a terribly awful day, when the reminders begin to pile up, I remove the shirt from its plastic wrap and slowly inhale. The scent almost cures me of my longing; it will be enough to get through tomorrow.

# The Move

By Kristi Brooks

*Kristi Brooks has been writing to keep the madness away for as many years as she can remember. She has been published in some small publications (Absolute, Nonzine, Aoife's Kiss, and PANK), has had her science fiction book (Vision2) published, and is co-editor for GlassFire Magazine.*

At night the elephants would congregate in the living room. The largest, Brack, was easily five pounds and his massive two foot frame had been bound in brown leather. He towered over the ceramic elephants that lined the bookshelves, and to the half-inch glass figurines that guarded the pictures on the dresser he was a god.

“Fellow Brethren,” Brack snorted through his trunk, “some of us have been in this mess before, so we know how unorganized the humans can be when it comes to packing.”

“No shit!” retorted Trimba, a white Avon perfume bottle shaped like an elephant. He had a large, ornate gold seat in the middle of his back for a stopper, and the glass elephants thought it was fun to run alongside him and listen to the perfume in his belly slosh when he moved. He was a grumpy Old Gus who’d presided over the bathroom more years than were reflected on their manufacturing dates. “Need we forget the last time we moved some of us were forced to spend months suffocating in bubble wrap at the bottom of a box?”

“Hear, hear!” came several cries from the delicately painted, porcelain figurines that stood just to the side of the herd. The scenes painted on their girths were carefully positioned so no one

could look in their direction without seeing what they commonly referred to as their 'beauty marks.'

"We never did find Lacienda after the last move." One of the glass figures spoke up from the middle of the herd, his voice as soft as the tinkling of a crystal chandelier. One of the stone elephants raised his now lopsided trunk in agreement, sadly displaying the jagged crack that ran along his nose from where an over-ambitious three-year-old had dropped him last winter.

The chorus of voices continued to climb to a dull roar as each of the statues recalled their own moving story. Brack let them speak for a little while. Eventually he silenced them by raising his snout straight into the air, his polished granite tusks gleaming in the moonlight.

Within seconds the group quieted down as one by one they looked to their leader for guidance. Even though he had grown accustomed his leadership role, he hadn't always headed the group. When he had first arrived here the nightly meetings were led by Titan, a three foot tall cement elephant who remained steadily frozen in an upright position every day with a glass tabletop carefully balanced on his trunk and ears.

He had been an excellent leader and role model; especially for the younger, more playful figurines. However, his gentle rule had come to an end when the humans had brought home an excited puppy.

Brack had watched and mourned his fellow comrade from his door side perch. He'd witnessed the fall and had seen the understanding of what was about to happen spread across the great pachyderm's face just before his head landed on the floor and snapped off with a loud crack, effectively ending his reign with a wound so mortal no amount of glue would have fixed him.

There was no doubt among the elephants that they were not immortal creatures, but Titan had proved just how susceptible they were to the environment they lived in. After that, the humans had decided the dog was too clumsy of an oaf to stay in the house unsupervised. The nightly meetings had remained intact.

If you had asked him outright Brack would have said that where they lived now were far better than most. Many of those in his charge had their own horror stories about life outside of this home, him included. A small slit on his back was the scar he bore when the children from his previous home had unsuccessfully tried to turn him into a piggy bank. When he was picked up at the garage sale he would have openly cried tears of joy if his black marble eyes would have allowed him that benefit.

“I think we can all agree that our main objective in this move will be to keep the herd as safe as possible. Establishing our positions in the new home, when we arrive, is an important secondary goal,” Brack reminded them.

Many of those assembled swung their trunks back and forth like pendulums in agreement. A few who could not swing their appendages so easily grunted to show that they understood what Brack was telling them.

“The brass and granite elephants often have the advantage during this time as they are least likely to be harmed or kept wrapped in that horrid plastic shroud during the move. Therefore, we will rely on them once we get in the new home to help locate everyone as quickly as possible.”

“Won’t the humans realize what we’re doing?” someone called out from the crowd.

“If you do everything at the proper pace then we should be able to reestablish our place in the home in a short amount of time. The key is to move an elephant or two a night instead of releasing the whole herd at once, got it?”

“I’ve been through this many times. I will help the younger ones.” Babara, a five-inch brass elephant said, stepping to the front of her group’s congregation.

Brack swayed his trunk in approval before speaking again, “Obviously our greatest concern lies with the glass and porcelain elephants. It seems that no matter how well we work together, our harmonious efforts still result in a loss to this group during every move. Whether it be the complete loss of an elephant like

Lacienda or the smashed and broken chips that some of you accumulate each time you are packed away, it is a loss that is heavy to our entire clan.”

To this, all of the elephants raised their trunks to the ceiling as a sign of respect and love for those who'd been lost or injured before.

The meeting was then called to an end as each statue clambered back to their respective positions. Brack returned to the door, his largest worry yet unvoiced. In his other home, and at different times, he had heard stories of humans deciding to do something they called “redecorating,” in which most of the elephants would be rounded up, placed in boxes for safekeeping and stored somewhere dark and lifeless.

He hadn't been able to vocalize this concern, afraid the mere mention of it might turn it into a truth. But his denial didn't change the fact there hadn't seemed to be enough boxes for a full-scale move. Those he had seen had been carefully labeled with the word “elephant” and then a description of the different types of figures.

Right now he could only sit by the door, waiting.

# I Am Seventeen

By Audrey Harris

*Freshman/Biology/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

I wake up in the morning, look at the clock. 7:05 AM. I'm already five minutes late. Dragging myself out of bed, I fumble with anxious hands until I find the light switch. Illumination! But the kind that makes my temples throb and my head ache, not the kind that brings joy or new ideas.

With worn out limbs I get dressed, grab my bag, and head out the door with a quick, "I love you. Have a good day," to my mother, fully knowing that my day will be awful. Down the steps, unlock the car, open the door, sit down, keys in ignition, engine turning over. Step by step, I tell myself as I back out of the driveway. Anything faster than that, you get overwhelmed.

Gas, brake, brief stop, look both ways, gas. The stereo's on, and the CD that used to make me cry is playing. A continuous loop of memories harmonizes with each song. No tears, no sir, not today. I am stronger than that. I am strong, goddammit. I will be strong.

By the time I pull into the parking lot, I'm more exhausted than I was when I fell asleep last night. I think the same thoughts so often that they must be imprinted on the insides of my eyelids. I should have done more; I never should have stopped visiting; I should have made time; sleep shouldn't have been a priority; I should have taken more shifts; I should have been better; why can't I be better? If you look closely enough, you can see the letters

embossed and engraved on my retinas, my corneas, my pupils. But no one looks me in the eyes anymore.

That's the one thing no one ever tells you: if you lose a man you hardly knew or took time to know, people look at you differently, talk to you differently. They walk on eggshells around you. I don't think they even realize the change, but I do.

Multiple empty handshakes, pats on the back—hollow physical contact only makes things worse. Loss, guilt, loneliness, alienation, isolation: my five steps of grief. Along with isolation comes numbness, a feeling welcome after five long years of bone-crushing hopelessness.

People say loss does not physically change a person. But let me tell you: atom for atom, I am a person I no longer know. My neurons have formed millions of separate connections relative to my smoked-cigarettes-till-the-day-he-died father; neurotransmitters altered, thought process malfunctioning. I am only a body with a fragment of soul left.

People can see that. They look at the way I sit still or read my book or drink my tea, and I know they know. I can feel it. I can feel their self-driven sympathy from across the room. "What if it happened to me?" runs through their minds.

But I don't need your goddamn secondhand sympathy; I have enough sorrow of my own to cast out like an anchor. I could let it drown me if I wanted. That's not who I am, though. If I were going to drown, I would have done it a long time ago and saved myself the trouble.

*An Excerpt From*

# Jesse James and the Dragon

By Erik Matthew Thacker

*Senior/Film Production/Villa Rica, Georgia*

“I’ve lost my patience with you now, James. You give this up. You come on out, and won’t nobody riddle you with holes. You’ve got my word on that.”

Jesse peered between the broken shards of the saloon window. Sheriff Coburn and his posse rallied in the street just beyond his pistol’s reach. For now, he’d have to settle with stinging Coburn with tough truths instead of bullets. The bullets would come later.

“I’m afraid I can’t oblige you on that insistence Coburn, on account of you being dead and all.”

Jesse could make out Coburn’s beady, dull eyes, even from here. Those eyes were now lifeless, left so by the bucket-sized hole through the sheriff’s chest. The large, gaping wound revealed the decaying insides of James’ long time rival. Jesse had put that hole there, fair and square and to face the buffoon again felt mighty unjust.

“Now I won’t be taken by your threats, boy. You get out here now or we’re gonna come on in there and wring you out all messy like.”

Rows of pale skinned townsfolk stood vigil behind Coburn with rakes, shovels, and violent intentions. They didn’t concern themselves with already being dead, compelled by justice or consumed by willful ignorance. They concerned themselves even

less with the ghastly preacher man standing just beyond their numbers.

The priest towered over all of them, at least a couple feet above the tallest man. He had the look of a hanging judge, with robes so black and free of dust you'd think anything that came near them was removed from existence.

It was a hell of a sham, but Jesse knew the Banshee resided in the empty shell of this long-dead holy man. The priest's dark, soulless eyes did little to conceal the evil inside. Those cold orbs glared at the Old Hope Saloon, paying the mob no more mind than they paid in turn.

"Coburn don't seem to know he's already checked out from this mortal coil once," Robert Ford said. He leaned back against the bullet-ridden wall and donated attention to a very empty shotgun barrel. "He doesn't seem to concern himself with that tall, evil looking fellow either. I'm guessing that's your lady shadow, James."

The Banshee drew no sweat from Jesse. Her chase was as exhausting as any lawman's, and the fear was long gone. He'd left her in pieces more than Jesse cared to count, and she wanted that debt made square. Jesse had put three horses in the ground trying to outrun the comely specter, and her persistence had trapped his band in New Hope with a sideshow of familiar faces he'd already hand-delivered to father time.

"Well Coburn weren't ever a keen eye. Don't seem right to have to kill this whole town twice, but I'm guessing God ain't anteing in on this one. How about your heathen gods, Seral?"

"Don't think I can rain dance us out of this one, James," said the old Indian through a teethful of fabric. Seral tore strips from his shirt to wrap the deep gashes on his huge arms. Jesse figured if the big mule took many more hits, he might end up fighting his way out naked.

"How's your ammo?" Seral asked.

"I've got these six rounds and a flurry of powerful taunts," Jesse said. "We make it out to them stables. I'm figuring these

horses might be all corpsey like too, but still stern enough to get us back on the trail.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed, looking for ways to punch holes in Jesse’s strategy. Robert was a master of making hopelessness even more hopeless. Jesse robbed him of his masterpiece before he could birth it to the world.

“Keep your hole shut, Robert. I swear I’d shoot myself right now just to be rid of your fence sittin’ if not for some cruel fate that I may come right back to life in Coburn’s noose for all eternity. We make for the stables and we grab them pale horses and ride like we are Armageddon come to Missouri.”

Jesse checked his revolver and stood. Robert and Seral followed suit, and the three pushed their smiling faces into the dusty sunlight of New Hope.

“Alright Coburn,” James yelled. “You got me! We’re coming out. You promise not to shoot and I promise we’ll make our surrender all prissy like.”

“You do that, James and you do it quick. We got all day to hang you but I’d hate to lose the light. Don’t wanna rob ourselves of the spectacle.”

Jesse turned to his companions and spat.

“He’s right. That’d be downright rude. Let’s get.”

The three outlaws bounded down the staircase into the lobby of the ancient Old Hope saloon. The wood squeaked in protest of their every step and James reasoned a few more of the posse’s fresh bullet holes might leave the bar a pile of sticks.

Seral sprinted ahead to the side door and flung it open, nearly tearing the door out of the frame. Both of Jesse’s companion’s arms fell to their side and their jaws dropped like their virgin spirits had been violated.

“Oh wow! Are you guys cowboys?”

The young lad wore a bright, spirited smile that was almost as wide and shiny as the enormous railroad spike stuck out of his noggin.

Jesse couldn't spare the bullet and there was something downright sinister about shooting a young boy, even one set on by the devil to slow you down. He shoved past the kid to get to the alley.

"Move along, son. Yah!" Robert said. "Get out of here before I split your hide!"

Robert kicked wildly at the boy, throwing fits of dust. The lad scurried out of the way, chirping and squealing. Jesse would have been more concerned about the commotion had he believed that Coburn actually thought he was coming quietly.

"Hold your horses, Bert. C'mere boy."

Jesse snagged the little one by his shoulders. The wound smelled terrible. The boy smelled terrible too. He tried to jerk out of James' grasp, and the railroad spike let loose a sickening squish with each tug.

"Let the little spook go, James. We ain't got time for this," Seral said.

"Quiet your yap and listen. These walking corpses going about their business like somebody buried 'em too shallow. They'd probably be convinced this here little spit is still drawing breath too."

Robert and Seral stared with the judgmental gazes of two men without the proper dose of conviction. Both men wanted to nag, but Robert beat the big oaf to the draw.

"James, that might be the most damn unchristian thing you've yet to suggest,"

"Horse manure! I've done worse, and there's plenty of daylight left to do worse again. I'll live with it. Boy's already dead."

"No! Don't hurt me! Let me go!" The boy squirmed and blubbered, but the sobbing produced no tears.

Jesse held the boy firmly, staring his companions down.

"This is how it is, Bert. If you don't like it, you can wander out there and let them make you a permanent settler. I figure that banshee ain't gonna interfere lest she might break the

ruse.” James counted on this conclusion, but was not feeling particular lucky on this particular day.

Ford’s face remained hard, but he kept his beak shut. It was good enough.

Jesse dragged the boy to the edge of the saloon and peered around the corner. He had a clear view of Coburn and his posse. The townsfolk patrolled like ancient knights wielding rolling pins and table legs. Coburn waited confidently, archaic revolver in hand.

“Alright, piggy!” James shouted. “You out there?”

Coburn smiled a wide gory grin. He licked what was left of his lips with what was left of his tongue.

“Right here, James. Just waiting for you to do the smart thing, lest I have to come drag you out in a messy way. Don’t figure your mammy would like that.”

“Got a lil’ deputy here wouldn’t much appreciate that either.”

Coburn sighed, and James was sure he heard the air come out of the sheriff’s chest wound, not any of the usual orifices. Coburn strode forward, or tried to, but the maggots in his legs had reduced him to a determined shuffle. When he finally closed the distance, he let Jesse and the boy fight for his disapproving gaze.

“I’m almost willing to let you end that varmint, just to watch you hang sooner.”

“That’d be one very damned sinister epitaph for the lad, Sheriff.”

“Yeah. Supposin’ it would be.” Coburn spit, or rather Coburn tried to spit. His jaw rocked back and forth, but no spit came out. “That’s just fine, Jesse. I’ve got nothing but time. I’ll see you take that last step, eventually.”

“From where I’m sitting that seems unlikely, Sheriff.”

Coburn grunted and turned on his heels. He couldn’t get a hold of Jesse, and he only got a few feet before his pride got a hold on him.

Coburn drew.

Jesse heard the crack of Coburn's old sidearm as familiar as any childhood hymn. The outlaw shut his eyes and reveled in his last breath as it left him. He was sure he'd open his eyes and see the fiery smile of that great red devil. He heard a downright evil chuckle, and was sure it was the old goat laughing at Jesse's misguided attempts at spiritual redemption.

The chuckle drowned in a chorus of gasps and screams. Jesse knew this song. Jesse wrote this song. He let his eyes open and stole breathe from the world once more.

Coburn had missed. The fat windbag had never been a particularly good shot, and Jesse had weaved a history of using strangers to block bad shots.

The young boy stared down at his own chest. The gaping wound stared back up at him. He walked a bit, pondering his newly found immortality.

A very befuddled Coburn let two more cracks ring out, filling the boy with more holes. It was downright scientific.

"Goddamn it, Coburn! What the hell are you doing?" Jesse asked.

The boy just stared at his holes and the sheriff just stared at the boy. The brief silence gave each townspeople a chance to evaluate the miracle of which they had stood witness. For every declaration of the boy's holy patronage, another fool proclaimed sorcery. Then, as if remembering the nature of an angry posse, the bulk of the crowd just panicked altogether.

The preacher man's empty, lifeless expression turned furious. It jolted toward Jesse in a downright comical onslaught of uncoordinated limbs. The Banshee's living stagecoach gained all of two full strides before it was swarmed by townspeople.

The ruse was gone. Each citizen of New Hope looked upon their neighbor and saw a corpse. The sight left their faith a spiritual mess, and they dove at the preacher's feet, demanding holy guidance.

Jesse wasn't a man to see omens, but it was satisfying to see someone else pay for their blasphemy, on rare occasion. He drew his sidearm.

"Whatcha think Bert, run or shoot...Bert?"

Jesse blinked. He'd reveled so long in the Banshee's misfortunes he'd missed Robert and Seral scream away toward the stables. James felt like he owed the enraged specter a tip of his hat, at least. He paid the debt in kind before flying down the alleyway in pursuit of his comrades.

The three outlaws hooted and hollered as they ran, caught up by the excitement of their escape. They turned the corner for the stables and hopped over the waist high iron grates imprisoning the ponies. The place looked empty. The place even smelled empty, but James heard whinnies from deeper in the darkness. His eyes adjusted to the light and the trio let loose a groan.

There were horses. Three horses in fact. James couldn't have wished for such luck, but had he wasted something as precious as a wish, he would have preferred they were covered in skin, muscle, and free of maggots, worms, and decay. All three horses didn't fit the bill, with varying degrees.

"They're all...goeey!" Seral said.

Jesse ignored the old titan's complaints and yanked himself onto the bare back of a decomposing quarter horse. His heels scrapped away rotting flesh. His hands dusted away maggots while his fortitude fought back nausea. He put the wet slogging feeling under his rump out of his mind.

"C'mon boys," he said. "Let's go wrangle us a big lizard."



# POETRY —————

# To the Preacher

FACULTY SELECTION  
OUTSTANDING POEM

By Jordan Pierce

*Junior/Cell and Molecular Biology/Ardmore, Oklahoma*

*"I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.*

*I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." – Ecclesiastes 1: 12-14, written by Solomon*

I know that no stream can ever fill the sea,  
I realize that from much wisdom comes much sorrow,  
I understand that the fate of the fool still overtakes the wise –  
these things I recognize as true, I do,  
but I cannot accept them right now;

Right now, I will search futilely, tirelessly for that all-quenching river,  
I will pursue impossibly that all-encompassing knowledge,  
I will sleeplessly seek the sins I desire;  
and all the while, with a half-bitter smile,  
I will keep your words in mind.

I will happily follow the heat of my heart until my heart heatedly hates me,  
until the mishaps heap up,  
until a long life and a leaden heart leads me to  
abandon my fruitfully fruitless ambitions,  
until I have no hope but to heed your words,  
until I yearn for nothing but God's healing hands –

For confession.  
For judgment.  
For calm.  
For peace –  
For truth.

When I'm done chasing the wind, Solomon, I'll see you then.

# Sugar Bowl

By Beth Robinson

*Adjunct English Faculty/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

I live in Oklahoma.

When I was young  
at camp in Texas  
my counselor sang *Roll Tide*  
with such love it made me cry.  
But, in this life...

I live in Oklahoma.

I'm an ACFF  
Adult Child of a Football Fanatic.  
My father grew up in Norman,  
has two degrees from OU,  
met my mother after class.  
I spent home games at my grandparents'  
a mile from campus -  
my grandfather's radio up  
T.V. volume off.  
Even his mean dog "Rebel" paid attention.

I prayed little girl prayers,  
knowing my parents' mood depended on the football.

I quit watching in my 20's.  
Anxiety had flattened fun.

Sugar Bowl - 2

Once, in my 30's, a restaurant big screen blared a rivalry game.

I found myself

standing on the table

screaming at the players

[the running back had taken off;

it was a thing of beauty].

My four young children

who had never heard of football

gazed up at me in horror.

Clearly, it was still too hard to watch.

I've gotten a little better.

The kids got older.

I can watch a few minutes at a time.

Everyone is less terrified

when I scream, "*Kill 'em!!!*" from the back of the room.

I'm the most non-violent person they know.

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There's a lot of red in Superbowl Stadium tonight.

I can't read which team the fans are for at all,

can only hear them.

The commentators give us no chance

whatsoever.

Even if we play a perfect game,

one said, the Tide would roll

by the largest bowl game spread this year –

three touchdowns.

Sugar Bowl - 3

A no-star team  
well-coached and undersized  
is ahead at the end of the first quarter!  
And comes back to tie it in the second!

I text my younger brother.  
I may have to leave the room soon.

I looked down this afternoon  
surprised  
but not surprised  
at my white shirt under red fleece:  
Game-day outfit unplanned.

All heart the Sooners play.  
I can not look away.

We live in Oklahoma.

12-4-2013

By Patience Williams

*Freshman/English and Film Studies/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

It had been years.  
His headlights crept up the garage panels,  
Bright and yellow like dazed eyes. I heard  
The low rumble of his engine, the thud of  
His music. He looked at me once with his  
Hydrated blue irises, like two drops of water  
Fallen onto a teal-stained floor.

I climbed into the passenger's seat  
And closed my eyes while he drove,  
The instrumental music strummed  
In my ears like pleasant advice, and  
It soothed the clamor of my hands.  
He was so close. The smell of his clothes-  
Clean and laundered, reminded me of so many things.  
He was so close.

Telephone poles rolled past as silhouettes of rooted memory.  
My mind thought something else each time my eyes  
Latched onto one and broke as we sped by.  
The music climaxed, the wind broke in through the open window.  
The sounds of the outside pouring into the inside of the car  
Were like the ruffling of a plastic bag. And I wanted to suffocate.

My eyes watched his hands steady the wheel with importance,  
Swaying with skill and concentration. My eyes traced the  
Dry splotches creased in between his thumb and pointer finger,  
The blue veins that elevated from his smooth, hairy hands,  
The unevenness of his fingernails, edged with dirt and cut short.

The music continued to crescendo in my ears, and the wind  
Continued to pummel loudly through the window. All I could hear  
Were swoosh noises, the crushing of concrete beneath tires,  
Explosions in the Sky's *The Only Moment We Were Alone*.  
I tried to hold on to what I was thinking, what I was hoping for.  
But everything sped past. I had a thought, but it was gone.

Eventually his car slowed  
And my cheeks were slick with tears,  
My eyelashes were so dark and polished from crying  
That they were the same color as shiny black shoes.  
His car kept slowing, and the wind slowed  
And the crackling of gravel slowed, and the memories slowed,  
And the thoughts slowed, and the tears flowed, slower-  
Until I realized that I am here, this is now, and I am okay.

# Lessons 2013

By Kellynn Brack

*Senior/English/Weatherford, Oklahoma*

F█. Change was not the  
Chicago progressive force  
Facebook said He was.



Applications and  
resumes come easier  
with a glass of scotch.



Damn it. Dad was right.  
Accounting degrees are gold.  
All writers are drunks.

# Shoes

By Jordan Pierce

*Junior/Cell and Molecular Biology/Ardmore, Oklahoma*

There's something about shoes,  
have you noticed? The way  
they warp your walk provides  
a measured measure to your pace;

like tennis shoes, that beg to run, to jump, to fly away from reality,  
like boots, that oblige a two-step with that girl from room 831,  
like flip-flops, that whisper, "F--- it, go shoeless,"  
like those holy high-top Nikes reminding me  
of a night spent – swelling expectations, sweet sultry sweat, silent harmony...

You see, there's something about shoes:  
about walking in them,  
about showing them your life,  
about giving them a life,  
about imbuing them with spirit,  
about letting them talk to you –  
about listening to them;

today my faded, grey boat shoes sigh with each soft step. They implore  
me to think, to take time between each beat:  
each footfall,  
    each breath,  
        each memory,  
            each jolt of jarring melancholy,  
                each rush of half-hearted hope.

There's something about shoes.

# Once Upon A Longing

By Matthew Wakeham

*Freshman/Studio Art/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

Bones beating  
On old drums  
Lighten moods  
In dark rooms  
With tables  
And new views,

Lonely chatter  
Competes with the  
Hollow sounds  
Echoing throughout the  
Dining space,

Common topics  
Spoken about aloud  
In a  
Drunken festive cluster,  
To be  
Home again I  
Crave for.

# (Ir)Responsible

By Jordan Pierce

*Junior/Cell and Molecular Biology/Ardmore, Oklahoma*

We can be irresponsible together  
as long as we are responsible with each other.  
We should have reckless fun together  
as long as we are never reckless with each other.  
We will live in cacophonous harmony together  
as long as our cacophonies harmoniously caress and coexist.

We cannot submit to sightless emotion together  
unless it flows from both skulls and chests.  
We should never waste our days together  
unless our days desire hands, hips, and lips.  
We will never water down those days we choose to waste together,  
unless that water comes from

the raindrops of a sluggish, sleepy afternoon spent  
mostly in the strength of soothing silence with *Dirty  
Dancing* in the background;  
your hair, your smell, your softness, your sweet...

the splash of your bare body shattering that liquid  
glass moon-mirror,  
a flourish of your hair, shaking out the wetness,  
an invitation spoken by sultry laugh, a glimmer of  
dark eyes, a smile...

the salty-sweet sorrow of a sad, sullen day dripping  
from  
your damp, distressed eyes; I'm so caught up in  
marveling,  
so tender, so vulnerable – beautiful – I'm so lucky, I  
almost forget...

We can be irresponsible together  
as long as we are responsible with each other.

# Fall

By Lauren Matheny

*Junior/BFA Acting, English Minor/Middleton, Wisconsin*

Cider light falls through crimson-kissed  
Leaves, weaving them into the warf and woof  
Of forest-fall,  
Sleep slipping  
Into the souls of oak and aspen and elm,  
Summer-crowned lovers with caressing branches.  
Speckle-trailing sun passes slowly like syrup,  
Caramel rich on the tongue of the  
Drowsy-rooted floor,  
And though  
Trees stretch, and yawn, and croak their  
Love song to a fading evening, the arbour  
Knows,  
It knows that autumn-woven sleep  
Is coming  
Soon.

CREATIVE

NONFICTION —————

# Tribe of Lauren

FACULTY SELECTION  
OUTSTANDING CREATIVE NONFICTION

By Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty

*Junior/English/Silsbee, Texas*

“*Rot!*” The stumbling patter of light up shoes. The sandy slide of rubber soles on cement. In any language, the rules of Red-light, Green-light were simple and universal. All the kids in my neighborhood were expatriates by nature and picked up German as if it was a secret language and implemented it into everything they could. That means stop on *rot* and go on—

“*Grün!*”

It was a big neighborhood, with compound after compound of apartments—and a playground behind every one. In our building and the one across the parking lot, there were twelve girls, only girls, ranging from four to eight. I made thirteen, but I wasn’t really one of them.

I had heard that if girls ruled the world, it would be a better place. There would be less war and more kindness. Girls were kinder, smarter (they went to college to get more knowledge!), gentler, and more understanding and nurturing. However, that’s not what I found in Germany, where the group of twelve made up a tribe of selective inclusion and, if necessary, the complete shunning of individuals.

It didn’t help that I didn’t know German very well. In German class and music class, I struggled with the harsh language. It didn’t work well with my southern drawl. What little I could say made me sound Australian. Most of the other students had been in

Germany for one or two years already, and spoke German—sort of. One girl had an accent like Hitler, and had hair and eyes the same color as the spaces between the stars. Her name was Lauren of Germany.

“*Rot!*”

Sam fell, knees grinding on the ground like cheese against a grater. Cackles emerged from round bellies like a chorus of imps. Lauren stood at the front of the line, scrunching her nose while Sam cried.

“*Du bist OK!*”

When she spoke, her Vulcan-esque bob swung about her face. Part of speaking German fluently included dramatic head gestures. Her features were sharp, and her eyes were granite. Sam immediately flared her nostrils and sucked up every drop of snot that had poured out in a cascade, drying her eyes with her hair.

I had been watching them for almost half an hour, clinging to the bark of a tree as if it was my father’s pant leg while keeping my scabbed palms off of the bark. Buddy the bear and I were hiding from them, but now I had a hard decision to make. I really wanted to play, but I also really had to pee. If I went home, I’d lose my chance to play altogether. There was also the dissonance that I wanted to play with the kids, but I was afraid of what would come of it. I looked at Buddy the bear’s beady eyes for advice. He just reflected my uncertain face.

I had never had any girl friends before, so I was a little excited to interact with my own kind. So, when Sam got hurt, I seized it as an opportunity and galloped over to the game. Sam was picking gravel out of her knees, periodically wiping her eyes with her hair.

“Are you okay?”

“*Ich bin OK.*”

“You’re bleedin’ though.”

“*Ich bin OK.*”

I pressed my knees together instinctively when I looked at hers, brown and red with blood and gray with dust. My knees were

ruddy, and it reminded me of how fragile I was. My thumbs licked the sores on my palms instinctively. I thought about going home, but I was already in their midst, and no one had said anything yet. When the runners lined up again, I joined them with Sam.

“Grün!”

I really had to pee.

The air conditioning didn’t work very well in the apartments. Mama said it was because the buildings used to be compounds for prisoners of war, so they weren’t built to be too comfortable. She would usually fan herself on the couch and watch the only English channel, which thankfully played *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. So, she was content.

“You see, baby? Girls can be tough, too. You just need to put your fists up and stand your ground.”

“Uh huh.”

“Have you tried, puss?”

“I wouldn’t know how.”

“You can make a fist, can’t you?”

I made a dainty fist, my thumb tucked into my palm where it could lick my scabs soothingly. They hurt less if I was touching them. Mama untucked my thumb and let me punch her hand a few times. Her hand was as small, white, and delicate as the neck of a swan, and I didn’t do anything to harm it. Still, she mussed my hair and called me a tiger before fanning herself vigorously with the TV guide.

“Can I go outside?”

“Haven’t you already been out today?”

“Yes’m.”

“Don’t you start that running in and out nonsense again. You let all the cold air out.”

“What if I have to use the potty?”

“You hold it or come in and stay in.”

I took Buddy the bear in case I would have to play by myself.

“What do you think you’re doing, *foitzø?*”

As soon as everyone started to run, they slowed to a corked jog then a stumbling, uncertain walk. They swayed to a stop like a grove of alien trees, looking at me. The wind tangled itself in front of my eyes, obscuring their empty faces. As I looked at them, I felt like a flicked penny when the spin becomes unstable. My vision wobbled between the strands of my hair as I looked this way and that way.

“You don’t even know what *rot* or *grün* means. You can’t play, hure.”

Then I heard the thunk of rainboots. I pushed my hair back and looked straight on. Lauren was walking towards me, her steps bearing a militaristic slowness. Her toes slapped the ground in even increments until she had approached me. Then she looked me over, her pointed jaw jutted out in contemplation.

“Don’t call me things like that,” I said, after a moment of just waiting for her to speak.

“Or what, *lesbe?*”

“Tell her to go home!” Sam shouted.

I ignored Sam. It was easier than accepting that I was entirely unwanted.

“Or I’ll tell your mom,” I said, cocking my chin back like hers was.

Lauren scrunched her nose at me and grabbed Buddy the bear out of my pocket and tossed him over the chain-link fence that surrounded the compound. Beyond the fence, just a few feet away, was a sheer drop into a flooded quarry. Buddy the bear’s limbs splayed in the pale gray rays of sunlight, as if signaling for help or waving goodbye, then he dropped like a stone, the beans of his belly rattling as he descended. There was a small “plop,” and I knew he was gone.

“Are you going to tell my Mutter about that too?”

“Buddy the bear was innocent, Lauren! He was an innocent bear!”

“Whatever. Nothing *du hast* is innocent.”

A week ago, Natalie, Lauren’s little sister, had found her mother’s stash. When she told me she found a “stash,” I imagined fireworks and money like in *Home Alone*. She pulled me into the bushes in front of the school, which were massive enough to form sizeable tents around our bodies when we got inside of them. She took magazines out of her bag that were very similar to the *Playboys* that Kevin pulled out of his brother’s stash, but they said *Playgirl Magazine*. Not in English, of course, but there was a bunny on the cover.

She flipped page after page. I hid Buddy the bear’s face deeper in my pocket. A part of me knew I shouldn’t be looking, but I had never seen what a naked boy looked like before, let alone men. Natalie had her hands up her skirt and her eyes were closed.

“Don’t do that!”

“What? Why?”

“It’s gross.”

“No it’s not.”

She grabbed my hand and tried to put it on my thigh. I stood up and retracted my hand like the chord of a vacuum and ran home, leaving my Lisa Frank backpack behind. I told my mama everything. She called our first grade teacher, who called Natalie’s parents, both of whom said they had no idea what I was talking about. The next morning, when I got to school, the principal was waiting for me. They had my backpack, which had five dirty magazines in it.

“Now, sweetheart, where did you get these?”

“Natalie showed me, but I only saw two pages, three tops.”

“You didn’t get these from home?”

“Nuh-uh. She must have put them in my bag so she wouldn’t get in trouble.”

“These are very inappropriate. Do you know what that means?”

“Yessir.”

The principal called in both of our parents. Natalie didn't come to school for a few weeks, but no one talked to me about it after that, other than Lauren calling me a *bure* and *lesbe*.

"I really am going to tell! Then I'll sue you for damaging my property."

"My mom hates you. She won't care what you say."

Lauren pushed me. I sprawled out my hands to catch myself. The scabs tore open again. I cried harder. There's nothing worse than being mad and crying at the same time. You're not strong if you're crying. No one takes you seriously if you're crying.

I stood up and made bloody fists, remembering to keep my thumbs untucked. There were scattered laughs from all the girls as they drew in to a semi-circle in front of me. Sam handed Lauren a hula-hoop, the beads of which just reminded me of Buddy the bear.

The consequences of encroaching upon Lauren's tribe were cruelty unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Or since. They were always mean to me. Every day I interacted with them I was pushed down. I was hit. I was bitten. I was spit on and slapped. I was stoned—decorative quartz rocks were flung at me as I attempted to run home. I was crammed into a FedEx box and thrown down eight flights of stairs, but all this I could handle. Pain is fine; I grew up with boys.

It was the pain inside. The kind that feels like the slow dragging claws of a disgruntled cat inside of your body. I tried so hard to be friends with these girls. There had to be something great about being one of them. The fun they had together had to be elating, a jubilant paradise. They always seemed to be so happy. All I had was Buddy the bear, and he didn't even smile. He couldn't speak. He wasn't warm. He wasn't anything but beans and that frown. I wasn't happy.

I was lonely.

Lauren circled me with the unnatural posture of a hungry lioness. I could see her shoulder blades sticking out like a cat's haunches as she circled me, swinging the hula-hoop from one hand to another. My knees were shaking, and I couldn't see her through the lake that was building over my eyes. I really don't know what I thought I could accomplish.

She swung the hula-hoop like a sword, sharp cuts through the air whooshing as I backed up from her. She was cursing, loud and harsh, in German of course. The sharp black strands of her hair swung in front of her face like needles. Her jaw was set like welded clockwork. She nailed me across the face once, then twice. I folded my shoulder over my chest like a wing and covered my face with my hands. The hula-hoop hit my shoulder, my back, my head and my fingers.

The other girls were laughing and cheering. I heard shrill whoops and caws every time the hula-hoop made contact. I thought of what it would be like for them to be quiet, to realize what they were doing. I thought of what it would be like for Sam or Natalie to stand between me and Lauren—to say, “that’s enough,” or, “this isn’t right.” I thought of what it would be like for them to be my friend instead of hers. To replace her. To punish her. To wrap my fingers around her neck and feel the sick pops of her arteries breaking. To feel the tickle of her bobbed hair on my hands as her lips turned blue, as her eyes rolled back. To leave Natalie with what was left of her and walk away with the tribe. My tribe.

With primitive reflexes, I managed to snap my hands out and grab her weapon. For a moment, Lauren and I looked at each other, and she resumed the form of a seven year old girl. She jerked and yanked at the hula-hoop with a mewl—but in the next moment that whine transmogrified into the screeching snarl of a large cat. She threw her head back and her voice echoed inside of the quarry cinematically. I twisted the hula-hoop from her paws, and in the same motion flung it into the quarry. You could hear the

beads rattling as it bounced down the cliff and rolled into the water.

Natalie charged forward, screaming and snarling like her sister. She bit me, my breast square on the nipple. She took skin with her like a cannibal when I pulled away, and I still have the scar to prove it.

Playtime was officially over. I ran away. I ran past my compound, knowing they'd overtake me if I attempted to climb stairs. I ran to the playground. I remember the crunch of gravel slowing my pace down and the pang of adrenaline that I had, the sheer terror when I heard the tribal war cries of my kind as they closed in on me.

I lurched for the braided rope and began to climb with a burning vigor. Someone grabbed my ankle with cold little hands and biting claws. I kicked like a horse, hard and desperate, and screamed. It didn't sound like a normal scream, like a kid at Wal-Mart who doesn't get a toy or a kid who is frightened by a monster on T.V. It was a primal roar that was accentuated by the soft crunch that the girl's face made when I kicked it.

I was on top of the wooden castle now, safe on a platform, as least for now. I pulled up the rope, but they were coming up the stairs on the opposite side of the jungle gym and up the slide itself, piling up to me like ants swarming up their hill. I jumped onto the monkey bars. The blood on my hands nearly doomed me. Lauren waited quietly, holding her bloody nose without expression.

I flipped my legs onto the bars and forced myself on top of them. I had nowhere to go, but I was confident that I was more fearless than the other girls. I had been through more pain than them. I was already afraid I was going to die. The six-foot distance from the top to the ground did not intimidate me.

I was right. They left me there. They played under me. Pokémon and house. However, if I made any attempt to climb down, they swarmed around me again with war cries and whoops and German exclamations. I was up there for hours, even after the street lights came on. There was a calm that settled on me up there.

Even though it was uncomfortable and I was bleeding, I knew I was safe. Like a wounded animal that takes shelter in the trees, I was safe.

Unfortunately, though, I became more and more aware of the pregnant nature of my bladder. I kept hoping, praying—praying to God, to Jesus, to *baby* Jesus, that Lauren’s tribe would finally leave so I could climb down, but they didn’t. Eventually, it became to be too much. Everyone laughed harder than they ever had. They left, satisfied that although they hadn’t beaten my body, my spirit was thoroughly pulverized. They were right.

Should girls rule the world?

I went home. Wet, friendless, lonesome. I changed before my mother could see me and hid in my room. “How was your day, puss?” she called from the living room. I didn’t answer her, and she didn’t come to check on me. Maybe she felt that I wanted to be alone—alone to lick my wounds and feel sorry for myself. I was just a puss among the big cats. “I’m lonely,” I mouthed, my hot face pressed against the door. “I’m lonely.”

I slithered out of my clothes, aching limbs reluctantly retreating as the fabric clung and dragged on my raw breast. I put my hand over the open wound. I did not look in the mirror. I did not clean up. I did not dress. As I crawled in bed, I noticed Buddy the bear’s bed on the nightstand. I cried again, hard and quiet into a pillow. When I pulled away, one of my teeth remained on the surface. I stared at it for a while. Maybe all night.

# [untitled]

By April Coffin

*3L/Juris Doctor Candidate/Washington Island, Wisconsin*

The Friday of Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, I discovered I was pregnant. I remember the weekend particularly because it was so long, which was usually a godsend. In this case, there was no way to contact a doctor for what seemed like an eternity without making it an emergency, which it wasn't. I stood outside, away from the family gathering so I could call anyway. The sunshine was warm and bright on that January day, the dead grass and leafless trees making for a brown landscape, the air crisp and fresh. I was impatient as I heard the message telling me what I already knew: Doctor so-and-so is out of the office until Tuesday; if this is an emergency please hang up and dial 9-1-1. It felt like one. We had been trying for two years. I was ecstatic, and so was he.

I had been feeling different, but really only in one way. The sides of my abdomen felt like I'd been doing crunches and had made those muscles sore. Yet I had waited to check for a couple of reasons. Fear of disappointment was one. Those two years of trying felt like five, and while I never stopped hoping, the let-downs got old. I was also under a lot of pressure at work, so thought it perfectly feasible that my body would react; maybe I had ulcers. Something tension-related would have made sense. And finally, there was the part of choosing to wait that came from my experiences of jumping the gun.

When you want to get pregnant, you check a lot. It's that wishful thinking, I suppose—one of the countless meanings

behind that adage, *hope springs eternal*. Pee on a stick, start your period two days later—it turns into a bit of a roller coaster, and pregnancy tests get expensive. So I had waited.

As I unwrapped the test and sat down, the now-familiar feeling of suppressed excitement behind my breastbone found its focus while I very logically told myself not to get my hopes up. *It'll be great if it happens, but you don't want to be let down.*

A part of me already knew; I actually stood and watched the test that day instead of leaving it on the ledge next to the toilet and coming back to check when I was sure three minutes had gone by, as I had done in the past. Yet when the line turned into a cross, I still gaped. I rummaged for the directions that had come in the box; the line wasn't *that* dark. There it was, printed in ink—pretty much any shade of crosshair was pregnancy. My chest now tight with excitement, I could feel that my eyes were wide and fixed as I fumbled under the bathroom sink for the other test that had come in the box—two for \$10.99 or whatever it had cost; it was a much better deal than the single tests had been. Thank the Lord.

I unwrapped the second test and sat down, the smile already creeping over my face, winning the battle with restraint. I began imagining how I might tell him that we were pregnant. Should I leave the test out for him to find? Would it still show, or would the lines be faded and gone by the time he got home? I had never had one come back positive before and so had never had a reason to save one, and I realized I didn't know. No matter, I wouldn't want to wait, anyway—but should I? If I gave myself some time I could go get a pair of baby socks, or something baby-related, and leave it somewhere for him to find, maybe with a card? No, I'd have to call him—I'd just have to. I couldn't wait. We'd already waited so long.

I watched the second test intently as it changed to a cross. I already felt transformed, unfamiliar to myself but somehow more whole—a child, a life, living and growing inside of me?! I had always known being pregnant would be different, but that knowledge, even though I expected it, took on new meaning. I

went for my phone. I returned periodically to recheck the test as I paced through our apartment from room to room and back again, listening to the lonely, measured ringing in the earpiece. It struck me as totally inappropriate—*why wasn't it singing?*—and I waited for him to pick up. What if he didn't? He was at work. He might be busy. Well, if he didn't answer I'd go for the baby socks, I decided. I loved the many hues and textures of our wood floor, and they stood out now as I retraced my steps back again to look at the little cross—faint, but boldly proclaiming my new condition. *Pick up the phone, pick up!* Finally I heard his greeting on the other end of the line. I jolted back to reality and smiled. I took a shallow breath, and the words on my tongue tumbled out:

“Hi, honey,” I said...

# Valerie's Pen

By Connie Langhorst

*Red Earth Low Residency MFA in Creative Writing/ Area of Study:  
Creative Nonfiction, Essay, Memoir/Tierra Verde, Florida*

Self-doubt clouded my ability as a writer when the news arrived. I was accepted as a graduate student in the Red Earth Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma City University. Instead of being overjoyed, I was deflated. Call it writer's block or creative gridlock, my muse, it seemed, was lost. My writing was not working. Recent submission rejections indicated much of it read like a "paint by numbers" exercise. I lacked inspiration. The acceptance letter was relegated to a desk drawer.

I postponed sharing the news with my husband. We had recently moved from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Tierra Verde, Florida. He was enjoying retirement life, captaining his thirty-five-foot Beneteau and sailing the Gulf of Mexico with a motley crew of post-executive-world pirates. I was enjoying my work as an editorial writer for a community newspaper (a job that did not require the full cooperation of my muse). We were living on flip flop time. Going back to school would require structure—and deadlines.

A former professor and mentor, involved in the MFA program, was an important touchstone in my writing life. The yank to this was my creativity had evaporated like the ink in the pens I wrote with when drafting my stories and essays. Still in the original

box, the pens were in the same desk drawer as the acceptance letter.

I mustered the courage to tell my husband. He was happy, as expected, but took on the role of devil's advocate, reminding me that we lived "several states" away from Oklahoma. The program was low-residency, I offered, meaning that I would commute to classes over two years and complete the coursework on a long-distance basis, working with a faculty member mentor. He suggested that I was no longer, in his words, a "spring chicken."

I reminded him that, since entering my "golden years," I had ignored age barriers and earned a BA in Creative Writing—with high honors—at age fifty-three. He then asked a question I could not answer. *What will you write?*

Despite (or, maybe, in spite of) my doubt and misplaced writer's voice, I retrieved the acceptance letter, signed the registration papers, and enrolled in the program.

In anticipation of visiting Oklahoma for the first time, I decided to review my knowledge of the Sooner State, the entirety of which might pass for a Jeopardy game prompt (*I will take the Dust Bowl for 500, Alex*). I knew that the State of Oklahoma was home to legendary cowboys, singers, and writers. Gene Autry. Woody Guthrie. Will Rogers. Ralph Ellison. What I knew about Oklahoma City was confined to a single date. April 19, 1995.

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building felt like a gut punch to our nation. I witnessed the aftermath on television, and was frightened and enraged.

December 2011. Three days before New Year's Eve. I flew to Atlanta and from there to Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City. I hailed a cab and exchanged greetings with the driver as he loaded my bags. "Where're you headed," he asked. I provided the address for the Bricktown hotel that would be my home for the next ten days.

The driver asked if I was in town for business or pleasure. I informed him that I was a student at Oklahoma City University. His eyebrows raised above the frame of the rear view mirror. He

was surprised to learn that I was a student and not a professor. The voice of my devil's advocate nagged. *What will you write?*

During the cab ride, there was not much to see. Frozen farmland, a few oil rigs, a stretch of highway leading to Anywhere, USA. The air was tinged with the smell of petroleum. There were no palm trees, no white sand beaches, and no salty-air sea breezes.

I considered asking the driver to take me back to the airport. Then, my reason for being there took hold. I wanted to find my voice as a writer and held on to this thought upon arriving at the hotel.

After checking in, I set up my laptop and Googled "Oklahoma." I learned about the state bird (Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher), state flower (Oklahoma Rose), and state motto ("Labor Conquers All"). A map of Oklahoma revealed that the state shared a geographic similarity with Florida—a panhandle. This symmetry offered hope that I would find common ground and coax my muse out of hiding. Still, my husband's question lingered. *What will you write?*

I went outside for a walk. My thin, warm-weather blood was not accustomed to winter in Oklahoma. The frigid air attacked my face and hands. I felt lightheaded and nervous. Orientation for the program was hours away, a circumstance that would require me to de-thaw before meeting the writers who comprised the faculty and student body. My husband's query, as icy as the wind, whistled in my ears. *What will you write?*

To ease my anxiety, I contemplated beach bum versus cowgirl quips, describing myself as being in "Okieland" without a horse or a shotgun, as wearing Spanx instead of leather chaps. I wondered how dusty (and rumored to be unflappable) Oklahomans would react to my Betsey Johnson-inspired Hello Kitty knitted cap with ear flaps and my UGG boots in Classic Sparkle. I considered the option of entering the room wearing a wide-brimmed Stetson accessorized with a fringed cowgirl shirt, boot-cut jeans, and a pair of Dan Post wing-tipped and snip-toed boots. I opted for khaki pants and a sweatshirt—with no hat.

I was the first person to arrive for orientation. A posted announcement read: *Attention Students. Sign up for a field trip to the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum. Bring a pen and paper for free writing.* I signed my name on the first line.

On the day of the field trip, I met other students in the hotel lobby. There was a discernible level of restlessness, a circumstance made bearable by the energy level of our guide. A van emblazoned with the university's logo arrived. We climbed into the warmth of it. On our way to 620 North Harvey Avenue, I was jostled by the burley passenger sitting next to me. It was not a person, but my husband's voice. His question, invading the space, elbowed me. *What will you write?*

The van lurched to a stop in front of a nondescript building. We disembarked, formed a line, and walked into the museum. The lighting was subdued. I felt a feather flick. Fear of the unknown. After a welcome and introduction from a staff member, our guide led us to a door and outside to the street.

Confused, I followed at a distance. There was nothing to see until I saw it . . . The Fence.

It was the simplest kind. Chain link. Warped in places and rusted in others. It was adorned with countless items. I walked the length of it. Each item stopped my heart. A tiara adorned with rhinestones and the words *Happy Birthday*. A pair of children's shoes—Mary Jane's—in pink canvas with white polka dots. A miniature liberty bell. A crusty padlock. I pointed my camera and started shooting. An unmatched set of license plates from Ontario, Canada, embossed with the motto "Yours to Discover." A cowboy boot charm attached to a keychain. Wristwatches. All set and stopped at 9:01.

I studied each item through the camera's lens. The distance felt safe and my tears were hidden. When a wreath with a pair of dolls nested in the center came into view, I lowered the camera. Their faces appeared to be smudged with dirt. On closer inspection, the smudges were actually burn marks. Their heads had been set on fire. Part of them had melted away.

I looked for a place to sit. There was not a chair or a park bench in sight, only sidewalk, bordered on one side by the street and on the other by The Fence. I would have to carry the weight of what I was seeing.

That was when I saw it. Lashed to The Fence. A pen. The writing kind. BIC style. Clear plastic. The cap was chewed off, a condition which made it look like one of my pens. Scarred from gnawing, the mastication of it, an act of desperation, intended to evoke the sweet reward of inspiration. Someone had taken care to affix it to the chain link.

A campaign-style lapel button attached next to the pen featured a woman's photograph. At the top was a name. *Valerie Koelsch*. At the bottom were three words. *We love you*.

The woman in the photograph was young, late twenties or early thirties. Her face glowed with the vibrancy of youth. She wore a patchwork vest in patriotic colors. I raised my camera. As I focused the lens, the wind pushed from behind with an ominous voracity. I waited for it to pass before photographing Valerie—and her pen.

Our guide led us through the 9:03 gate. My eyes went to the Field of Empty Chairs. Nine rows representing the number of floors in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Each engraved with the name of a victim and placed in the row corresponding to the floor on which they died. There were big chairs for adults and little ones for children, and they were decorated with a wreath with a red bow. The scent of pine reminded me of Christmas and of how much I missed my husband.

I photographed the reflection of a church steeple in the liquid mirror of the Reflecting Pool and looked around, in search of the real thing. It towered over the Survivor Wall, causing me to draw a breath.

I met our guide at the entrance to the museum and waited to be the last of our group to enter. Once inside, after my eyes adjusted from sunshine to soft lighting, I was drawn to a sculpture by Michael Anderson, titled "Stellar Wheel." It was displayed in a

Plexiglas cube. A placard identified it as having been the focal point of the federal building's seventh-floor lobby. A man joined me in looking at it. His name tag, imprinted with his name (Alan), indicated that he was a docent—and a survivor. He told me the artwork, recovered from the rubble, was found without a scratch. So many lives lost and broken, yet this object was intact.

I hurried into another exhibit, the Gallery of Honor, which contained personalized “memory boxes” for many of the bombing victims. The one for Julie Marie Welch contained two items—a photograph and a book. I studied her picture. She smiled at me through the glass.

Something inside me stirred. A BIC-style pen with a chewed top lashed to The Fence led me to Valerie's photograph, which, in turn, led me to Julie Marie's memory box. If coincidences exist in life, this did not appear to be one. My muse took notice.

During the free-writing exercise, my muse guided my hand in writing about an offering left at The Fence—a plastic butterfly. She had been silent for so long. Now, it seemed, she had much to say. I kept writing, at every opportunity, throughout the residency. About a wagon wheel, a stained glass window, an iron bolt protruding from a star field at the top of a bronze plaque. My words poured onto the page, unfiltered. A few were bitter. Most were reflective.

I wrote about an aging American elm that proclaimed its victory over death. The Survivor Tree took time. Three years. Before shedding its scorched bark and sprouting new leaves to announce its aliveness. I wrote about a vapor trail, arching across the sky that reminded me of angel wings. I wrote about my family and the meaning of Christmas, and about how a Florida girl could feel so warm and alive on a cold winter's day in Oklahoma City.

I came away from the experience with a renewed passion for writing. I wanted to write about what I saw that day and how it affected me on a spiritual level. I found inspiration and an answer to my husband's question. I would write about my passion for life and the gift of living.

Today, my muse speaks loud and true. It is her voice, my hand to paper, and the inspiration of Julie Marie Welch and Valerie Koelsch dotting the “P’s” and crossing the “T’s.” To know these women, even vicariously, is a bittersweet lesson that life is a gift, one to be used to pursue our passion.

I wish to thank Julie Marie Welch. I acquired and read the book written about her (the one that is included, along with her photograph, in her memory box).

I especially wish to thank Valerie Koelsch . . .  
. for introducing me to her pen and allowing me to write with it.

# Curious Child

By Abbie Vestal

*Senior, English, Creative Writing, Broken Bow, Oklahoma*

## *Author's Note:*

*In a creative non-fiction course, we read about all different kinds of non-fiction that authors use to reveal parts of themselves unknown to their acquaintances and, perhaps, their closer circle of friends. Simultaneously, in another class, we took a day to talk about slasher films. The Slumber Party Massacre was the topic of our class discussion, and I was very struck by how many of the students declared their hatred and confusion for such films; why would any sensible person love to watch them? What does that say about the people who can't get enough of the fake blood and monsters bumping around in the dark? They obviously are demented or had an awful childhood that influenced their tastes in these movies.*

*This paper was my own try at sorting through the information while also recounting on past experiences with horror movies, including an incident with my late neighbor. As I wrote for the class, I remembered all sorts of trivia facts about my favorite films (such as Jaws or Silence of the Lambs). Although I know that not everyone who reads this paper will rethink their opinion about horror movies, at least they'll have some interesting facts about a few of the classics. It is a personal insight as well as an unprofessional criticism. I decided to mix the trivia facts into the personal experiences as a braided essay: many subtopics woven together to create a chain of the overall topic of choice.*

We started out watching reality ghost shows. They were normal with familiar settings of small town homes, kitchens with hospitable dining tables and chairs, living rooms decorated with memorabilia of framed moments, and regular people with faults of thinning hair and round bellies pooching under their flannel shirts that Hollywood wouldn't dare allow in its films. My brother would sprawl out his ever growing legs on his bed, lying back, and I would curl up on a pallet of pillows on the floor, hugging onto one and hiding my mouth behind one of its corners.

“At times,” the “expert” exorcist explained, “we will drink carbonated sodas. In order to not be possessed ourselves by the spirits possessing this household, we must expel gas through our mouths to keep the spirits from going in.”

My brother and I smiled playfully, but we didn't speak our jokes or comments. Still we took our cans of coke and kept them nearby. Just in case.

\* \* \* \* \*

Many people believed that *The Blair Witch Project* was a real snuff film of sorts. Actually, the actors are very much alive today, going about their daily lives, forever as the kids who lose their map, later dying in the unsolvable maze of trees. They jump at every sound and instead of confronting the hands that slap and shake their tent, they scream and remain the helpless victims until the last bit of film captures one of the boys standing in a corner.

I saw the film when I was seven. I only saw the blur of trees and dark as the actress who held it ran for her life. Her screams gave me a headache, and I changed the channel before it made it to the credits. Unable to sit still enough to let the realistic horror of being lost and afraid in the darkness of forest, my young mind was more confused by this film. Why was everyone saying how scary it was? I watched the film all the way through for the first time in my freshman year at OCU, but the magic of it was long diminished from my young encounter with it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The unknown creatures in the dark are scarier that way; unknown, undocumented, unseen. *Jaws* proved this when it was released. The mechanical shark that Spielberg had dubbed “Bruce” was supposed to make more appearances than it did, but because its inner mechanics broke down time and time again, needed constant repair and eventually had its whole system replaced in order to work in the saltwater of the ocean, many scenes had to be readjusted for the lack of the faux predator’s appearance. This proved a blessing in disguise. Without a shark to see and face visually, audiences cowered in their dollar theater seats. Any moment they did see it sent them into fits and screams. In one of the scenes, at the first screening where Spielberg stood to the side to watch outside the theatre, an audience member got up from their seat and ran into the hall, unable to make it to the bathroom before vomiting.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first dead body I saw that wasn’t in the secured, pillowed confines of a coffin was right below my apartment window this last summer. I had seen dead bodies before; I had attended my grandmother and uncle’s funerals and seen them in the funeral home parlors. Their waxy bodies were proof of medical hands embalming them, their dress or suit picked and pressed. Everything about them was carefully placed for one last look for the family to see them as they were. This time, though, it wasn’t arranged; the body was left on the concrete of our driveway for hours.

My sister’s phone call was off-putting:

“Don’t come home.”

It was ten ‘o clock at night, and I was moments away from clocking out at work. I couldn’t imagine the reason behind my sister’s instructions. I had paid my half of the rent, hadn’t I?

“Why?”

“There’s cops all over here. You know that neighbor lady? She killed herself in front of the storage where those brothers downstairs park their truck.”

“How?”

“Abbie, how the hell do you *think*? She shot herself in the head.”

Oh. I kept picturing a rope hanging from inside the parking shed, a makeshift noose.

The body was still splayed out on the concrete when I did go home. My sister let me in through the front and of course the best view was from my bedroom window, right beyond the cluttered desk where my laptop and pencil cups crowded. I peeked through the blinds, and my first thought was: *There's hardly any blood.*

She had shot herself in the head, but her cranium appeared intact, save for the way her jaw slacked open. Dark stains patched along the bottom of her sleeves. Her legs were spread, fleshy and plump with thin cotton shorts ridden up on her thighs. She was wearing thick glasses, and I couldn't recall if I ever saw her wear them before that. Her hands were crippled claws of curled fingers that remained stiff at her sides, and soon one of the few cops that stood around with clipboards or flashlights taped ordinary paper sacks over them.

I didn't feel odd about watching the macabre spectacle until one of the examiners put their latex-gloved hand to the cooling corpse's jaw and wriggled it. It was more than slack; it loosely moved freely with their fingers, moving it far off to the side than it should have. My stomach clenched and I looked away for the first time. Otherwise, I kept watching until they finally laid a paper sheet over the body and wheeled it out on a gurney. Throughout the night, I would talk with my boyfriend on the phone, telling him the macabre details of what I saw, and check out the blinds to the spot.

Literally, there was a big spot to mark where the woman laid; the police didn't bother to clean up the large splotch of blood left behind from the woman's shot head. The red was dark as the cracked pavement soaked it in, and later I looked out to see two tabby cats sitting on the spot, unmoving.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slasher movies can be the most thrilling but also the most fake. The occasional twenty buckets of red dye #40 syrup covering the barely-clothed, butchered bodies of young B actresses could be the turn-off for many people. For others, we're lured in as easily as the innocent high schoolers are when they go to investigate a strange noise into the darkness of their backyards while Michael Myers waits in the shadows for that perfect moment. We're fascinated. That child grew up in a perfectly good home; why stab his sister? Why go after teenagers in heat?

\* \* \* \* \*

My mother warned me of my curiosity towards those films and killers behind them. I don't believe any mother wanted her small child to torture herself with such films. I didn't know why she bothered me about it; Chase was the one who wouldn't sleep without the hall light on after he'd see *The Exorcist*. My heart threatened to give out when the killer escaped; I always pictured them turning up in my closet or in my house's hallway as I tiptoed out to use the bathroom at three a.m. They would be waiting for me at the bathroom doorway, but my full bladder held me hostage and pressured for me to go on.

My childhood curiosity perhaps wanted things it shouldn't. Director Guillermo Del Toro loves that aspect of childhood. His camera movements in *Pan's Labyrinth* are meant to resemble the cautious creeping of a child searching. Always either at or lower than her level, we are not adults following the young child, Ophelia, as she goes on perilous journeys directed by the ancient and dark faun, Pan, but are only another curious child following after her.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the most famous Hollywood secrets is in the film *Black Christmas*. To this day, it has never been released how they were able to secure a plastic bag over one of the actress' head, the plastic fills her mouth as the camera captures her dead and wide eyes that stare into space. There is no visible sign of breathing that would give her away, but they claim it, indeed, was the actress and

not a dummy. There has never been another film to redo a scene like this. No one has released the secret, and there is no sign that anyone will.

\* \* \* \* \*

I watch *Silence of the Lambs* to relax and *The Walking Dead* to pass the time. When my boyfriend and I got together on the Fourth of July, I rented *Insidious* for us to watch before going out in the dry evening heat to twirl sparklers and watch deafening fireworks. My brother felt left out and came to watch it with us. We pulled the living room's shades closed, making it dim and the widescreen television our only source of illumination. Twenty minutes into the film, I noticed my brother had pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes, lying back against the loveseat he sat on. I grinned and vowed to never tease him for wanting to shut his eyes in secret.

I received a phone call one week later from my mom.

"Your brother hasn't slept in three nights and he's sore all over." She said the words quietly but with a point of accusation aimed at me.

"Okay." I hoped she could hear the confusion in my voice. "And you're telling me this why?"

"It's that movie you and John were watching. He watched it and now he can't sleep. Also, he gets so scared that he tightens up all over and gets sore everywhere. So thank you."

"Hey, we did not invite him to sit! He wandered in on his own!"

"I know, but you could have chosen a better movie!"

Was it truly my fault that my twenty-five-year-old brother couldn't handle himself?

\* \* \* \* \*

Jody Foster played the iconic heroine, Clarice Sterling, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, but refused to return for its sequel in which Sterling encounters her once helpful guide, Hannibal Lector, once more. Only this time, the cannibalistic psychologist who helped her solve her first murder mystery is coming back for her. She told the

makers of the film, as well as in interviews, that the first film was too creepy for her to do again.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wondered, because so many claim that people who watch horror films are sadists and would one day go on a spree of their own, if my taste in villains such as Freddy Krueger, Buffalo Bill, and Leatherface said more about me than I realized. I contemplated the reason why they held my attention more than the boys in collared shirts at school did. The monsters in masks and fedoras wielding kitchen knives, machetes, and chainsaws fascinated me and any time I caught them on the screen. They are horrible creatures that kill without humanity or visible remorse; why do I watch their massacres? Perhaps I don't understand because I haven't snapped yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

A close friend of mine once told me about him meeting a talented makeup artist who specialized in turning actors and actresses into zombies. His living, or unliving, art are well praised. Before, he was in the army and served in combat. When my friend told him that he loved his work and how it terrified him on the television screen, the man didn't say "thank you" but instead glowered at him.

"He looked at me like I was an idiot," my friend said. "I didn't get it until much later when I realized that he was a war vet. What he makes on people, he saw in real life. Maybe not zombies, but he saw the closest thing we'll ever get to an apocalypse. And I'm scared of the fake version."

\* \* \* \* \*

My neighbor never was outgoing or kind. I always thought of her as "that crazy shut in who yells at nothing." We believe she had intense paranoia and possibly was schizophrenic. I caught her coming out of her apartment once in a jogging suit complete with a sandwich board sign that stated "John, quit following me!" She wore it all over the city, dragging an empty metal cart behind her.

One day, I heard screaming and peeked out the same blinds I would later look out to her corpse.

She was standing at her garbage can, lifting the lid over and over only to slam it down continuously as she looked up to the noon sky and scream unintelligible words.

Whenever I moved in, she glared at me from her front step. When I awkwardly waved, eyes afraid to meet her narrowed ones, she only scowled audibly. I moved on and never met her stare again.

My sister tried to be friendly with her, believing that anyone will open up with a few kind words.

The neighbor replied with a snarl, "*Why are you talking to me?*"

"People who do that," my mom explained when I talked to her two days after the neighbor's suicide, "are living in hell. They really see no way out and sometimes when they figure that that's what they'll do, they feel happy and relieved for the first time in a long time."

I know she felt relief.

Walking by her apartment block, the squat brick building that was right up against our apartment building, was opened to be cleaned out. I passed the open door, and something caught my eye. A dark blur had signaled to me from inside, and my curiosity wouldn't leave it alone.

I stepped back, and my stomach dropped.

"*I'm Free?*" was painted on her wall in thick, black strokes of paint.

I wouldn't last in horror movies. I couldn't even look at her doorway the same again. My brother and I relied on those shows and movies to be fake. They're movies after all. I dote on those disclaimers that say "all persons, names, and locations are fictional. Any person, living or dead, and place with the same title are purely coincidental."

I wonder about what went on in my neighbor's head every day that kept her secluded in some demented world where a guy

named John was always stalking her. We believe she chose to kill herself outside so people would find her, otherwise we wouldn't know until the stench of a decaying body rose up through the floorboards. I tried hard to picture what could be so substantial about her that she would fear and hate the world and drive off anyone who would try to reach out to her. Perhaps for her, a woman in her forties who had the behavior of an angry, abused dog, it was too late.

I find myself thinking now as I watch AMC's countdown to Halloween marathon. *The Walking Dead* is playing its fourth season, and I watch as people result to a life of combat where children fire guns and people turn on each other as animated corpses snarl and growl to consume flesh. As I cringe at the sight of bodies piling up, fake blood and flesh making my stomach sour, I sigh.

I would never survive a horror movie.

# Nine Lives

By Connie Langhorst

*Red Earth Low Residency MFA in Creative Writing/ Area of Study:  
Creative Nonfiction, Essay, Memoir/Tierra Verde, Florida*

I remember the day my sister, Lora, found the kittens. She has an inclination for finding things, four-leaf clovers, seashells, and heart-shaped rocks. Finding things helps to keep her mind off what she lost.

Lora arrived at the machine shop she ran with her husband, Max. It was predawn. Hearing a noise, they followed it to a barrel of recycled oil and were surprised by what they found—a kitten.

Using dual super powers of motherly instinct and intuition, Lora surveyed the tiny creature. Black dots scurried over the orange terrain of its fur. It was flea-infested and its belly was bloated, indicating it had spent time guzzling at mom's breakfast buffet. The mother cat did not respond to the kitten's incessant meowing. Lora guessed she was injured or met her demise on the busy street in front of their shop.

Lora and Max heard the noise again and, for a second time, went to the barrel. Another kitten had climbed to the top and was clinging to the inside rim. Lora fished it out, towed it off, and put the pair in a cardboard box, where they mewed in two-part harmony. The kittens tumbled and leaped at invisible predators. Lora peered down at them. They looked up at her. Their eyes glowed like gold-flaked marbles.

Lora carried the box, door-to-door, to neighboring businesses and did her best sales job. The first kitten found a

home. The second one did not. A lost kitten, now found, would make her daughter, Julie, happy. Lora lifted it out of the box.

The kitten was a male, likely the runt of the litter. He was scrappy, having clawed his way to the top of the barrel, hanging there until being rescued. His fur was tangled with bits of leaves, dirt, and Spanish moss. She told him how happy she was to find him. His ears, like heat-seeking missiles, locked onto the sound of her voice. Introducing him to their home would mean that Max would have to take allergy shots and use an inhaler to keep his asthma at bay. Lora knew that he would do it—for Julie.

She went to a pet store to buy cat food, catnip, toys, a leather collar with a bell on it, a litter box and cat litter, and a carrier, and took the kitten to Medicine River Animal Hospital to be vet-checked. Lora placed the kitten in the carrier. He was wet from being flea-dipped, but she knew his fur would dry into a rich marmalade color. He had found his way into her heart.

A week before, something else found its way into Lora's home . . . a hospital bed. The hospice nurse, at Julie's request, placed it in front of the sliding doors in the living room. This is when Lora imposed a rule about crying. There was no ambiguity about it. She demanded compliance. Anyone who became teary-eyed in the presence of her daughter was reprimanded with a stern look and asked to leave. The rule applied to family and friends. No exceptions.

Lora never cried, at least not in public. She existed in the air-starved space between her obsession to control cancer and her ability to accept what she could not change. Time was the enemy, and she was not willing to waste a second of it.

With the carrier in one hand and bag of pet supplies in the other, Lora marched up the steps and stopped at the front door. Before going inside, she paused to consider the implications of her actions. Max's allergies. Julie's immune system. The behavior of cats—from marking their territory to scratching and climbing. She raised the carrier and looked inside. The kitten was quiet, but his eyes were wide.

Lora was willing to sacrifice the contents of her home, her furniture and curtains, if losing them meant that her daughter had found a new friend. She took a cleansing breath and opened the door.

Despite Julie's challenges, she had a happy disposition. Watching her learn to walk with a child-sized walker was heart-wrenching. She motored with it. Each time doctors poked and prodded, and cut away a piece of tumor, she lost something necessary. Her balance. The use of an arm. Her vision in one eye. Through it all, she found ways to laugh.

There was no limit to what Julie could do. The tumor was attached to her brain stem. Removing it would render her a quadriplegic. So, the decision was made to treat it with chemo and radiation. At the age of eighteen months, she was already a cancer survivor and found ways to enjoy the gifts of childhood. She loved to sing and dress up like Strawberry Shortcake. Her blissfulness carried the weight of my family's desperation for a cure.

Julie attended high school and was an honorary cheerleader, but her teenage years proved challenging. The disease irreparably harmed her. It claimed her parents' marriage, too. Although she inherited her mother's inclination for finding things, Julie could not fix the broken parts of her life. When she reached the age of twenty-one, her doctors revised their prognosis. Her cancer was now Stage 4.

Lora handed Julie the kitten. She kissed his head, laughing at the chestnut colored "M" in his fur above its eyes. She named him Charlie, after a character in her favorite movie about a boy and a chocolate factory. He wanted a golden ticket. Holding the orange tabby in her arms, Julie believed that she had found one.

From their first meeting, Julie and Charlie were inseparable. She snuggled and napped with him. He seemed to understand that she was sick. The cat was possessive, gentle with her and feisty with others. When Julie's nurse appeared to administer medicine or tend to her port, he would pounce and pummel her with his paws. He had a favorite brush. Julie spent hours brushing him with it. If

she stopped, the cat would rub his head against the bristles in an attempt to brush himself. In these moments, the room did not feel like a sterile vacuum. Oxygen found its way into the space, allowing everyone in it to breathe.

Charlie lived by Julie's side, sleeping when she slept, playing when she felt like playing, eating when she felt like eating. When her pain intensified, his antics helped ease her pain until a self-administered dose of morphine sent her to the land of the lost.

Julie's stepfather, Max, found ways to entertain her. The pair indulged each other's wacky side. When Julie's doctor refused to grant her driving privileges, Max let her drive the golf cart. She ran over curbs and hit mailboxes. When Julie was unable to walk, Max pushed her in her wheelchair, popping it into wheelies, which she loved. For them, fun was the best medicine and they found ways to have lots of it.

They talked in code, and adopted fake accents and cartoon voices. Julie created artwork for Max. He showered her with gifts. Stuffed animals and kooky hats. They shared a fondness for store-bought cake. Max would have the bakery write something on each one in frosting. Something to make Julie laugh, like *Happy Just Because Day*, *Happy Fart Day*, or *Happy Underwear Head Day*.

Max exchanged the bobber on one of his fishing poles with a feathered cat toy and used it to go "cat fishing." He would cast the line across the living room. When the bait touched the floor, the cat pounced, ensnaring it in his paws. Julie laughed. Max laughed. Lora Laughed. She had found a four-legged lifeline.

I hid my tears behind a smile. Angry, I doubted the existence of a "higher power" that would allow a child to have cancer. My doubts evaporated each time Julie laughed and, most times, Charlie was responsible for instigating her laughter. He was a court jester, a harlequin, a prankster. To the extent animals are able to express emotion, he loved Julie. The cat with the golden eyes and obsession for being brushed that loved to catfish, sit in laundry baskets, and wiggle his way into and out of plastic

shopping bags, was her greatest love. He found a home and a best friend, but would soon lose both.

The end came suddenly. Julie died in her mother's arms with her beloved cat by her side. A fire truck responded to the 911 call. The firemen knew Julie. As a final act of grace, one of them carried her from the house to a waiting ambulance. It was, in a word, a moment. Neighbors lined the street. Lora was stoic. Max was inconsolable.

At the same time, friends of Lora and Max were grieving the loss of their cat. Struggling with his allergies and asthma, Max was getting weekly shots and using an inhaler. Being around Charlie made it worse. Lora, worried, discussed the situation with their friends. They offered to adopt the cat. Although it broke their hearts, Lora and Max were amenable to trying the adoption on a trial basis. There were, however, stipulations. Charlie, an indoor cat, would not be allowed outside, except to prowl the screened-in pool enclosure.

Lora and Max delivered Charlie to the couple's house. The cat would be loved and cared for. Max kept his cat fishing pole. Lora kept a few of Charlie's toys. She made a wallet-sized photo album featuring pictures of the cat, including some of Julie with Charlie taken when he was kitten. She displayed it on their living room coffee table and often looked at it.

The friends invited Lora and Max to visit. Lora refused. Then, the communication between them stopped. Lora suspected something. When their paths crossed at a social gathering, she approached the husband. Bypassing hello, Lora asked about Charlie. The man was evasive. Lora asked again. The man's wife intervened and, with apologies, reported that Charlie was missing. Lora heard two words. *Charlie. Missing.*

The couple did not know how the cat got out of the house. He had been lost for days. When Lora spoke, her words were coated with phlegm. Her emotion spilled into the night. Max drove through the couple's neighborhood. Lora

called Charlie's name. The cat did not respond. He was lost, as lost as her friendship with his caregivers.

The next morning, Lora called with the news. I listened. The sound of air escaping between her words was horrible to hear. I wondered if Charlie would be found and, if not, if my sister would be able to find peace.

I found the ad on Christmas Day morning. It was a Sunday. The one day of the week when I took delivery of a newspaper. I divided it into two piles: sections to be read and recycled. I wanted to read the lost and found pet column, so the classified section found its way into the "to be read" pile.

Found pets were listed first. I scanned the headlines. Found dog, dog, cat (black, wearing collar), bird (a talking cockatoo), cat (calico), iguana, dog, dog, and there it was. *FOUND CAT. In vicinity of downtown St. Pete. Call to identify.* No physical description was offered. I wanted to call the phone number in the ad and call my sister, but I resisted. It was Christmas Day. *What if it was not an orange tabby?*

I shared the ad with my husband, Tom. He noted the date was right, but the location was wrong. The cat was found downtown, several miles from the couple's home.

The day after Christmas, I phoned my sister to tell her about the ad. She ended our conversation to call about it. Minutes later, she called back and, without saying hello, told me the cat was a male declawed orange tabby. The excitement in her voice was electric.

My enthusiasm waned upon learning the cat was in the care of a homeless woman. I barraged her with questions. *How does a person without a home keep an indoor cat? Whose phone number was in the classified ad? How does one go about finding a cat in the care of a homeless person?*

Lora shared the details. The woman who placed the ad invited the homeless woman and cat to stay at her apartment on a temporary basis, given it was the holidays and an unseasonably cold December in Florida. The woman said her cat, an alpha male,

fought with the homeless woman's cat. As a consequence, the woman asked them to leave. She gave the homeless woman some food and a cat carrier, which, she told Lora, was blue with a black handle. The woman suggested they might be found in the park near the Vinoy. Lora gave the woman her phone number and asked her to call with any news.

The park had a reputation as being a place where the rich and disenfranchised met by happenstance. The rich hurried by on their way to waterfront venues. The disenfranchised congregated to accept handouts. The park was an ideal location for panhandling. Sunny most days, there were trees for shade, benches for napping, grass for sleeping, and an abandoned pavilion as shelter against the rain.

Lora and Max spent hours driving around the park and canvassing its grounds. On the second day of searching, Lora's cell phone rang. The male caller asked if she was looking for a cat. Lora told him that she was. He instructed her to meet him at the tennis courts near the Vinoy. He said the woman with the cat would be there.

Once there, Lora saw a man and woman standing by the tennis courts. The woman was holding a blue cat carrier. The man, Lora guessed he was in his thirties, pushed his hands in and out of his pockets and swayed from one foot to the other. The woman appeared to be older. Her skin was sun-damaged and wrinkled. Her hair was unruly. She was wearing a '50s-style patio dress that was too large for her small frame. Her canvas shoes, cut across the top, exposed her dirt-encrusted toenails.

Unlike the man, the woman was standing perfectly still. Only her eyes betrayed her calm demeanor as they moved, nervously, back and forth. She was holding the carrier tightly against her body and had a grip on, what Lora noticed was, a black handle.

Lora asked to look inside. The woman nodded and warily raised the carrier to eye level.

Able to make out the outline of a cat, Lora was unable, at first, to tell if it was Charlie. When a ray of light touched the creature's eyes, causing them to spark, but not take flame, the flash of gold made her cry. The woman understood her reaction and demanded proof of ownership.

Prepared for scrutiny, Lora removed the coffee table photo album from her purse and flipped through a few pages. Now, it was the woman's turn to cry. Without saying a word, she held out the carrier. Before accepting it, Lora offered the woman a crisp, new \$100 bill. The woman refused the money, asking, instead, if it would be OK to check on the cat from time-to-time. Lora agreed. The woman smiled through her tears and walked away with the man.

Charlie had been found. Tom and I could not wait to see him and drove to Lora and Max's house. The four of us sat outside, in a circle around the carrier, on their screen-enclosed pool deck. It would be, we thought, a familiar place, where Charlie once spent hours lazing in the sun and chasing lizards. We waited, anxiously, for him to step out of the carrier as my sister, in a hushed voice, shared the details of his ordeal.

Lora told us the homeless woman placed a sweater in the carrier to keep the cat warm. She said, other than the too large dress and cut-out shoes she was wearing; it was the only piece of clothing the woman owned. Our eyes turned from Lora to the carrier. The sweater, we could see, was still inside.

Lora said the homeless woman told her about the park, saying that it was not safe to sleep there for fear that someone would try to steal the cat. The woman, Lora said, slept on the beach instead, where she could protect the carrier by hiding it under a low-hanging strand of sea oats.

My heart was squeezed by these details. I was happy that Charlie had found his way home, but could not stop thinking about the homeless woman who found it.

After a while, Charlie stepped out of the carrier. My stomach lurched. He was thin and had an infected gash over one

of his eyes. His once shiny coat was lackluster. He was tentative and skittish, and his eyes were vacant. Most distressingly, his playfulness was gone.

Lora retrieved the cat toys she held in reserve and placed a soft stadium blanket on a deck chair. Charlie, afraid or unable to move, crouched in front of the carrier. With coaxing from all of us, he found his way on to the chair.

I was the one who found the ad that resulted in Charlie being found. However, later that night, when I was in bed and alone with my thoughts, I could not stop thinking about the woman who found and cared for him. *Where was she sleeping tonight? Who was tending to her wounds? Did she have a warm blanket, and food and water?*

The next day, Lora took Charlie to Medicine River Animal Hospital . . . and left him there. In time, the cat healed and his personality returned, but he was a different cat in a myriad of ways. I wondered how many of his lives were sacrificed in order for him to find his way to this place.

When details of Charlie's lost and found odyssey became known, everyone wanted to see him and donate something to the homeless woman who found him. Lora attempted to use her inclination for finding things to locate her and hoped the woman would call, as requested, to check on the cat. She never did. Lora visited the park many times, but was unable to find her.

My story does not end here. More people, it turns out, were touched by his journey. Starting with my husband . . .

. . . Tom went to the dentist to be fitted for a crown and have his teeth cleaned. In the examining room, he noticed a photograph of an orange tabby. The assistant said that it was her cat. His name, she said, was Mr. Perfect. Her husband adopted him from a shelter. The breed, she said, was endangered. Too many males and not enough females. Someday, in the not-too-distant future, the woman confessed, orange tabbies would be lost forever. With his mouth opened wide and full of latex-gloved fingers and dental instruments, Tom offered a garbled response.

The assistant professed her love for Mr. Perfect and for tabbies, in general. Then, her demeanor changed. She told Tom that Mr. Perfect had a sibling, a brother, and about how she wished her husband had adopted him, too.

When able, Tom told her about Charlie. A few days later, during my teeth cleaning, the assistant blindsided me by asking about the “lost and found” cat. I detailed Charlie’s journey, going back to the time when he was first found, clinging to the side of an oil barrel, and how he stayed by Julie’s side until she was lost to us.

After my appointment, I received a phone call from the assistant. She suggested that our dentist, Dr. Vestal, wanted to meet Charlie. I thanked her for calling and indicated I would relay his request to Lora.

A few days later, on a follow-up appointment, Dr. Vestal entered the room and immediately asked me about Charlie. I detailed his progress, telling him that the cat was now living at Medicine River Animal Hospital.

As I spoke, Dr. Vestal’s eyes welled with tears. He told me his eleven-year-old daughter had a tumor in her lung. She was, he said, an active girl, involved in cheerleading and sports. The tumor was large, but treatable. He and his wife had taken her to the emergency room after she complained of an upset stomach and coughed up blood. He told me that she was recovering at home and needed lots of bed rest to get better. Dr. Vestal told me that he shared the story of the found cat with his daughter and upon hearing it, she wanted to adopt the cat.

Now, I understood why he was interested in Charlie, but his story gave me pause. Just as Max’s breathing was compromised by his allergies and asthma, his daughter’s health was compromised by the tumor in her lung. *Would she be able to live with a cat and, if not, would Charlie end up being lost again?*

Dr. Vestal reported that his family had a rambunctious puppy that was growing into a large dog, that they had never owned a cat, and that there were other, smaller, children in the home. The details of his life poured out. He was adamant about

wanting to see (and possibly provide a new home for) Charlie. He then stopped in midsentence. There was no need for him to say anything more. What he wished to convey was displayed on his face. I could see what he was afraid of losing.

It can be difficult to verbalize fear. Nine intersecting lives touched by a cat that was lost and found, only to be lost again before being found by a homeless woman who helped him find his way home.

Charlie still lives at Medicine River Animal Hospital. Tom and I take our dog, Moby, there for checkups and always ask to see the cat. The staff loves him. They are protective, but happily oblige. A vet tech carries Charlie into the room and places him on the fleece blanket on top of the examining table. The cat, recognizing us, purrs, loudly. He lowers his head and rubs it against us. He lifts his paw, offering a “howdy do,” and turns somersaults. His eyes are bright and his coat is shiny. There is no evidence of his wounds—or of his traumatic ordeal.

Charlie seems happy to see us, but stays close to the vet tech. When know he has had enough when he jumps onto her shoulder and waves a paw at the door leading to the back room—and his quiet space, the place where he feels most at home.

My sister occasionally stops by the vet’s office to deliver a check to offset the cost of Charlie’s care, but she does not ask about the cat or want to see him. I understand how difficult it must be, given all that she has lost.

Call it instinct or a sixth sense. Whatever force of nature that allows animals to love us unconditionally. Whatever it is that enables them to know when we need closeness or help easing our sadness and suffering—and loneliness.

Charlie cat touched many lives in this way. I often think about my niece, Julie, and wonder about the homeless woman who found her beloved cat. I wonder if the woman is beloved, if she has found a home and someone to care for her.

It is human nature to wonder about these things. Such questions hint at the lost and found ways in which we live our lives. The irony of this should not be lost on any of us.



# SCREENPLAYS —————

# A Note On Screenplays

By Mercedes Bigham

*Screenplays tell stories through characters' actions and dialogue, only showing what is heard and seen on screen. Screenwriters use characters' actions to develop character and advance the plot. It is all about what goes on in the world between characters.*

*They use a different format from plays or prose, relying on scene headings, transitions, action lines, characters, and dialogue. The intro to a scene is called a scene heading. It will include EXT. (exterior) or INT. (interior), the location's name, and DAY, NIGHT, or CONTINUOUS. These tell the reader the setting and time of day. CONTINUOUS is used if a scene is directly after the one before it. The writer uses a new scene heading for any change in time or location.*

*When characters are first introduced their names are capitalized and followed by their age and a short description. When characters speak, their names appear centered on the page and capitalized. If a character is not shown on screen when they speak, O.S. (off-screen), or V.O. (voiceover) will appear beside his or her name. Other sounds will appear capitalized. If an actor needs specific information to say the line with the right inflection, a word may appear in parenthesis under the character name. This parenthetical is usually an adverb.*

*Transitions appear flush to the left of the page for introductory transitions and to the right for ending transitions. A reader may also see the words C.U. (close-up) or INSERT. Writers only dictate shots when absolutely necessary for the effect of a scene.*

*Writers use this format for ease of reading. Screenplays are meant to be read quickly, so each line gets quickly to the point with a subject and verb, focusing on the exterior world and interactions between characters.*

*An Excerpt From*

# Jeff & Julia

FACULTY SELECTION  
OUTSTANDING SCREENPLAY

By Mercedes Bigham

*Junior/Film Production and English/Newcastle, Oklahoma*

EXT. JEFF & JULIA'S HOUSE/PORCH - DAY

Concrete porch. Green grass. Grill, outdoor chairs, and table. JEFF, twenties, brooding, sits outside, plucking his guitar.

A car pulls up.

JULIA, twenties, Jeff's wife, steps off the porch, waving.

Several KIDS fall out and rush toward their aunt.

Julia welcomes them. Jeff smiles hesitantly at them and continues to play.

NICK steps out of the driver's side. Nick, twenties, athletic, a young professional, laughs at the children's excitement. He catches one Child and whispers in her ear. She excitedly runs away and disappears. SARAH, twenties, well-groomed housewife, Julia's sister, and Nick's wife, takes a BABY from the car. Julia comes to coo over the baby.

The Child grabs a ball from the yard and tosses it at Jeff's head, who isn't paying attention. He barely deflects it.

NICK  
(triumphantly)  
Too slow!

Child runs back to her father. They high-five.

SARAH  
Nick, be nice.

Sarah shoos Child and follows her. Julia approaches Nick.

JULIA  
Why can't you two ever get off on the right foot?

NICK  
I guess it's our power dynamic.

Julia crosses her arms.

JULIA

Trying to say you're more powerful?

Nick winks.

Julia frowns and turns away.

Nick plays with the kids in the yard.

Julia approaches Jeff as he stands.

JEFF

Well, I'm gonna head inside.

JULIA

(frustrated)

Come on. Stay.

He goes inside. Julia sighs.

Kids play with the dog.

EXT. PORCH STEP - LATER

Julia and Sarah sit side by side. Sarah bounces her Baby.

O.S. KIDS BABBLING AND LAUGHING

JULIA

How do you first know when you're pregnant?

SARAH  
Am I the expert now?

Julia forces a smile.

JULIA  
Compared to me.

Beat.

JULIA (CONT'D)  
I've just been a little...

Julia motions abstractly at her stomach.

SARAH  
Nauseous?

Chuckles. They watch Nick play with the kids. He picks them up, lifts them into the air.

Julia watches intently.

INT. MASTER BATHROOM - NIGHT

Spotless bathroom. Clutter-free. Julia stares at the counter, holding her breath.

A PREGNANCY TEST sits on the edge. It slowly turns negative. She deflates.

INT. JEFF & JULIA'S HOUSE/KITCHEN - LATER

Stainless steel. Glittering appliances.  
Julia prepares a salad on the kitchen  
island.

Jeff, with a beer, settles on the other  
side of the counter.

JULIA

I've been meaning to ask you something.

Jeff takes a swig.

JULIA (CONT'D)

I think we should get fertility tests. You  
know, just to make sure nothing's wrong.

It's just—

Jeff sits his drink down with a CLINK.

JEFF

No.

Julia drops her utensil.

JULIA

Why? Are you scared?

JEFF

Infertility is nothing to be scared of... I  
have my reasons.

Jeff leaves the kitchen.

JULIA  
(mutters)

You can't be that scared of the doctor.

O.S. DOORBELL

INT. ENTRY - CONTINUOUS

Julia hesitates toward the front door. She stops, takes a deep breath, collects herself, and opens the door.

Sarah and Nick enter. Sarah hugs her.

EXT. PORCH - LATER

Jeff flips meat on a grill. Nick sits, smoking.

NICK  
(indicating cigarette)

Kids would go nuts if they saw me.  
(to Jeff)

But you don't have to worry about that.

With no acknowledgement, Nick continues.

NICK (CONT'D)

Must be shooting blanks. Might as well be  
gay.

Finally, Jeff turns from the grill.

JEFF

I'm not gay. I just can't have kids.

Nick shrugs.

INT. JEFF & JULIA'S HOUSE/DINING ROOM -  
LATER

Julia, Jeff, Sarah, and Nick sit around the table. Their plates are mostly empty. Wine bottle, glasses, and beer bottles on the table. Nick takes a sloppy swig, obviously drunk. Sarah sips wine, trying to ignore her husband. Jeff sips, staring at Nick.

Julia breaks the awkward silence as she rises.

JULIA

Ready for dessert?

NICK

Hell yeah!

He pats Julia on the rump as she passes.

Julia jumps. Jeff gives Nick the stink eye. Julia continues into the kitchen. Nick chokes laughter.

SARAH

Nick! That's inappropriate.

NICK

Especially when her husband's around!

Jeff jumps up. Jeff holds back the full force of his anger.

JEFF

I've had to deal with your shit for too long!

Nick looks mildly abashed but defiant. Sarah holds back tears.

Julia, with a tray of cookies, halts in the doorway. Jeff points to her.

JEFF (CONT'D)  
Apologize or leave!

Awkward silence grows.

NICK

Sorry, that was inappropriate.

Jeff sits. Julia settles the tray on the table. Sarah refills her wine. Nick stares at the table.

*An Excerpt From*

# We Live in the Flicker

By Erik Matthew Thacker

*Senior/Film Production/ Villa Rica, Georgia*

INT. CAMPING TENT - DAY (MOS)

"Gospel" song plays.

A bright red dome camping tent. The tiny interior is cluttered by survival supplies.

Women's voices (O.S.)  
(Sings)

Go to sleep my child, go to sleep.

DANIELLA, early-20s, face and hair of a fairy-tale princess. Daniella is thin and athletic with white, soft skin. She wears a bright-red HOODIE.

Daniella sleeps beneath a thick stack of patchwork-BLANKETS.

MEMORY FLASH:

INT. LARGE RED BLANKET - NIGHT (MOS)

TRACY, male, 18-25, muscular, attractive.

Tracy looms over Daniella beneath a huge red blanket. They smile at each other.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. CAMPING TENT - DAY (MOS)

Women's voices (O.S.)

(Sings)

Dare to dream, and you will dream.

Eerie handprints press into the walls of the tent. Daniella stirs uncomfortably.

MEMORY IMAGES: The interlocked, youthful hands of Tracy and Daniella.

Women's voices (O.S.) (CONT'D)

(Sings)

If you dream, my child; dream. I will take you...

Daniella kicks violently under the covers.

MEMORY FLASH:

EXT. CITY ALLEY - DAY (PAST)

Tracy and Daniella flee through the alley from an unseen threat.

BACK TO PRESENT:

INT. CAMPING TENT - DAY (MOS)

Women's voices (O.S.)

(Sings)

If you dream, my child; dream. I will take  
you to...

The handprints draw back from the tent in a  
rush.

MEMORY FLASH:

INT. TINY MAINTENANCE ROOM - DAY (MOS)

Dark, dank, and closet-sized; the walls are  
lined with aged pipes thick with rust. A  
single open doorway to the outside world.

Tracy shoves Daniella through the open door  
into the room. Daniella grabs his wrist. He  
wrestles her off and slams the door behind.  
Daniella screams in protest as the door  
closes.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. CAMPING TENT - DAY (MOS)

"Gospel" stops playing.

SILENT:

Daniella's eyes open and panic washes over her face.

EXT. CAMPSITE - DAY

SILENT:

A barren countryside beyond the outskirts of Oklahoma City. The atmosphere is cold and grey. A disorganized campsite sits in a dirt clearing. A LARGE SACK lies against a nearby tree.

Two female ZOMBIES, 30-45, colorless skin, torn clothes, wild bloodshot eyes, stand posed to drive stakes through the red dome tent with Daniella inside.

"Gospel Action Version" song plays.

Daniella flies out of the tent. She avoids the stakes as they pierce the tent.

Daniella rolls uncomfortably over the campfire. She grabs a TINY SHOVEL. She smacks Zombie 2 in the shin. Zombie 2 wails in pain.

Daniella throws an EMPTY COFFEE CAN at Zombie 2's face.

Daniella is on her feet. She shoulder-tackles Zombie 2 into the stake of her

companion. The scavengers stare at one another in confusion. Zombie 2 dies.

Zombie 1 roars and struggles to free her weapon. She throws Zombie 2 to the ground and rushes at Daniella. Daniella fakes left and right.

Daniella turns completely around and runs in the opposite direction. Daniella lets out DOG WHISTLES. Zombie 1 pursues.

Daniella circles back to the campsite. She performs a mock-dance move as she runs by. Zombie 1 continues to pursue, slower now.

DANIELLA

(Sings)

Time to rest, dear mother. Time to rest.  
Dare to dream, and you will dream.

Daniella circles back to the campsite. She pauses at the edge of the site and claps mockingly at Zombie 1, who sluggishly fumbles toward her.

Zombie 1 lunges. Daniella effortlessly sidesteps and snatches the stake from her hands. Zombie 1 lands against a tree.

DANIELLA (CONT'D)

(Sings)

If you dream; dream I will send you...

Daniella pins Zombie 1 to the tree with the  
stake.

DANIELLA (CONT'D)

(Sings)

I will send you to hell!

"Gospel Action Version" song ends.

BLACK SCREEN: "We Live In The Flicker: An  
Apocalyptic Sing-a-Long"

*An Excerpt From*

# The Desert

By Mercedes Bigham

*Junior/Film Production and English/Newcastle, Oklahoma*

Fade in:

EXT. DESERT - NOON

Red dirt expanse, mountains on the horizon,  
a two-lane highway stretches away.

A rough muscular man kneels on the dirt,  
his hands cuffed behind his back, CARLOS.  
He struggles with the bonds. A red vintage  
convertible is parked behind him, some ways  
off.

CARLOS

This isn't about the money is it?  
Cause I don't have it. I burnt it. I have  
no use for money. I live on the chase...  
on the kill. And you will not be able to  
beat me. I am a juggernaut, a golem, a...

Standing in front of him on the blacktop is  
ALEXIA, mid twenties, all hard eyes and

vicious smiles. As Carlos continues she rolls her eyes.

ALEXIA

(mutters)

Give me a break.

She draws a gun and fires from her hip. Carlos falls backward, legs bent awkwardly.

Alexia sighs and re-holsters her handgun. She goes to the convertible. The wind ruffles Carlos' jacket. She goes back to his body with a two liter of gas, pours it over his body, and drops the plastic bottle on him. From her pocket she withdraws a matchbook, lights one, and lets it fall. Flames eat Carlos's body as she drives away.

C.U.

Gas gauge at empty. Light comes on.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

The whole place is covered in dirt, with only scraps of pavement peaking through. The pumps don't take credit cards.

The red convertible pulls up to the outside edge of the tanks. Alexia hops over the car door.

RICHARD is ejected from the door, flat on his face as she approaches. Richard, thirties, looks like trailer park white trash. JUAN, the manager, hustles out after him, cussing him in Spanish, then breaks into English. Richard tries to scramble away. Juan crushes his ankle with a booted foot.

Alexia smirks.

JUAN

If Carlos hears your gringo voice around here I'll have trouble, and that means trouble for you.

Juan kicks him. Alexia tires of watching.

ALEXIA

Juan, I need a tank of gas.

The two men notice her for the first time. Juan with apprehension, Richard with obvious shock then jackal's eyes.

JUAN

Who are you working for today?

Alexia studies her nails.

ALEXIA

Not Carlos.

JUAN

Que?

Alexia takes a belt buckle from her pocket and throws it at Juan's feet. 'Carlos' is inscribed in Cowboy fashion across the gaudy silver piece.

Juan looks from the leftovers to Alexia. He stumbles back into the store. Richard continues to gaze at Alexia. She pivots and jumps into the car.

Richard trips trying to get up. He grabs the driver door as Alexia fires the engine.

ALEXIA

Idiot, do you want to be shot?

The unmistakable cocking of a shotgun can be heard. Alexia slams down the pedal, Richard attempts to jump in the backseat, and Juan fires at the convertible's gas tank all at the same time.

The shot blasts out the driver side taillight, Richard is drug a few feet before he swings himself into the car.

Alexia yells like a demon.

RICHARD

Are you shot?

She yanks the wheel to the left, sending Richard flailing. She pulls a gun, hidden under the steering column. The car shoots between the gas tanks and the building, she fires at Juan who has retreated behind the counter inside.

RICHARD (CONT'D)  
What are you doing?

ALEXIA  
He broke my taillight!

She yanks the wheel again, making the car do a full three-sixty, then abruptly brakes. The engine growls as she searches in the glove box for something. Richard flails around to regain a seat.

RICHARD  
Your tail light? We can get your taillight fixed. We can't fix a bullet in my brain!

Alexia triumphantly holds up a grenade.

RICHARD (CONT'D)  
Oh my god.

ALEXIA  
You're going to throw this-

RICHARD  
--No I'm not--

ALEXIA

--while I drive. When I say, okay?

She shoves the grenade into his hand and, as an afterthought, pulls the pin. She quickly slams on the gas. The wheels spin and kick up a column of dust. She aims the car between the pumps and the store. Just before the car is even with the door she yells-

ALEXIA (CONT'D)

Now!

Richard baseball throws the grenade.

INT. STORE - DAY

Dirty and sparsely stocked.

Behind the counter, Juan reloads his shotgun that the grenade miraculously bounces off and to the floor.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Richard, twisted around in the car, watches as Alexia drives. The station explodes, then a few seconds later the gas tanks explode. They drive away down the two-lane highway.

INT/EXT CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Richard turns around from watching the explosion and shakes his head in disbelief.

ALEXIA

Tell me you're not thinking about the cops right now? And if you are I'll be forced to do something about that. If you did something to piss off Juan you're better off now.

She waves the pistol in the air, and puts both hands on the wheel still holding it.

RICHARD

No! I've never seen anything like that before.

He climbs into the passenger seat. After a beat, he extends his hand.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Richard.

Alexia begrudgingly replaces her handgun under the wheel to shake his hand.

ALEXIA

Alexia.

Beat.

RICHARD  
So who do you work for?

ALEXIA  
Adrian Veron. You?

RICHARD  
No one.

ALEXIA  
If you're in this part of the desert,  
you work for someone.

RICHARD  
Myself.

EXT. TRAVEL PLAZA - NIGHT

Alexia stands at a payphone, the receiver held an inch from her ear to avoid the germs. As the gas pumps, Richard sits on the rear of the car out of earshot.

EXT. RESORT BALCONY - CONTINUOUS

ADRIAN, thirties, tall, white, blond, with an air of self-importance and self-involvement, stands on the balcony under neon lights. He holds a drink. A raucous party is going on behind and around him. Somehow in all this, he hears his phone.

ADRIAN  
Yes, Alexia?

He sets his glass on the tray of a cocktail waitress and leans on the very edge of the balcony. Even over the phone he puts on an air for her.

ALEXIA (O.S.)  
Carlos is dead. And so is Juan.

ADRIAN  
Oh you've lost your temper once again?

ALEXIA (O.S.)  
It was my car.

ADRIAN  
It's not like that isn't covered in  
your expenses.

Alexia sighs.

ALEXIA (O.S.)  
I've picked someone up. He was about  
to get his ass handed to him by Juan. Can I  
keep him?

ADRIAN  
We'll see. If you can be good until  
you get here.

ALEXIA (O.S.)  
Alright.

ADRIAN  
Alright.

He hangs up.

EXT. TRAVEL PLAZA - NIGHT

Alexia replaces the receiver and walks to the car. Richard replaces the nozzle.

RICHARD  
Are you allowed to keep me?

ALEXIA  
I am.

They get into the car and drive off.

*An Excerpt From*

# Barrington

By Eric Kuritz

*Senior/Film Production/Columbia, South Carolina*

FADE IN:

INT. AARON'S APARTMENT - DAY

Gray. Minimal furnishings.

AARON BARRINGTON, early twenties, dressed in a shirt and tie, lies on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He sits up and looks out the window.

Aaron stands and walks to a chair with a jacket draped over the back. He picks up the jacket and puts it on.

He walks toward the door, stops in front of a cracked mirror with a postcard of a beach tucked into the frame.

He looks into the mirror, studies his face, and then straightens his tie. He exits.

EXT. CITY STREET A - DAY

Crowded. Businessmen in a hurry to make money.

Aaron stands on a corner and scans the crowd. His eyes stop on something. A BUSINESSMAN waits at a bus stop.

Aaron walks toward the Businessman. In far b.g., two men, COREY and JEFF, watch Aaron.

Businessman looks down the street. Aaron bumps into him.

Aaron's hand slides into the Businessman's coat, removes a wallet. The hand slips out of the coat.

Aaron gives an apologetic look to the Businessman. In b.g. Corey and Jeff walk toward Aaron. Aaron walks away from the bus stop. They follow. Aaron looks over his shoulder, sees them.

He quickens his pace. They match pace. Aaron dashes around the corner. The chase is on.

EXT. CITY STREET B - CONTINUOUS

Sparsely crowded.

Aaron sprints down the street. The men gain ground.

Aaron runs into the street.

O.S. CAR TIRES SCREECH

Aaron narrowly avoids the car, stumbles to the ground.

Corey lifts Aaron up. They drag him around a corner.

EXT. DOWNTOWN ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Trash blows along the ground.

They drag Aaron down the alley. Jeff slams Aaron backwards, pins him against the wall.

Corey belts Aaron in the stomach. Aaron hunches over. Corey reaches into Aaron's jacket, removes the businessman's wallet. He shows it to Jeff.

COREY

This is our turf.

Jeff forces Aaron to his knees.

Corey reaches into his jacket, pulls out a pistol.

COREY (CONT'D)

Don't ever come 'round again. If you do...

He thrusts the gun into Aaron's face. Aaron looks up into Corey's eyes. Corey pistol whips Aaron.

CUT TO BLACK

O.S. CAT MEOWS

EXT. DOWNTOWN ALLEY - EVENING

Aaron lies face down, by his head sits a cat. He looks up at the cat. The cat wanders down the alley.

Aaron stands up, gets his bearings. He walks down the alley.

A man smokes a cigarette next to a dumpster. The cat MEOWS at his feet. He kicks the cat. Aaron picks up his pace. He punches the man. The man hits the ground. Aaron walks to the cat. He picks it up.

AARON

Let's get you something to eat.

Aaron carries the cat down the alley, turns the corner.

INT. Apartment building highway - NIGHT

As he walks down the hallway, Aaron holds the cat. He stops in front of a door, pulls out his keys. Unlock the door and reveals... In a chair sits CAL, late twenties, nicely dressed, eyes trained on Aaron.

INT. AARON'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Aaron enters, looks at Cal, and stops.  
Beat.

Aaron walks to the fridge, opens it, and grabs an open can of tuna. He goes to the table.

CAL

You and your f [REDACTED] strays.

Aaron places the tuna and the cat on the table. The cat eats. Cal looks closer at Aaron's face, notices the bruises.

CAL (CONT'D)

Need me to take care of that for you?

AARON

It's...it's nothing.

Cal gives a questioning look.

CAL  
Remember last time you said that?

AARON  
We're not kids anymore.

Cal gives the apartment the once over.

AARON (CONT'D)  
I'm doing fine on my own.

Cal stands up, walks to the mirror. Aaron sits down, pets the cat. Cal looks at himself, then notices the postcard. He snatches it.

CAL  
What's this?

Aaron's eyes dart to the postcard. Cal studies Aaron's face. Cal laughs to himself.

CAL (CONT'D)  
Wanna go somewhere?

Cal rips up the postcard and tosses it on the table.

CAL (CONT'D)  
I'll show you what to do.

Aaron sinks into the chair.

CAL (CONT'D)

Friday. Three o'clock. The Tavern.

Cal walks toward the door.

Aaron looks at the postcard.

INSERT - POSTCARD

O.S. DOOR CLOSES

INT. AARON'S APARTMENT - DAY

Rain hits the window. Aaron lies on the bed.

He sits up and looks out the window.

O.S. CAT MEOWS

Aaron turns toward the cat. He gets up, walks to the fridge, opens it. No tuna. He closes the fridge, looks down. The cat MEOWS as it rubs against his leg.

He looks at his watch: two-thirty.

He bends down, pets the cat. He exits.

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

In a long line at the register, Aaron holds cans of tuna. In b.g. clock reads 3:15.

INT. AARON'S APARTMENT - DAY

With a grocery sack in his hand, Aaron enters. He looks up, stops. By the window stands Cal, face marked up from a fight.

CAL  
Where were you?

Aaron stares at Cal.

CAL (CONT'D)  
God!

Aaron looks around the apartment.

AARON  
Where's the...

Cal's eyes burn through Aaron.

CAL  
(steps toward Aaron)  
Let that thing out.

AARON  
But...

Cal knocks the sack out of Aaron's hands.

CAL  
Get your head out of your ass!

Cal gets into Aaron's face.

CAL (CONT'D)

Gave you a simple job. Just had to show up.

Aaron looks over Cal's face.

AARON

Are...are you okay?

CAL

No. Thanks to you.

AARON

I'm sorry.

CAL

Right.

(beat)

One more chance, all you're gonna  
get...Well?

AARON nods.

Cal (CONT'D)

Don't f [REDACTED] this up.

Cal storms out of the apartment.

*An Excerpt From*

# Stacy, NY

By Mercedes Bigham

*Junior/Film Production and English/Newcastle, Oklahoma*

FADE IN:

INT. ELEVATOR - NIGHT

Four girls stand in the elevator; they straighten and primp their cocktail dresses. There is STACY, twenty-five, bouncy brunette; ALONA, twenty-six, first generation American, heavy Russian accent; MARIA, twenty-two, Hispanic, perfect English; and CASSIE, twenty-three, too tall to be classically attractive.

O.S. ELEVATOR DING

They anticipate the doors opening. Sexy red light spills into the elevator and their eyes widen.

INT. ENTRY - TOP FLOOR RESTAURANT -  
CONTINUOUS

High-ceiling. Glass top tables. Neon accents. Breathtaking city view. Men in

suits and women in svelte dresses talk, laugh, and drink.

HOSTESS, perfectly polite young woman, smiles at the girls.

HOSTESS

Do you ladies have a reservation?

Hostess's pen rolls off the desk onto the floor. She bends to pick it up. Stacy leans over the host stand, spying the list.

Hostess rises.

STACY

Has, um, Mr. Burns arrived yet?

Hostess analyzes the list, analyzes Stacy.

Tense moment.

Stacy raises her chin a little higher. Hostess makes a mark on the list.

HOSTESS

Not yet. Would you like me to go ahead and seat you?

Stacy flashes a dazzling smile.

STACY

Yes, please.

INT. TABLE - TOP FLOOR RESTAURANT -  
CONTINUOUS

Sleek glass table. Shining tableware.  
The girls grin uneasily as the waiter fills  
long-stemmed glasses with water then turns  
away.

Maria leans in.

MARIA  
Ohmygod Stacy!

ALONA  
Calm down.

Cassie sips from her glass.

STACY  
It will be fine. I guarantee you it's an  
old man and his wife. He'll be surprised  
to see so many pretty girls at his table,  
so he'll buy us dinner.

ALONA  
Besides, he won't want to make a scene.

Maria sits back, tense. Stacy takes in the  
classy surroundings. Cassie pokes her  
finger at a silver fork. Alona peruses the  
menu.

BURNS (O.S.)  
Ladies.

All girls jump.

BURNS, thirties, handsome dark-haired man,  
stands beside the table.

STEPHENSON, thirties, less attractive than  
his business partner, stands behind him.

BURNS (CONT'D)

The hostess said my party had tripled.

He sits beside Stacy. Stephenson sits  
beside Marie. The girls hold their breath.

Burns picks up a menu.

BURNS (CONT'D)

So what are we all having?

The girls relax.

CASSIE

Haven't really looked.

MARIE

Everything's so...

Burns waves over the waiter.

BURNS

Give us whatever the appetizer special is  
and I'll have a Sazerac.

The waiter pauses in writing down his order, looks at Burns.

BURNS (CONT'D)

It's cognac, absinthe, bitters.

STEPHENSON

Brandy, please.

ALONA

Can I have a pinot noir, please?

MARIE

Shot of tequila.

CASSIE

White wine spritzer.

The waiter opens his mouth, like he'll ask for IDs but then looks to Burns. Burns waves him off.

Marie and Cassie exchange a triumphant, but impressed look.

Burns leans in to the girls.

BURNS

So how did we arrive here?

CASSIE  
Alona's cab.

BURNS  
You drive a cab?

ALONA  
Yeah.

Burns looks into each of the girls' eyes,  
leaving them wilting.

He looks Stacy up and down, her dress is  
noticeably more expensive than the others.

Stephenson loudly SIPS his water.

STACY  
So what do you two do?

BURNS  
Stockbrokers.

Stacy nods, ripping her eyes away from him.  
The waiter brings the drinks. Burns focuses  
on Stacy even as he sips.

EXT. OH2 CLUB LINE - NIGHT

City street. Various interesting characters  
line up on the sidewalk inside a velvet  
rope. Stacy and Alona in shimmering dresses  
catwalk past the line.

ALONA

(to Stacy)

How will Marie and Cassie find us?

STACY

Don't worry.

BOUNCER with clipboard sits at the head of the unmoving line, in front of a door surrounded by neon. He appreciatively takes in the girls' copious cleavage.

As Stacy and Alona approach the head of the line, Alona looks around nervously. Stacy smiles at Bouncer.

STACY (CONT'D)

(to Bouncer)

How are you this evening, sir?

She extends her hand, in her palm a twenty dollar bill folded neatly.

BOUNCER

Fantastic.

He touches her palm then slides his hand under the paper on his clipboard. He gestures to the door.

Stacy takes Alona's hand and pulls her along.

INT. OH2 CLUB - CONTINUOUS

Blackness. Rainbow strobe lights. A DJ at one end, a bar at the other and pretty dancing people in between.

Stacy leans over the bar, noticeable in strapless dress. Alona texts behind her. People push in all around them. Stacy receives a colorful shot and turns around to Alona.

ALONA

Can you get Burns in?

Stacy exclaims in dismay.

ALONA (CONT'D)

What?

Stacy shoves the shot at her.

ALONA (CONT'D)

I think he's... nice.

Stacy settles on a barstool.

STACY

Did you see his shoes?

ALONA

Yeah.

Alona leans next to her.

STACY

He showed them to you didn't he?

Alona pulls herself onto a seat and nods.

Stacy rolls her eyes.

STACY (CONT'D)

He's one of those. He won't amount to anything.

Alona looks down at her phone.

ALONA

Well he's in. Probly pulled the same trick you did.

Stacy pouts, unamused. Alona grins. Stacy turns away. BARTENDER lecherously grins at her. Stacy pulls a smile.

STACY

Can I get a water please?

Bartender moves away.

STACY (CONT'D)

He'll drag you around until something better comes along.

Alona smolders anger.

ALONA

Unlike Ralph.

Stacy snaps her head around to her friend.  
Burns falls into the bar between them.

BURNS  
Wild out there!

Alona puts on a happy act. Bartender places  
water in front of Stacy.

BURNS (CONT'D)  
(to Bartender)  
Can I get a beer?

ALONA  
Surprised you got in so easily.

BURNS  
Me too.  
(to Stacy)  
Hey Stacy.

Stacy gives a thin-lipped smile.

Burns (CONT'D)  
Where are your other little friends?

Stacy, unbeknownst to them, rolls her eyes.

ALONA  
They're coming.

Bartender pops top on beer. Alona looks at  
her phone.

ALONA (CONT'D)  
They're here.

STACY  
They'll never get in unless you go get  
them.

Alona hops off the barstool.

BURNS  
We'll hold the spots.

Alona gives Stacy a 'please behave' look as  
she leaves. Stacy looks into her drink.

BURNS (CONT'D)  
So you in school?

STACY  
Yes.

Burns waits for more. He frowns,  
disappointed.

BURNS  
What are you studying?

STACY  
You'll never guess.

BURNS  
Photography.

Stacy rolls her eyes.

BURNS (CONT'D)  
Education?

Stacy looks away. Bartender looks at her cleavage. Stacy turns her body toward Burns, engaging.

STACY  
Chemistry. Master's.

Burns raises his eyebrows, surprised, a bit intimidated.

BURNS  
Wow. What d'you plan to do with that?

STACY  
I had an internship this summer with a lab called MedWork.

BURNS  
I know their stock: it's good.

STACY  
I have an in to get a job there.

BURNS  
An in?

STACY  
Aric Holdings is buying the lab. I know Ralph Aric.

BURNS

You know him? Personally?

Stacy nods. Burns shakes his head.

BURNS (CONT'D)

This is insider information-

CASSIE (o.S.)

--Hey y'all!

Cassie appears beside Stacy's shoulder. Marie leans against Cassie. Alona slips into the seat beside Burns. Cassie distracts Burns with chatter. Stacy turns from her friends, already mentally withdrawn. Bartender stands in front of Stacy.

BARTENDER

(to Stacy)

You two together?

Stacy narrows her eyes, can't decide whether to answer. She sighs and hops off the barstool. She walks into the crowd.

The Girls and Burns watch her walk off.

BURNS

(to Alona)

I'll get her.

Burns bounds after Stacy.

Alona tries to get Bartender's attention.

INT. OH2 CLUB ENTRY HALL - CONTINUOUS

Darkness. Distant from music and neon.

Stacy marches toward the entrance. Burns hustles behind her. He touches her shoulder. Stacy shrugs him off.

BURNS  
You okay?

Stacy whips around to face him.

STACY  
You know, you remind me of someone.

Burns decides to be complimented.

STACY (CONT'D)  
And I don't like you doing this to Alona.

Burns closes the polite social distance between them.

BURNS  
Because I want you?

With his body, he pushes her against the wall. He leans toward her lips. Her mouth stays just out of reach. Stacy presses his

face with her palms and wiggles away and continues to the entrance.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Classy, high-ceiling. Filled with men in suits and women in flashy dresses.

RALPH ARIC, Stacy's boyfriend, late thirties, sharp eyes, business suit, stands in front of a table of men, including FRED, twenty-seven, intellectual type, and ALAN, forty-five, prospective investor. He twirls Stacy in her new revealing dress. The group watches appreciatively.

Fred, wearing a gaudy sparkling tie, smirks at Ralph.

FRED

You two met at MedWork, right?

Ralph puts his arms around Stacy, claiming her.

Stacy analyzes each man at the table. Each wears designer labels, some are ill-fitting. Most are trying too hard to look as young as Fred.

RALPH

Meeting her made me decide to buy the company.

ALAN

Just like a princess.

Alan winks at Stacy. Stacy smiles, hiding disgust. Ralph's mouth twitches a half smile.

RALPH

I'll see you, gentlemen.

Group sputters good-byes. Ralph and Stacy walk to their table.

INT. RALPH'S TABLE - LATER

Ralph hunches over a glass of scotch. Stacy peruses the menu, bored. Stacy closes the menu.

STACY

He's late isn't he?

Ralph leans back in his chair, agitated. Stacy inches closer.

Under the table, Stacy runs her hand up his leg.

Ralph's gaze burns. He clutches her chin with one large hand.

Stacy giggles as he leans over and kisses her. She smiles into his insistent kisses.

O.S. THROAT CLEARING

Ralph turns his head, irritated. He holds Stacy in place.

Burns stands by the table, like a berated boy. He notices Stacy, brief recognition. She widens her eyes in surprise, but hides it from Ralph.

Ralph leans back into his seat.

RALPH

Burns. You're late.

Burns

It's raining. There were no cabs.

Burns shrugs. He settles across from Ralph. Waiter comes over to the table.

Stacy practically clutches at the waiter.

STACY

Can I get a rum and coke?

Ralph raises an eyebrow. Waiter looks to Burns.

BURNS

Vodka martini, extra dry.

Waiter moves off.

RALPH

(to Stacy)

Perhaps you should take it slower, darling.

Stacy snaps back into herself. She dazzles Ralph with a sultry smile.

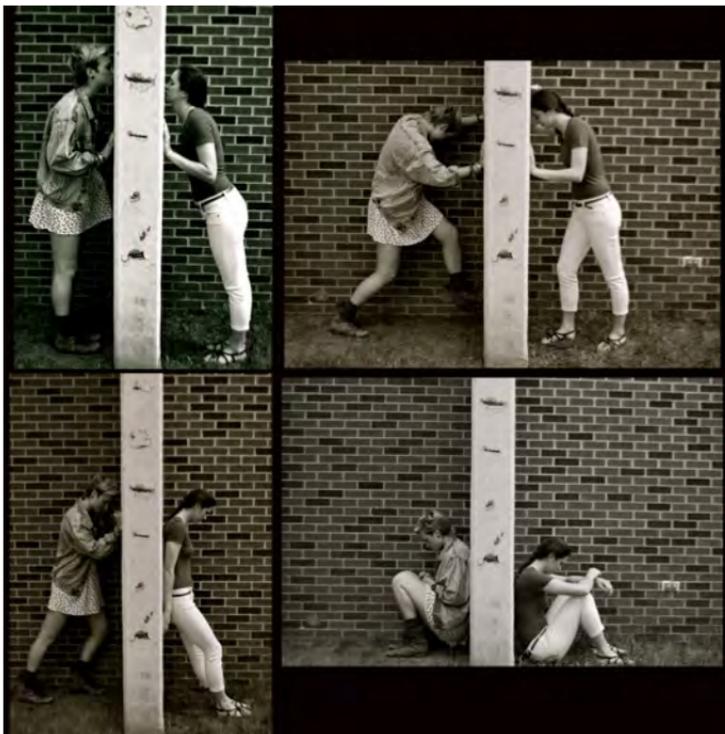
STACY

I'm feeling it tonight.

Ralph smiles, wolf-like. Burns's teeth set on edge, put off by the display. Ralph pulls his eyes from Stacy to Burns, discerning.

# VISUAL ART —————

FACULTY SELECTION  
*OUTSTANDING VISUAL ART*



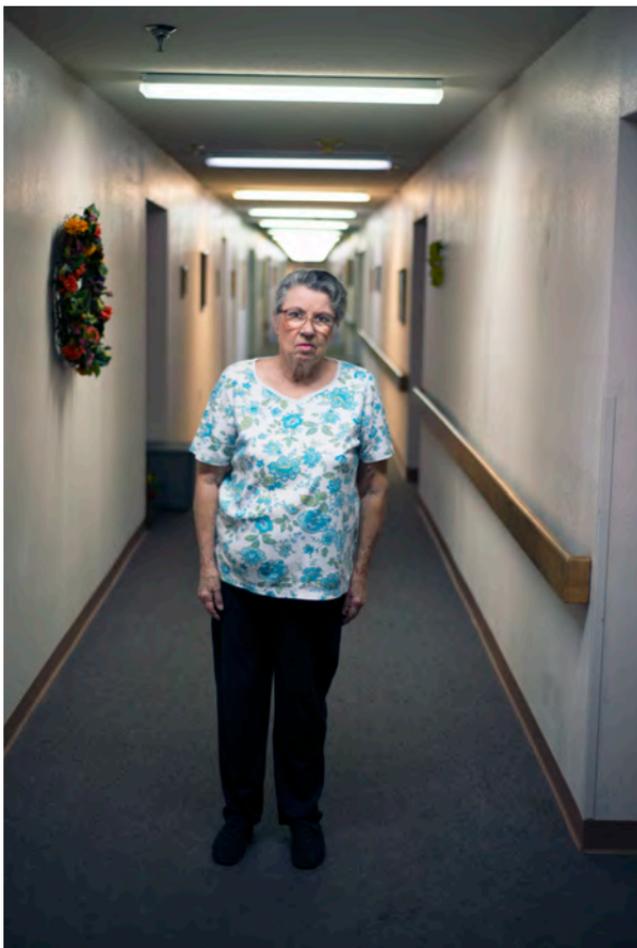
*Love is Love*  
*Kelley Shiels*  
*Junior/ Accounting, English Minor/ Edmond, OK*



*Sideways*  
*Jessica Garvey*  
*Senior/ Studio Art and English/ Moore, OK*



*Shadow*  
*Jessica Garvey*  
*Senior/Studio Art and English/Moore, OK*



*Joyce  
Amy Hanson  
Senior/Photography/Oklahoma City, OK*



*Unveiled*  
*Amy Hanson*  
*Senior/Photography/Oklahoma City, OK*



*Unveiled Series*

*Amy Hanson*

*Senior/Photography/Oklahoma City, OK*



*Pony With A Pearl Earring*  
*Amanda Gathright*  
*Senior/ BFA Studio Art/ Oklahoma City, OK*



*Pop Goddess of Harvest*  
*Amanda Gathright*  
*Senior/BFA Studio Art/Oklahoma City, OK*

