

Contest Judges

Melanie Anderson

Lauren Coker-Durso

Mike Smith

Faculty Advisor

Maia Elgin Wegmann

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REFRESH!



Women's Women: Womanism in Hur- ston and Walker

Morgan Raper

Throughout history, the role of women has been met with social, economic, political, and autonomous restrictions that play into patriarchal structures. Although such restraints occurred in varying capacities to the overarching female social body, African American women faced further discrimination both within and outside their respective marginalized communities. Within the literary sphere, African American writers engaged with forms of intersectionality to demonstrate the hardships experienced within their political and social spheres. Of the different forms of intersectionality, womanism is “[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” with a Black female focus to emphasize issues in areas like race and gender (Walker 1). As the coiner of the term “womanist,” Alice Walker incorporates womanism ideology within her book *The Color Purple*, which is about a woman named Celie navigating through the racial, economic, and romantic pathways in her life. Although written before the creation of the womanism movement, Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* acts as a precursor to womanist ideals in Janie’s coming-of-age story as she develops an understanding of race and independence in relationships. Walker and Hurston engage with womanism’s “wellness and survival of everyone” through the development of their Black female characters’ voices

Hurston's development of Janie's voice in the face of discrimination within the Black community demonstrates an array of experiences in the social sphere. Janie's position of being mixed race both grants and restricts her agency in society. She is pulled between the societal notions of racial backgrounds to predetermine her role within the social sphere. Hurston focuses on colorism regarding Janie's racial perception and how the racial dichotomy silences her voice in order for her to later reclaim it. Hurston channels this throughout the novel, but it is emphasized in Janie's time spent with Mrs. Turner, who is also of mixed descent and primarily associates herself with her white lineage. Particularly, the two women's initial discussion on blackness shows the roles at play. Mrs. Turner states, "If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De black ones is holdin' us back" (Hurston 141). Mrs. Turner not only shows a separation from the Black community through colorist rhetoric such as this but also as separation of the self. Unable to truly accept the other half of her ancestry, Mrs. Turner is used to implementing white society's ideals into the private spaces of the Black community. She demonstrates this through her open critics of the Black community. Hurston writes,

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That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. (140) Within this Mrs. Turner demonstrates a colorist mentality that

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reflect white society's beliefs about race. However, Janie's contribution to the conversation allows a space for the Black community to stand up against this ideology through her immediate dismissal of meeting Mrs. Turner's brother as she is married to Tea Cakes.

sonance is shattered with the jury's verdict. Hurston writes, "She was free and the judge and everybody up there smiled with her and shook her hand. And the white women cried and stood around her like a protecting wall" (188). In this, white society's present voice is used to reiterate what Janie had previously already discussed. With particular focus on the words "protecting wall", Hurston creates a united image with women from both white and black communities.

The dissonance within the Black community that colorism brings is even furthered through Tea Cakes's internal dread of the privilege associated with it. Tea Cake verbalizes this fear after he hits Janie. Tea Cake states, "Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat het tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (Hurston 148). Tea Cake's insecurity towards his darker skin tone causes him to lash out at Janie as a surrogate for Mrs. Turner's, and in turn white society's, ideas of racial presentation; whereas Mrs. Turner projects colorist beliefs onto Janie, Tea Cake attempts to physically attack it. For a brief moment, Tea Cake has stripped Janie of her vocal agency by disregarding her role in society in favor of focusing on her body as a vessel for oppressive ideology.

Similarly, Hurston uses white society's social influence to reconstruct Janie's voice. Hurston places white society on the edges of the novel, framing it as a ghost within the social sphere to haunt both the Black community and the novel itself. Tea Cakes's overreliance on white society endangers him and others within the community through his view on white society being a figure to rely on for a guiding figure. When the community initially realizes the full extent of their situation, it is too late to change their mind. Janie says, "Ole Massa is doin' His work now. Us oughta keep quiet" (Hurston 159). In order to measure the severity of the storm, Janie suggests the group stay quiet. Within this, Janie's voice is granted the agency to not only direct members of her community, but it is used as a voice of preservation.

Hurston continues to work with Janie's voice through the power in its silence when directly engaging with white society. Within the frames of the novel, Janie's interactions with the white jury of her trial regarding Tea Cake's death hold significant impact on her how her life unfolds. However, the trial in question are presented in a passive manner. Maria Raccine states, "Hurston effectively uses Janie's silence during her trial before an all-white, all-male jury [...] to emphasize their ultimate insignificance" (290). Janie's silence emphasizes the power she holds when she does wield her agency. Hurston's structure of the novel grants Janie the ability to provide the reader with the truth temporarily inaccessible to white society, which demonstrates the dissonance between the two social groups. However, this dissonance is shattered with the jury's verdict.

Hurston writes, “She was free and the judge and everybody up there smiled with her and shook her hand. And the white women cried and stood around her like a protecting wall” (188). In this, white society’s present voice is used to reiterate what Janie had previously already discussed. With particular focus on the words “protecting wall”, Hurston creates a united image with women from both white and black communities.

However, Walker’s display of the Black community’s internal pressures demonstrates the progress of vocal agency. Squeak’s otherization as a woman of mixed descent in the Black community is presented through her voice’s agency. Squeak navigates her social sphere through a fluid perception of her involvement within society; in settings of positive context, her skin tone is a desirable component, but she expresses several times throughout the novel the negative components associated with it. As Linsey Tucker states, “her only claim to a positive identity is through her body, her yellow skin, which creates her as a more sexually, racially, and hence socially acceptable object” (86-87). By attempting to tie herself to society’s perception of her, she shifts between them to develop her sense of self. Squeak states, “Do you really love me, or just my race?...My name is Mary Agnes” (Walker 96). Within this, Mary Agnes shifts from a moment of doubt and to a confident stance regarding her identity with her boyfriend, Harpo. Mary Agnes’s establishing her voice in the same breath as she reestablishes her name allows for voice to carry the weight of womanist ideology.

Walker crafts her voice to signify not only Squeak’s survival, but to act as a social rebirth from Squeak to Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes’s newfound voice grants her social and economic mobility through singing the blues. Mary Agnes’s engagement with the blues focuses on the colorist aspects she has faced within the black community. Mary Agnes sings, “But if yellow is a name/ Why ain’t black the same/ Well, if I say Hey black girl/ Lord, she try to ruin my game” (Walker 98). Mary Agnes using a historically black form of expression in music allows for her to reclaim aspects of her identity that she felt were previously inaccessible. Walker’s presentation of womanism in Mary Agnes’s cultural reclamation demonstrates the resilience of the self in the face of adversity.

Walker’s display of vocal agency of black women against white

society displays the external pressures of the social sphere. Sofia's development after her altercations with the mayor and his wife demonstrates the social and political restraint one's voice could overcome. Sofia's moment of unabashed free speech in response to the mayor's wife, Miss Millie, asking if she wanted to work for her was immediately taken as a threat for the societal structure. Walker writes, "The police come, start slinging children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground" (85). Sofia's verbal encounter quickly escalates to a physical altercation that not only she, but her family as whole must work to navigate. Her physical aggression being used to fight the verbal and social hostility demonstrates the willful behavior of womanism to ensures the self's survival. Barbara Smith states, "The limitations of the Black female role are even greater in a racist and sexist society as is the amount of courage it takes to challenge them" (1607). Although Sofia's opposition as a black woman singlehandedly brought into question social restrictions for black individuals and women, race is the determining factor as to why it resulted in an instance of police brutality.

However, the physical restriction of her jail time works to suppress her voice and its agency transforms into the social restriction of her voice's social restriction when she is forced to work for Miss Millie. This is emphasized when the mayor's daughter, Eleanor Jane, has a child of her own and is denied Sofia's admiration. Walker writes,

~~~~~

I do not love Reynolds Stanley Earl. Now. That's what you been trying to find out since he was born. And now you know [...] Sofia never wanted to be there in the first place. Never wanted to leave her own children. (262) Within this, Sophia's vocal agency has adapted to learn when to hold

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her tongue for self-preservation. Her responses to Eleanor Jane's probing exhibit a patience and curated response that was not present at the time of her arrest. By learning appropriate environments to express restricted thoughts, Sophia has traded the vocal agency to speak freely for vocal mobility to move through society unharmed. Walker demonstrates how womanism's advocacy of survival for all has altered Sofia's relationship with her own voice.

Hurston uses the male social spheres that Janie encounters to demonstrate how womanism's wholeness combats the patriarchal silencing of Janie's voice. Janie and Jody Sparks' relationship heavily emphasizes this through their dynamics of husband and wife as well as Jody making Janie run his store. Jody has positioned himself in Janie's life to have a multifaceted power over her and works to suppress Janie's voice within the community. His refusal to allow Janie to make a speech highlights this. Jody says, "'Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home'" (Hurston 43). Through his attempts of physically and socially silencing her in front of the community, Jody demonstrates how the men in the social sphere can use their positions within society as a weapon against women. Jody leaves Janie with the inability to navigate the social sphere despite her ability to physical move in the world. In this, Hurston uses the inability to achieve the wholeness of society to reflect that mobility does not translate into vocal agency.

However, Janie's relationship with Tea Cakes and their time spent on the muck contrasts this through a united community. Although its where both Tea Cakes and Janie engage in hard labor, it acts as a social space for individuals to converge and openly socialize with one another. As Saddoff writes, "For the rootworker, as for other black women, the double oppression of gender and race makes it doubly necessary to celebrate such continuity in the black experience" (6). Through the ability to persevere through hardships, the engagement with the hardships experienced in traditionally black spaces allows for the wholeness of a community to develop. This is actively demonstrated on Janie's first day in the muck. Hurston writes, "[A]ll day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back made her popular right away [...] The house was full of people every night" (133). Despite being prematurely judged before her arrival, Janie's ability to not only integrate into a community but to be socially mobile within it has granted her the ability to develop her agency. Tea Cake inviting Janie into fulfilling environments with the intent on the holistic growth of the community provides her the foundation to begin to equip her voice.

Hurston establishes the connections between women in society

as an outlet for the expression of the self. Janie's friendship with Phoebe allows for the full extent of her vocal agency to be used by acting as a sounding board for Janie's story. Through Pheoby's ability to listen, she provides Janie the space and time to fully explain herself, which directly contrasts against the porch sitters of Eatonville who watch Janie from afar and trade speculations about her. As Racine discusses, "Pheoby acts as a witness, and it may be argued that Hurston stresses Pheoby's listening to the story as much as Janie's telling of it" (291). By having Pheoby as a stand in for Janie's audience, Hurston provides Janie the chance to not only use her voice, but it allows her to for to be heard. The two women's friendship is predicated upon the mutual trust in their unity that they are able to see themselves in one another so much that their vocal agencies are tied together from the beginning of the novel. Janie says, "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (Hurston 6). By merging the vocal agencies of both women, Hurston emphasizes the importance of those who are trusted to hear it. Phoebe's engagement shows the importance the black female community and platonic love within in it that would eventually be used to cultivate the womanism movement.

Hurston continues to develop Janie's voice through her relationship with her sexuality. Hurston frames Janie's sexuality exploration through the use of natural imagery to discuss the beauty as well the innate curiosity tied to female sexuality. Within Walker's definition of womanist, she writes, "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one" (1). Janie applies a critical focus to her sexuality when looking at a blossoming pear tree. Janie states, "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into a sanctum of a bloom [...] So this was a marriage!...Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (Hurston 11). Within this, Janie is coming of age and discovering her sexuality for the first time. Hurston's use of symbolism, imagery, and style in the pollination scene frames her voice as unrestricted, which would be quickly suppressed through her grandmother marrying her off to Logan Killicks, her first husband. Janie's engagement with her sexuality and the agency of her voice are intrinsically tied due to the fact that the first time her voice is silenced within the frames of the novel it is by her grandmother's refusal to

listen to Janie explain about kissing Johnny Taylor, insisting the only form of protection is marriage (Hurston 13). Within this, Hurston's focus on the exploration of female sexuality unintentionally aligns itself with womanist ideology of curiosity for the betterment of the self.

Walker establishes the male social sphere's treatment of woman as the stimulus for women's strength. Throughout the novel, men abuse women through verbal, physical, and sexual experiences that distort the way they view and operate within the world. The novel's opening line directly insinuates the silencing of women's experience that is present within both the home and society, especially sexually related abuses. Celie writes, "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1). Within this, Celie is voicing the sexual abuse by her presumed father, Fonso, that she has had to harbor in silence. Not only does she place blame onto Celie for using her vocal agency to discuss the abuse, but it also generates the thread of Celie's silence throughout the book. Tucker argues, "another patriarchal silencing, namely the separation and linguistic isolation of mother and daughter [...] resulting in the severance of important female bonding" (83). Celie's development of voice and the self is severed, resulting in her numbing her emotions as a coping mechanism. Celie's lack of connection with those around her and with herself is how she manages to survive multiple forms of abuse from Fonso, her siblings, her husbands, and men within society as a whole. Celie has found strength through the forced dulling of emotions.

Walker develops the women's connection with society to align the preservation of women's culture. Through the novel, women bond over traditionally feminine activities to form and foster a community. Walker's integration of quilt-making amongst the women shows a display of unity and femininity. Celie says, "Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get" (Walker 57). The act of quilt-making has allowed the women to unite as a group to create an end project with a piece of each of them within it. The quilt works to draw the women into conversation and provides a social space of discussion throughout the novel. Tucker writes,


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Quilting in particular operates as a rich metaphor for Walker because it involves the making of a useful object from material which is customarily regarded as worthless: scraps and throwaways. (88)

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This is directly reflected in the social positions that of the woman producing the quilt as they have been scrutinized by society on their behavior or appearance. With quilting acting as a symbol for both their internal and social movement of establishing a community, Celie's guidance on how to sew provides her an instance of confidence around Shug Avery as her walls are starting to break away through familiarity and allows them both to eventually be emotionally available for a deeper connection. In this, Walker uses the overarching culture as a joining factor for women to participate in the community-based conversation.

Walker presents female sexuality as the development of connection between one another and the self. Celie's emotional inaccessibility starting to unravel with Shug Avery demonstrates the womanist components of loving women and learning how to self-love, both in the physical an emotional sense. This is demonstrated through Shug Avery teaching Celie about the body's sensations as they are discussing sex. Celie states, "I look at her and touch it with my finger. A litter shiver go through me. Nothing much. But Just enough to tell me this the right button to mash" (Walker 77). The two women's connection generates both physical and emotional feelings of pleasure and desire. Their display of open communication in regard to sexuality draws attention to what it isn't said just as much as what is said. Through Celie's letters, her thoughts are materialized through writing, yet they still remain inaccessible to Shug. This imbalance generates tension of sexual development. Lewis writes, "black women sacrificing sexual exploration - especially queer sexual exploration to protect black communities from accusations of sexual deviance" (160). Due to her prior history of sexual trauma, Celie's initial perception of sex paints a disconnected view of an intimate act. Through Shug's guidance through physical and verbal explanations with Celie, the two are able to equip their voices through sexual acts.

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's development of black female voices within their respective novels both have the foundational framework of womanism. Their engagement with racial difference through the exploration of white and black society provides an overview of the influence each had in establishing the voices of black women facing both internal and external stress. The development of voices through the dichotomy of the male and female social spheres demonstrates the pervading misogyny that constricts women's lives. Overall, Hurston's and Walker's novels establish a commentary of the intersections on racial and gender-based issues in society.



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Feminine Interiority and the Menstrual Image in *Macbeth*

Kelly Foster

It is no secret that gender has historically borne multiple connotations in media. To be labeled a woman, for instance, is to be understood through a multitude of ingrained associations after years of nuanced representations of the feminine. That masculine perception has maintained a position of dominance in storytelling naturally impacts these associations; “the woman” is often only represented in terms of her difference from “the man.” In short, media commonly depicts women as fundamentally other. Such a representation of femininity shapes the narrative of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which structures itself around the idea that feminine attributes can at times serve as an obstacle to one’s goals. Lady Macbeth’s plea to be “unsexed” both problematizes the feminine while, at the same time, posing the question of what precisely defines it. What becomes clear as the narrative progresses is that, within the social sphere of *Macbeth*, the outward expression of one’s emotional interiority is so estranged from common standards of masculinity that it can only be understood through its connection to the feminine. Any indication of “feminine” sentiment on the part of Macbeth is inseparable from the menstrual image of blood, highlighting an unbreakable link within the play between perceived deviance in gender expression and sex-based descriptions of the body.

Lady Macbeth's first scene includes a reflection on gender that establishes the play's otherization of the feminine. After learning of Macbeth's predicted future as king, she pleads,

~~~~~  
come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, *unsex* me  
here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst  
cruelty! Make thick my blood, / Stop up the access and passage  
to remorse. (IV.40-43)  
~~~~~

Her statement here intrinsically links femininity to the mind and, specifically, emotional response. She pairs her longing to shed her sex with a longing for cruelty, coupling the ceasing of her blood flow with the ceasing of her access to remorse. The reference to flowing blood is a direct nod to Lady Macbeth's menstrual cycle, a clear marker of her status as a woman. By making the connection between her cycle and remorse, Lady Macbeth insinuates that the nature of a woman is to allow sentiment to dictate her behavior. This is why she must plead to the spirits of "mortal thoughts." In order to truly detach herself from her sex, she must first detach herself from any concern over the mortality of her impending victims.

When compelling Macbeth to murder, Lady Macbeth echoes this understanding of her gender as it relates to their current objective. She goads him,

~~~~~  
When you durst do it, then you were a man / . . . / I have given  
suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks  
me / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd  
my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains  
out. (IV.7.49, 54-58)  
~~~~~

Contained in this passage is yet another connection between sex and morality, only now the "natural" response for men is presented instead of the natural response for women. For Macbeth to truly be a man in the eyes of his wife, he must forego his moral concerns, or feminine urges per the previously established definition, and murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth emphasizes this when she marks a clear contrast between the natures of men and women. She first cites an image

of motherhood, that which is traditionally associated with women, only to immediately reject it and kill the infant as a metaphor for Macbeth's task. More broadly, this can be taken as a metaphor for masculinity. The command is simple: Cast aside womanly compassion and sentiment. Become a willing and unrepentant murderer.

Therefore, within the confines of this narrative's established standards, women are incapable of engaging with the violent climb to power that proceeds within the play. Returning to Lady Macbeth's initial reflection on her status as a woman, her reference to halting her menstrual cycle sets the image of blood apart as a prime marker of this gender-based otherization. When marked with blood, one is both feminized and distanced from the power struggle. Notably, Macbeth himself receives the mark of blood immediately prior to murdering Duncan. He hallucinates a dagger, observing,

~~~~~  
I see thee still; / And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
/ Which was not so before. There's no such thing: / It is the  
bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes. (II.1.45-49)  
~~~~~

Macbeth hallucinates a blood-coated dagger. Reading this through a lens of gender construction, not only is there a return to the blood-based feminine, but it should also be noted that swords and daggers alike are traditionally phallic symbols in storytelling. With the blood having already been drawn on as a feminine symbol, it is likely the case that Macbeth's dagger here symbolizes the masculine. The phallic dagger is stained by a menstrual image, indicating that Macbeth's masculinity is being perverted as he envisions what his upcoming deed will entail. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed articulates what blood can symbolize with regard to femininity, nature, and mortality, writing, "[W]omen's blood points to the fertile nature of the female body and bears witness to women's alliance with the natural world. . . . [It also] symbolizes birth and life, reminds man of his capacity, even willingness, to shed blood, to murder" (234). The blood of women, per Creed, becomes a symbol of life and of an inclination toward nurturing that life; moreover, it reminds men that these are not their natural inclinations according to traditional standards. This trend reveals itself in Macbeth's mono-

logue, as visions of feminine blood mingle with the masculine dagger. His role as a man is to kill for power, but his respect for life—a trait previously established as feminine in the play—holds him back; thus, he sees the life force of blood even as he pictures his dagger.

Feminine sentiment begins to have an isolating effect on Macbeth in the third act of the play. As he hallucinates that Banquo is sitting in his designated seat, Lady Macbeth dismisses the situation and explains to their dinner attendees, “The fit is momentary . . . / . . . If much you note him, / You shall offend him and extend his passion. / Feed, and regard him not.—Are you a man?” (III.4.54-57). The final question is an address to Macbeth; in a bid to return him to his senses, she turns his attention to his gender. It is his status as man that should, according to Lady Macbeth, resolve this matter. She continues to chide, “O, these flaws and starts / (Impostors to true fear) would well become / A woman’s story at a winter’s fire” (III.4.62-64). Again, the point is clear: In allowing his guilty conscience to affect his thinking, Macbeth acts against the play’s standards for masculinity. Furthermore, it is as a result of his behaving “like a woman” that Macbeth is ignored. Before him sit a group of men and one woman, and he cannot fully identify with either party.

That Macbeth’s reaction to murdering Banquo is dismissed as a “fit” demonstrates his newfound societal station. Notably, Lady Macbeth dismisses his fear itself as false, his frightened reactions as nothing more than “impostors.” Now that Macbeth’s masculinity is compromised, he is subject to the same otherization as many women in literature. In “Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria,” Joanna Levin discusses the societal function of hysteria as means of ostracizing women, writing,

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I [M]isogynist accounts of feminine will generally collapsed the feminine mind into the body. . . . Whichever way the determinism went, the womb dominated the female mind and produced uncontrollable lust . . . . [T]he hysterical woman remained wanton, capricious, passive, yet disturbingly sexual. (36)

~~~~~

Levin argues that the “hysteria” label was a response to women exhibiting behavior that breeched societal standards of femininity.

Men would rationalize this behavior as madness, or hysteria, as a means of keeping ideas surrounding femininity within their control. “Hysterical” women destabilized gender stereotypes and thus were assigned a new stereotype, a phenomenon which is apparent in the case of Macbeth. Although not a woman himself, he has so aligned himself with the play’s definition of femininity that he, too, must have his behavior rationalized through the lens of hysteria. His deviance from masculinity is nothing more than a “fit” or “infirmity,” as opposed to any natural behavior (III.4.54, 85). Emphasizing this idea is Macbeth’s return to the blood symbol: “I am in blood / Stepp’d so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (III.4.135-137). He is now a permanently ostracized figure, with ideas of both the blood on his hands and the image of menstrual blood fully uniting here. He exists as permanently liminal, equally distanced from and incapable of wading toward either his previous masculine shore or a new feminine shore. This marks him as an ideal figure for the label of hysteric, as his very existence in this moment challenges a set definition of gender.

In fact, the very core of Macbeth’s ascension to the throne is a symbol of masculine perversion; his course is only set as a result of predictions by three feminine figures, the Weird Sisters. The three witches both articulate Macbeth’s perversion as his essential nature and mark when said nature has overtaken him completely. Lamenting the burden they have placed on him, Macbeth claims, “They hail’d [Banquo] father to a line of kings. / Upon my head they plac’d a fruitless crown, / And put a barren scepter in my gripe” (III.1.59-61). Macbeth decries his “barren scepter,” which stands out as a reminder of his aforementioned failure to meet masculine standards. The scepter is more than likely another phallic image, particularly when one considers its use in this context; Banquo will be a father to numerous heirs, but Macbeth will not. His “scepter” is “barren,” and more broadly, his masculinity is failing. This divide between Banquo and Macbeth acts as a divide between natural and unnatural rises to power, respectively. Banquo, who did not allow the Weird Sisters’ predictions to dictate his behavior, overcame the temptation to attain power via the feminine and instead achieved a “truer,” masculine power that will last far longer than Macbeth’s rule. In allowing himself to

be guided by these feminine figures, Macbeth submits himself to the “unnatural” dominion of the feminine. So tainted is his masculinity that he cannot even perform at a base level of reproduction, and it is for this reason that his reign does not last beyond his death. Now entrapped in the feminine, he cannot perform a masculine role.

The Second Apparition embodies Macbeth’s gendered deviance and corrupted path to power. Taking the form of a child bathed in blood, it advises him, “Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The pow’r of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (IV.1.79-81). Macbeth is now too far gone in his “unnatural” presentation of gender and ascension to power. At the outset of the play, Lady Macbeth laid out a mission statement of casting aside the sentimental flow of blood, but now, Macbeth is encouraged to “be bloody” and “scorn the power of man.” He has waded too far into feminine blood at this point; with the only child around him being a spiritual apparition called upon by the Weird Sisters, what becomes apparent is that he can now only accomplish gendered performance through unnatural means. His heir is a ghost, immaterial and unaffected. As previously established, femininity acts in this play as an unnatural, corruptive force in one’s pursuit of the crown; to merge the two is to corrupt one’s own gender identification. Macbeth now operates in a phantom world of gender deviance that appears to the natural realm as an ultimate menstrual image—a child stained with blood. A newly anointed man-woman hybrid, Macbeth is arguably so distanced from his masculine body that he has become an unnatural, incorporeal spirit himself, only understood in the material world through the symbol of the feminine body.

Within Macbeth, there exists a clearly defined set of standards for gender; women, per these standards, are too consumed with emotions and sentimentality to engage in bloody acts of conquest, while men are more active and less influenced by their emotions, thus making them the ideal candidates for a power struggle. Macbeth subverts this expectation in allowing his quest for the throne to be influenced by the feminine, a subversion that is marked in his repeated association with the menstrual image of blood. Because he deviates so far from the masculine standard, his actions are understood in terms of a perverted masculine body; his phallic “dagger” is coated

in menstrual blood, and his “scepter” is barren. Macbeth becomes an unnatural specter of perverted masculinity, attaining power but not in full, stained forever by the blood of the feminine and incapable of fully performing his assigned gender.



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ONE ACT PLAY

Suffer the Slings

Justin Porter

Cast of Characters:

Bennett Peterson: Husband to Charlotte, prone to aggression.

Charlotte Peterson: Wife to Bennett, the object of Bennett's outbursts.

Scene 1

Setting:

Bedroom. A queen-sized bed at center stage. A standing mirror on stage left and a small table in a corner on stage right.

At Rise:

CHARLOTTE, in underwear, begins to dress. She throws on a night gown, and then goes to the small table at stage right to comb her hair and apply her makeup.

CHARLOTTE: (*Humming.*) Twenty-two years old girl.

(*Enter BENNETT.*)

CHARLOTTE: Hey, baby, how are you? (*Kiss.*)

BENNETT: Same as always. Donaldson's been riding my ass. (*Walks to stage left to mirror. Loosens tie.*)—How was your day, babe.

CHARLOTTE: Good darling. I'm excited for tonight. We need to get get out more often, you know? The Halls go out at least three times a week, or that's what Lizzie told me. You remember them, right? We had dinner with them last week at. . . Oh, where was it? . . . That Italian place up Boulevard . . . What is it called?

BENNETT: You mean, Regino's?

CHARLOTTE: That's it. Darling, you remember things so well. If it weren't for my thickheadedness, then we could be better at conversation, right?

BENNETT: (*Looking down.*) Yep—

CHARLOTTE: We should take a vacation in the spring! We could go to that get-away in Maryland—

BENNETT: (*Turning to her.*) Don't you think that's a stretch?

CHARLOTTE: (*Sitting on bed.*) No. Why would it be a stretch, dear?

BENNETT: Because I'm making minimum salary, dear. And I don't know if I'll be able to spend it on something like that. You really need to get your priorities right, Mrs. Big Spender. Remember you're married to Mr. Big Spender, and the two of us can light the world on fire with what I can afford, right dear?

CHARLOTTE: Oh, we don't have to go, babe. I was only suggesting.

BENNETT: You do that a lot, don't you. Just suggesting, huh?

CHARLOTTE: I just mean that we should learn to have fun and enjoy ourselves. I mean, we aren't growing younger, right?

BENNETT: Oh, yeah. You're right, and do you know how I know that? It's because of the gray hairs on my head. The other day I looked down at my desk and saw strands of hair sitting on my keyboard. All on my papers. I'm losing hair, babe, while you stay here and keep yours fresh.

CHARLOTTE: Well, if it's such a terrible job, then quit. You—

BENNETT: Quit? Really? You think I can just quit?

CHARLOTTE: Babe, I'm just say—

BENNETT:—Yeah, yeah. You're always just saying and just suggesting— I should do this, and we should do that—We're just happy aren't we. Don't you ask me that, huh? You keep on and on, talking and suggesting. I tell you, why don't you get a job? Aren't women supposed to be feminists today and want jobs. Oh, y'all say it, but don't live it. Its men like me who have to live day to day, letting their bosses hammer us into exhaustion. . . You can get a job. How about that, and I'll stay home.

CHARLOTTE: If that's what you want, babe. I could ge—

BENNETT:—Sure. Sure. No, you love it here, day to day, while I'm gone, losing my hair. . . Huh. Maybe, if we could do something else, but that's not going to happen. Is it?

CHARLOTTE: (*Beginning to cry.*) Babe. . .You know I can't. . .I'm so sorry.

BENNETT: Yep, I know.

CHARLOTTE: I know we've been at odds since. . . You know.

BENNETT: At odds? We've been at odds? Yeah, I guess we have been.

CHARLOTTE: We can try again. Tonight, if you like. Babe, I want us to be happy, like when we got married. Remember? We would stay up late and talk and lie together. . .Remember?

BENNETT: Yep. Too long. It's just been too long. I don't know if I—

CHARLOTTE: —Well, you've got to try, Ben. We can't just stop, you know—

BENNETT: (*Walking towards her.*)—Try, huh. I've got to try. You said that, right? I just need to make sure that you told me to try. Isn't that, right? That my stay-at-home wife is telling me, her working husband, to try.

CHARLOTTE: (*Standing.*) I'm not doing this. Do you hear me? Not.

BENNETT: What? (*He grabs CHARLOTTE and holds her.*)—Now, what? You're giving me orders, Mrs. Big Spender, Mrs. "I want to lay around all day and think about vacations in Maryland" . . .Is that what you're getting at here?

CHARLOTTE: Damn you, BEN! Get off me!

BENNETT: No, you stop struggling. (*Phone rings from stage right.*)
—Lucky day, dear.

(*Exit BENNETT.*)

CHARLOTTE: (*Crying on bed.*) Fine. . .It's just fine. . .

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 2

Setting:

A back porch half an hour later.

At Rise:

BENNETT is seated in a rocking chair, drinking a glass of French whiskey, Giraud. He is sitting casually with his shirt unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up.

(*Enter CHARLOTTE.*)

BENNETT: (*Drinking Giraud in a glass.*) You coming out here to lay into me?

CHARLOTTE: Lay into you? Are you serious—

BENNETT: (*Drinking continues.*)—Serious as a damn heart attack, babe. (*He drinks.*)

CHARLOTTE: You need to get a hold of yourself. You are like a brute. Just brutish, I tell you. Like those men on TV who beat their wife. . .You're not far, I'll tell you that. . .I think there needs to be change here.

BENNETT: Oh, really? Good luck because for now I'm listening to Giraud here! I'm done, here, babe. Go mind yourself, and leave me alone, now.

CHARLOTTE: Fine. . .Just fine, Ben.

BENNETT: Good.

CHARLOTTE: If that's where you stand. . .fine.

BENNETT: (*Waving.*) Yes, yes, that's what I want. Ladies and Gents, we have got us a winner here, a winner. Here, here, here! Baby, baby! A winner, I say, a winner right here. This lovely lass, here!

CHARLOTTE: You're sorry, you know that?

BENNETT: Yep, I do.

CHARLOTTE: Fine. I'll leave you to drink.

BENNETT: Thank the Lord up high. You go do you, babe. Isn't that what people say?

(A few moments later, as he keeps drinking, a car engine sounds in the background, and Bennett gets up and runs through the backdoor awkwardly. He trips over something.)

BENNETT: —CHARLOTTE, what are you doing? CHARLOTTE, come back, you crazy bitch! I LOVE YOU!



Prodigals Come Home, Orphans Never Do

Naia M. Lanton

In my 28 years of existence, I have learned one thing very clearly: Whether or not a story is told depends entirely upon the teller. I will not say that my exodus from the Pentecostal Church has led me into a path of vehement antitheism—or even anti-apostolicism. If how you worship includes speaking in tongues, and calling upon angels and fire and such, I won't judge you any more than someone who practices tarot or zen meditation. If that's how you center yourself in the universe, that's what you do. I consider myself a seeker, and if all that holy ghost fire turns out to be a good fit for me after all, I'll come slinking back to it like the "prodigal" I am.

Unfortunately, I also don't actually consider myself a prodigal. You see, prodigals have a home to return to, a family that's waiting for their inevitable "calling back."

I doubt I'll ever experience such a "calling back" on account that I am not a prodigal, I am an orphan.

Chicken Soup for the Broken Soul

Lately, the Pentecostal Church has enjoyed a renaissance in Mental Health recognition. Therapy, Medicine, and self-care fly over the pulpit like they're sponsored by BuzzFeed. Now they're all about eating duloxetine and taking days off. I don't remember when this started, must've been around the time I was dying my hair and indulging in vices. I can only assume that this is a recent advancement because as I was self-healing from a certain level of trauma back in

the winter of 2018, I received a word from the lord in the form of “You instigated it, you clearly wanted it,” and “You need to let it go and live in the victory.”

Live in the victory, ah yes—look, I didn’t want to live at all, much less in the victory. But I was so “full of dead men’s bones” that I couldn’t even sleep in my own bedroom and I hated even the idea of showering. The most basic forms of hygiene seemed like a chore, and I spent every waking minute playing Final Fantasy 14 and chugging LaCroix in a manic bid to make myself healthy, and of course, nearly relapsing, like, all of my eating disorders. But hey, I was just living in sin, so my idea was to “Seek God as hard as I possibly could!”

Which meant attaching myself to my pastor/dad in hopes that I could Elisha some of his Holy Ghost onto me so I’d stop being miserable. Ironically, this was the best that my relationship with my father had ever been or ever would be. I was literally calling myself his “disciple” and following him everywhere he went.

And then, when I started asking questions like, “Okay, how do we know the earth is only 6,000 years old?” and, “So you can’t cosplay and still be a minister?” and, “Why does the world have to end?” our relationship instantly strained like a dry-rotted bungee cord. My being autistic was always an issue for him, and when he started suspecting me of being “gay,” our relationship went from Elijah and Elisha to Esau and God.

Thanks to a “Collect-and-Fight scantily clad chubby dudes” mobile game I found on Twitter, I became torn between my discipleship and a heady case of the “not gays.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d had gay thoughts. I think Chad Michael Murray was one of the first same-sex heart thumps aside from a friend I had in the fourth grade. It was, however, the first time I knew what these gay thoughts were.

So I had to suppress them. Clearly, the spirit of homosexuality had taken root in my body and I had to pray away the gay and shit.

So after convincing my dad to drive me to a church at the very foot of the state so that I could attend “YOUTH FORWARD 2019,” we hit the road like a couple of apostles.

The trainwreck of fall 2018 left me with more baggage than a Mich-

ael Kors delivery truck. I would say Gucci or Valentino, but I grew up on food stamps and lead paint. Anyways, I took my cheap-ass baggage and my patchy facial hair and fucked off to some Biloxi megachurch to seek out holy-ghost healing!

I clad myself in a floral button-down and painfully tight skinny jeans, checkered vans and square glasses—and threw myself into the nerve-racking throngs of being underdressed—I was kind of hoping that my building nerves were just the preliminary tingles of Jesus-ness.

I was also probably just buzzing from the black coffee I'd bought from the in-house cafe, and my nerves were set on edge from feeling like everyone knew how full of shit I was. For the first time, I didn't feel like I was anticipating a "Move of the spirit," however much I wanted to. I just sort of felt raw and exposed, maybe I was just getting too old for youth services—I mean, I couldn't drive and still lived with my parents, but I had just turned 25—

But Insecurities be damned- I was going to receive!

Angels in the Doubtfeild

Pentecostals will say that if you don't feel anything, you didn't want to. I wanted to. I wanted to feel the jittering Holy Ghost electricity in my veins. I wanted to feel the chills and spine-tingling ecstasy—instead, I just had a headache.

I listened through the deafening tinnitus, I focused, desperate for something said to stick—And then the preacher said something that stabbed into me like a white-hot knife:

"God wants entrepreneurs," he said. "He wants you to be rich. When you make your first million, remember this moment."

The knife turned. I didn't want business advice. I wanted to hear that I wasn't dirty, that it wasn't my fault—I needed to hear something to make me feel like I wasn't some sort of reprobate—and all I received is something I could have read in a fortune cookie.

When that slog of a service was finally over, I sought out my former pastor— I don't know why, but I wanted to see him.

And that's when the air shattered. Two girls approached—dressed to the nines and posed like something out of fucking Bridgerton—and with all the poise and professionalism of Victorian child-brides, shook his hand. It should have been innocuous, but the movement

was so painfully calculated and puppet-like. Time slowed down to a crawl. Everyone was a fucking politician. My “brothers and sisters” became salesmen. I wasn’t one of them—

Clearly, I was a different, Radical breed.

No Apathy Like Christian Charity

I refused to be defeated in my search for the true Jesus. I studied socialism, Kabbalah, Greek and Hebrew, Aramaic, and only read the transliterated versions of the bible. I was also very, very in the closet. I was an alternative apostolic. I translated my desire to kiss boys as “biblical masculinity.”

Sort of a Jonathan and David, or Jesus and John, the beloved situation. It was not—unless these figures were queer icons...

...Anyway, I became what I called a “Secular, Progressive Christian.” My idea was that we were called to love and take part in creation. In hindsight, it was just me narcissistically picking away at the bits of Jewish mysticism that I thought were cool and stitching together a malformed religious homunculus.

Fall 2019 was the era it went to shit. I’d finally come to terms with the fact that yes, what I felt for that boy back in the summer was a crush, and yes, he was cute, and yes, I was disappointed that he was a red-cap, and yes, I had pictured a future with him, sitting on his bed talking till like 4 in the morning with our legs brushing each other as we’d awkwardly adjust our masculine sitting style—Yearning aside, I’d mostly accepted that boys were cute.

I’d bought cosplay wigs and fake glasses and was fully enjoying the free range of gender expression that I was able to explore. And then the other foot dropped. First, the church I’d attended convinced a lady of lower social status that she was possessed by a powerful, angry demon. Then my pastor/dad incited a “war with hell” and brought in a prophet to help train us all for “war.”

I remember this very well because I thought I was a prophet myself. I even had my own vial of anointing oil and an annotated bible, and had read this man’s works—he was basically a hero to me and...

...He thought I was possessed with a spirit of witchcraft.

He thought I was living in sin, and I had a spirit of rebellion attached to me. Anger, hatred, defiance—whatever—and suddenly, I felt lost.

I remembered how hard I'd tried to be a good Pentecostal. I prayed like everyone else, I cut off friends, I cut off relatives, I self-isolated and refused to even go into certain stores for fear of being possessed. I dedicated and re-dedicated myself and it was never good enough.

I would travail at the altar and my mother would flank me and say that I wasn't praying right and God couldn't hear me because I was a sinner.

I would get angry, and my dad would tell me that if I died, he doubts I'd go to heaven.

And then, when I thought nothing could hurt me more—I was isolated from my partner, my friends, and my school, the only place I'd found to be a refuge from the “spiritual warfare,” I was lost in the throes of quarantine trying to believe that this was all God's will—and then, my grandmother died.

Revelation.

I stared down at this woman's lifeless body. Dementia is a royal bitch. Watching people you love wither away. But did I love her? I remember when she got married and moved off to Mackon, I'd bitterly say, “She's their grandmother now,” referring to my step-cousins.

I thought of the idea of caring for her as a chore and her visits felt tedious. And as I looked at her empty body, I felt selfish, stupid, and broken. I choked out my apology and through sobbing tears, I begged for her to forgive me—wherever she was.

And then my dear, darling mother decided to flank me again. “You need to get it right in order to see her again.” Which translated to “You need to convert your non-religious partner and be the man of God I want you to be.”

The excruciatingly long procession from the funeral home in Batesville to the gravesite in Water Valley began. It was a gauntlet of “If you don't come back to Christ you will never see her again,” and, “We are saying this out of concern for your soul,” and, “What sins are you involved in?” the whole. Fucking. Way.

Bullshit

I wasn't even allowed to mourn my own grandmother? Bullshit!

My beliefs were flaking away like charred paper. And the harder I

tried to grasp at them the more they seemed to flake away—I tried to hold on and just ended up hurting the people I cared about.

And then there was the night it all came to a screeching, burning apocalypse. I had finally accepted that I couldn't "pray it away" and had come to terms with both being pansexual and nonbinary. I had been making friends in college and actually felt like I fit in for once, which was different from my experience with the youth group to be sure.

That particular night, my partner was out of town, I had just gotten home from hanging out with a friend and there on my front door hung a post-it note with a big "we need to talk" scrawled across it. The third one this week. I threw the note on the floor and slunk into my parents' room.

"What did I do this time?" I asked, shaking.

"You know what you did."

"Actually, I don't."

And then the interrogation began. Thirty or more grueling minutes of being picked apart and questioned, accused of things I didn't do, my friends being accused of things they didn't do, and suddenly it all came to a head. This was bullshit.

I knew they wanted me to come out, they had hinted at it and all but tried to force me to admit that I was a big, fucking queer—but I refused. I spoke of my nonbinary identity in the past tense and shot down their suspicions. They didn't believe me, they never did, but I tried.

They found me in a vulnerable position and ambushed me—ripped me apart from the seams.

"What are you involved in?" said my mom. "I'm your pastor's wife, I deserve to know."

"Why are you shaking like that? Are you possessed, too?"

I was having a panic attack. Because if I came out, they would disown me. It's not like I had anywhere to go, either. And that was it. I knew that if there was a Christ somewhere, he wasn't going to be found there. I became a Unitarian first. I was still seeking God, I suppose.

And then, the last time I ever attended their church was the weekly End Time night. We were forced, 1984 style, to watch a video of some soggy old dude picking apart the books of Revelation, Daniel, and

Ezekiel to find little clues to calculate when the end would come.

The man who headed this off took the stage, and with all his audacity said that the international trucking company FedEx would be a catalyst for the End Times because—get this—when the two prophets are killed (Revelation 11) they will use fucking FedEx to ship gifts to each other to celebrate the murder of the two prophets.

I left. I didn't go back, and I won't go back.

The Pentecostal Church can tell its own story from front to back. There are whole books written on the subject. They are the tellers of the story—but what they won't tell you about is when they fuck up. They won't tell you about dragging kids out of bed at church camp and forcing them to do push-ups because they were awake—and if you weren't awake, they'd shine a flashlight in your face to make you wake up so they could punish you.

They don't talk about the 16-year-old girls with 36-year-old husbands. Or the eleven-year-old girls with 16-year-old boyfriends who “were too godly to hurt her.”

They don't talk about confirmed pedophiles being allowed to hang out with the youth group after multiple allegations.

They don't talk about the scars. And now, after years of pretending like the wounds they cause were just from not living in the fucking victory, they are all about self-care and mental health—bull fucking shit.

Call it a grudge, but some stories need to be told. An organization that loves accountability needs to be held accountable. They refuse to hear their own faults while pointing at everyone else. This is my story, and I've more than earned the right to tell it.

My relationship with my family is over, and if they read this, shit will probably hit the fan—but I'm not really scared of them anymore. They can't love me beyond their religion and that's fine. But I'm not going to pretend to be something I'm not for someone else's comfort.

Because some things you can't pray away. Because I'm sick of being intimidated by people who don't give a shit about me. Because prodigals may come home, but orphans never do.



A Vacation from Queerness

Naia M. Lanton

On a warm Friday morning I sat in my partner's car gulping down monster energy to wash away the chalky filler that estradiol always leaves behind. We'd been invited to see my partner's mother perform in an adaptation of "You Can't Take It With You" to which I obliged the invitation. We set out on our southbound course to Pearl Mississippi as the delta sun pounded the flat, muddy, early autumn landscape of...green swamp.

I love my partner's family- there's something nice about eating carryout from Pizza Shack while making small talk about classes and childhood memories that holds a special place in a mind that's usually in fight-or-flight- Granted any dinner that doesn't end in a fight or an exorcism is considered a pretty nice dinner by my traumatized standards.

I suppose the bar is on the floor, though, because I was instantly enamored at the "hey pass the ranch" and not "I REBUKE YOU IN THE NAME OF JESUS!" followed by a torrent of tongue talking and head gripping. It sounds ridiculous but there were a non zero number of family dinners that ended in a full blown pentecostal beat down. This never happened at my partner's place. It was polite and so completely and comfortingly normal.

So there I was, hair tied back, Zooley Deschenel bangs in my face, and a pair of ripped skinny jeans, nervously scraping the red nail polish from my fingers. Look, I love them, but they still scare the shit out of me. I am a nervous little creature, my social anxiety

makes me mute in these situations. Nevertheless I was there, and in their home, with a dog on my lap. They figured out long before I'd even told them that I wasn't exactly a "boyfriend." They don't know that I'm a girlfriend, but we will cross (or burn) that bridge when my ever-growing breasts drag us there.

To be absolutely fair, I was identifying with non-binary at the time we first met, so they reference me, when they remember, with they/them pronouns. And dear reader, if the word "pronoun" scares you, then I would greatly advise Hooked On Phonics or going back through a kindergarten English class—Look, I don't have the crayons to explain that you do, in fact, use pronouns. I digress.

The occasional "He" does slip out but I can forgive this for two reasons. 1.) They're accepting enough that sometimes they use some androgynous pronouns (and even accidentally call me a girl), and 2.) I don't exactly live in their heads rent free, so with them not always being hypervigilant to use pronouns that, frankly, gen-xers aren't used to— It doesn't bother me. Could they try harder? I don't know—Frankly I'm glad I don't occupy more than a passing thought in their minds. It would be weird if they spent every waking minute thinking about me and my fucked up relationship with gender. (God Damn it I promised I wouldn't curse in this paper...)—Anyway, I would much rather a nugget of reference to my identity from someone I know is making an attempt than someone who corners me in the bathroom to tell me how absolutely gorgeous and valid I am, and how well I pass, and how she could never tell— this has never happened to me, but my community catches this shit regularly.

If my partner's mom started going off about how pretty I am, I would be genuinely uncomfortable, like when a cis "ally" refers to me as "M'theydy" (barf).

So they referred to me as "He" sometimes. But, I didn't feel like a he. I wasn't dysphoric. I was comfortable, I was relaxed—as relaxed as my anxiety would let me be—but I wasn't fighting to prove my gender to people who have already decided that despite the dress, the makeup, the fat tits, and my bulbous ass, that I still have a dick— and that either makes me a "trap" or a perverted degenerate, and it's met with disgust and horror, as if my preference for cute dresses makes me a salacious deviant— or it's met with "OH MY GOD GIRLIE POP

YOU ARE SO VALID YES QUEEN SERVE SLAY PUSSY SNATCH
YES GIRL YOU ARE SO VALID I COULD NEVER TELL GIRLIE
GIRL PRINCESS POP PUSS.”

Like bro, I’m trans, I’m not exactly the Trixie Mattel of campus. I’m just a weird gremlin girl who likes to dress like it’s still 2011 and I’m headed to drink PBR and watch Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World with a group of equally weird, equally queer friends. I was referenced as a he, but it felt adjacent. Like “He”—but in a very gay way, like He, but not **HE** more like... ~he~

Like the same kind of he that George Michael exhibits, or Prince (RiP), or Elton John, or a bizarre genderless alien—He—but not “he” as in being expected to like fishing, “tiddies”, and hunting—god, guns, and trump—football, cars and, arctic monkeys—Not he as in “Crypto cash alpha male podcast balding at nineteen doesn’t wash his ass” but he as in the weird little gay who just happens to be dating their kid and that’s okay. For once the interaction had nothing to do with my dick. It was refreshing to just exist; however, when my head hit the pillow that night, I was still queer. Like, yeah, I mean I got to pretend for a day that I was the family’s own personal Boy George, but I was still queer. As I closed my eyes I was still a tranny, and no matter what, I will never get to pretend I’m anything else.

Every day that I put on this dress and step out of the house, I am stepping into a warzone. If my voice isn’t fem enough I get clocked, If my hips aren’t defined enough I get clocked, If my body language is just slightly too masculine, I get clocked— and if i get clocked— there’s a fat chance I’ll get fucking killed by some douchebag who did in fact start balding at nineteen. All of this is centered around the virtually useless grub worm that may or may not be between my legs.

For a second, a single, minuscule second, I wasn’t defending my identity to someone who’d already made up their mind. Unlike my parents trying to exorcise the transgender spirit from me by throwing pointed “He’s” and “Hims” and telling me how much like a man I smell (weird), or worse my mother warbling about how she “gave birth to a son” while motioning to her vagina (Go off I guess, Jocasta)—they, very thankfully, didn’t do that, even remotely—they didn’t know I was a girl—and it didn’t matter—my dick wasn’t part of the conversation—for fucking once—I didn’t feel like a girl or a

boy—I was just me. It was a vacation.

Is this what it's like to just exist as a queer person? Is this what it's like to just live in a world that doesn't exactly hate you? What I was granted was a privilege. A privilege that the larger portion of my community doesn't get. I could step out: that doesn't mean that anyone else would ever get that opportunity. We don't get a vacation from queerness, in the end, we are still queer. People will always see us as "faggots" or "Trannies" or "Traps"

We are either a fetish or a target, but never just a person. I got to pretend not to be trans for one day, I got to act like I was just a gay little dude and I had the privilege to do so— but as soon as they find out— that illusion is over. It won't be them accidentally referring to me as "She," it will be them having to make a concerted effort to see me as a girl.

The same concerted effort as the group of Kappa Delta's put forth to see me as anything other than a man in a dress when I'm just trying to take a piss. "Oh hey girlie" —fuck off Staciegh.

I am a woman, but for a day I didn't have to fight to prove it. I got to pretend that I wasn't—that I was some sort of identity that wasn't straight, but straight-adjacent.

I wasn't queer that day, but I am today. Here I am in a dress and Zooey Deschanel bangs being clocked as a tranny by red-cap fuckwads and cis girlie "Allies." At the end of the day I am a Trans Woman. I can't pretend to be cis. I can't pretend I'm not who I am. I am stuck in the warzone. I am stuck in the frey. I am every part of the body I inhabit, I am me: A guerilla freedom fighter, clawing, biting and cursing. I am a bitch because I have to be, if my survival is a form of cruelty, then let me be the biggest, cruelest, bitch in this bible belt hellscape. I will not apologize for what I have to do to survive, so that girls like me, like us, can stay alive—If I die in the process then maybe my blood will harden like a rock and provide at least a stepping stone toward, a safer path, and hopefully one day enough of us can carve a highway: cut through with riots and middle fingers, bricks and bloodshed...

...If it's not obvious, I am a poet at heart, and lavender prose aside, I'm pissed, furious to the point of exhaustion. That's the way it is though, girls like me have to fight because the fight is all we have.

Because we have mothers who motion to their vaginas while tearfully chanting “I gave birth to a son”; we have father’s who won’t look at us; sisters who don’t want to talk about it; and friends who see through the dresses and black lipstick. We have to fight, we have to be cruel, we have to be bitches—we have to embody the spirit of Regina George, because that’s what we have. Our words, our clothes, our hormone pills and dark humor is what keeps us from becoming part of the 31% of trans kids who won’t even make it to 30, some who won’t even make it to 20. This is our weapon. This is what keeps us alive.

We don’t get to not be queer, we don’t get to hear all sides of the story.

We don’t get to take a vacation from queerness—we are queer—that’s it.



I Would Never Read

Lauren Harvey

I didn't want to learn how to read. At four years old, I vividly remember sitting on the couch of our two-bedroom house in rural New Mexico with my arms crossed across my chest. I remember saying something along the lines of, "Mommy, if I haven't had to read yet, why would I ever need to?"

As a new homeschool mom, I'm sure my statement of defiance was frustrating and discouraging. Even so, she didn't press the issue, not until I was five. I had one more year of ignorance-induced bliss. If you had told me at the age of four that in fourteen years, I would be striving to build a career where all I do is read books, I would have violently disagreed.

I would never read.

I was wrong. Kicking and screaming, my mom taught me to read. I hated every minute of it. Every day, I would cry out of frustration when phonics class started. Words would be the end of my existence. I hated the way they formed, the way they made strange patterns, and above all, how letters didn't always sound the same. Why did the 'e' in 'red' sound different than the one in 'see'?

Reading never made any sense to me. I hated books most of all. Why would anyone want to read multiple pages at a time unless they absolutely had to?

My sister on the other hand was different. At an early age, I remember her slumped over a Leapster reading pad. She was three years older than I was and always so much smarter. She could read at four, but I couldn't. She understood phonics at five, but I couldn't. I even tried using her hand-me-down Leapster, but I still couldn't get the hang of reading.

Maybe I would learn to read, but I would never like it.

My mom would make me sit down while she cooked dinner and read stories out loud to her. At the time, we were using a new curriculum. In this curriculum, there was a heavy emphasis on poetry. I hated poetry more than chapter books. Everything had a deeper meaning that I didn't understand, nor care to learn to understand. Nevertheless, mom would sit me down with the book as she chopped vegetables or stir-fried chicken and make me read poems to her. Looking back on it, I realize that, as a busy homeschool mother, the last thing she had time for was to listen to my broken speech, striving to pronounce unusual words as I gave her attitude. Regardless of any feelings she had, she never showed them. She listened and helped when it was needed.

As much as I hated books, poetry, and reading in general, I believe that that is where my biggest growth came from. Speaking the written work aloud advanced my reading ability by leaps and bounds. Even when the frustration I felt that the words wouldn't form, I could feel myself learning, and getting smarter. Maybe it was in my head, but either way, it boosted my morale. Even then, after I had improved so much, I still didn't enjoy reading, but I could tolerate it.

It wasn't until my middle school years that I began to enjoy reading. It started with a middle-grade book series by Rick Riordan: Percy Jackson and the Olympians. This was the first series I truly grew to love. The descriptive, deep language with vivid images of characters, animals, and strange creatures pulled me in, and wouldn't seem to let go. I never knew that books could bring out emotions in a person, but these books brought me new feelings. I felt connected to the words inked on the page. It was eye-opening.

I liked to read.

I began a reading spree in search of another book that made me feel something. The more I read, the more my love for it grew. I devoured book after book, all the while falling in love with reading more.

In the years following, I went through periods of not reading for months but I always returned to books eventually. I would feel comfort in the pages of a new book. Plot lines and structure were always my favorite parts. It amazed me to know that a person could sit in one place and write something from purely their imagination

that could empower people and invoke so many emotions.

Years passed and the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe. During the long quarantine days, I read book after book, filling up my empty days with stories that lived in my head days after I closed the back cover. Over 2020, I read over ninety books, loving each one. In the fall of 2020, I started college as a psychology major. My reading time went down, and my study time went up.

I remember sitting in the kitchen, like when I was little, and reading aloud to my mother, telling my mom how I wished I could read all day for a living. To me, that was a pipe dream. Work was work and pleasure was a pleasure, the two never mixed.

“Why don’t you then?” My mom asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Get a degree in English and become an editor. You can read all day with a job like that.” The thought sat in my head. Was that even a possibility?

Within a few days, I changed my major and had a newfound vigor for school. I finished the semester with a 4.0-grade point average.

As a child, I never knew that words could have such an impact on the world. At one point in my life, as a small four-year-old, I refused to learn how to read, and now I am so thankful I did. Without books, without reading, I wouldn’t be the person I am today, and I wouldn’t be on the career path I’m on.



The Lavender Scare-crow

Morgan Raper

Lately, I find myself decomposed
at her touch. Let nature lay her
claim to me.

I drown in this saccharine spit until
I vomit up glitter and spell out
“admiration”.

See? I’m better now.

Gouge out my eyes and
Feed them to the birds. my corneas
Burn in your wake.
Shed layers in this warmth.
I remove my skin and leave it out to dry.

Just don’t plant violets at my bedside.

My ribcage aches to be hollowed out. Stuff
me with nectarines and envy-dyed carnations.
To do this is to become the Lavender Scare-crow.



Drowning

Morgan Raper

The sores between Your grandmother's shoulder blades burst at Your touch. Pus cries out and stains the towel underneath her in dandelion hues. You wipe her back with a saline wash rag. As You begin to dress the wound, You hear Your grandmother wheeze out another charge.

"Deep clean it. Don't You know anything?" Her voice crackles as she peers over her shoulder. You put the gauze down to go to the bathroom medicine cabinet.

"You're one to talk." You say, waiting until You're out of earshot. Your grandfather's Budweiser cans form windchimes as Your feet plow through them, breeze past the living room, and turn into the hall bathroom. Avoiding the mirror's gaze, You open the cabinet's door to look for disinfectants. Your hand hesitates over the dark brown bottle. That shit burns like hell, You think. You ease towards the rubbing alcohol when You hear her again.

"Hurry up! You know I don't have all day!" Gripping the brown bottle and a fresh rag, You make Your way back to her bedroom. She's still in the same position: lying on her side, the back of her shirt pulled over her head, and balling her hands into fists. You pour the hydrogen peroxide onto the rag before spilling some directly into the wound. Her back tightens; the bedsore sizzles under the white foam. After taking deep breaths, her muscles relax until You jam the rag into the wound. Suffocating the damaged skin, You scrub small circles into her back. She wheezes while her spine arches, seizing in pain as You apply pressure in a final blow by twisting Your palms into her. You remove the rag and blot until it's dry. Apply the dressing to her tender skin, You crack a smile.

“See, you were right. I bet that feels better already.” You say, grabbing her pill planner and leaving her hunched to the side.

In the kitchen, You play medicine mancala, dropping white and blue pills into little boxes. Orange pillars of painkillers and muscle relaxers tower over as You sort through prescriptions and dosages, slipping a tab into Your pocket for later. You bring the tray back to Your grandmother’s nightstand. She is now sitting up with a pillow wedged between her back and the headboard. In her right hand, she had a lit Newport sprinkling ash over the bedspread. As You place the tray down, she wraps her free hand around Your wrist and sears through Your skin until the raw oval joins the growing constellation creeping up Your arm.

“Your mother might have pulled this shit when she was Your age but I’ll be damned if I go through it again with You. Look where it got her.”

“You mean away from You?” You feel the sharp sting of her open palm against Your cheek. You keep Your eyes fixed on the floor, waiting for another blow to hit.

“She’s not here with You either, is she? You want to go live like her? Go do that in the gutter with all the other rats instead of in my home.”

You storm down the hall until You reach Your bedroom. You slam the door and look down at Your phone to a text message. From Bea: You coming tonight? :). With shaky hands, You slather glitter on Your dark circles and brush on mascara. Sliding the window open, You slip out, keeping it cracked so You can get back in later in the night.

You feel the house before You see it. Before You see the strobing lights or unconscious bodies rooted in the front lawn, You feel the hum of overproduced vocals seeping into the ground. Your legs carry You on desire trails until they start to give way to the wind knocking into them. You dig Your Doc Martin’s into the soil as You climb over sprawled out limbs of white girls beyond wasted and float in through the front door. You shove past a couple tangled in the foyer to fully make it inside; her leg wrapped around his hip, his hand on the nape of her neck.

The house overflows with people and You sway with every push and pull of the current of people until the tide washes You up in the

corner. You watch them pour down the stairs, over couches, into each other. The air starts to press into Your skin and cloud Your vision with the levees in Your eyes start to break. You occasionally return Your intent gaze to a game of beer pong as if You're actually interested in who would win. As if You weren't scanning the room to see if You could find Bea. As if You aren't trying to remind Yourself how to breathe. She wraps her arms around Your stomach, squeezing all the oxygen out of Your body; All Your breaths are hers anyways.

"I'm so glad You made it, Lucy" She embosses the words into Your collarbone.

"I'm glad I'm here too" You wheeze out, and You turn around to face her. Your chin burrows into the crook of her neck.

"I need to show You something." She begins pulling You through the crowd before You have the chance to respond. She barrels down the hallway until You reach the bathroom. As she closes the door, You rest Your head against her back. Giggling, she pulls You in so she can whisper in Your ear.

"I can feel You shaking for me. Let's get You fixed before we go back out there." She smiles and pulls out a small brown balloon from her pocket. She sits You on the lip of the bathtub, then works on mixing and heating everything until the acidic air starts singeing Your nose hairs. She kneels on the floor, make-shifting a tourniquet out of an old hair ribbon. The soft florals cut into Your arm. You shut Your eyes while she jabs into Your skin. As You take deep breaths, she removes the needles and presses her lips against the small pinprick, her stare keeping everything in place.

When she rises from the floor, my body begins to blush from her shimmering touch. My blood feels fuzzy raving through my veins, cells glowing in my fingertips. The room spikes us with seasoned reality. The light shifts into a lavender haze, and the air stretches like bubblegum around my forefinger. I melt into the floor and Bea sips me through a straw; clumps of myself are still stuck in the bathmat. Bea sits down at my feet and slides the needle into her arm among the garden of rotten strawberry blooms. Looking on with languid-laced eyes, these walls bleed with my mother's handprints. She cradles my head in her hands, and I assure her that the honey pouring from my mouth feeds only her soul.

We wade our way back to the living room, sloshing into the walls the entire time. She stops in front of me to let the crowd engulf us. She grips me so tight that the stars in my bones rattle. She slathers my neck in syrup and crushes into my chest. While each of my ribs snaps to the speaker's beat, she unravels her skin and piles it onto the floor. She smears herself into my sweater, my arms, and my mouth. I clot in her hair while bubbles trickle out of her. We kiss through gilded webs making balloons in me swell and burst. My thoughts are sent soaring, whirling across the mosaic of bodies until it lands deflated in the potted plant. My hip pulses from my phone dancing in my pocket until I answer my grandfather's call. I elbow my way to the front porch to hear him better, away from the stained-glass chaos lighting up the house.

"You need to come see Your grandmother." He says.

"Well, hello to you too. And, no, I'm not gonna come home just to apologize to her, so if that's what your thinking you can jus-"

"She's in the hospital and it is...You just need to get down here. We're in the ER and I need You to get here. Now."

I hang up and lean against the porch railing. I go back into the house to find Bea and let her know I'm leaving. As I explain to her the situation, she begins picking her skin off the floor, sliding her fingers into place and pulling it over her shoulders. She walks me out; my head sputters and sparks. She wraps me in her jacket as we stand in the archway. She watches me crawl through the yard and down the street.

I run down the trail that spit me out hours prior. The branches es scratch and claw at my face the whole sprint down. One tree manages to yank a tuft of hair, and the force sends me flailing to the ground. My knees becomes bloodmeal to the soil underneath them from the newly formed cuts pouring out red. I wipe the wounds with Bea's jacket sleeves, the harsh fabric irritating my skin. Confetti scraps of twigs and leaves cling to my legs and a thin layer of dirt covers my hands and face. I stand up and continue down the trail, letting the blood begin to congeal against the cold air.

I exit the trail onto a side street and hop between lamp posts to shield myself from the world enclosing behind me. I stumble along, letting myself be guided by the hands of the dark pulling and push-

ing on the backs of my legs. I feel my sock bunching up within my boot; the fabric promises blisters, rubbing circles into my foot. I lose the foundation beneath me. I fall into a hole of crumbling hours and slipping places: the church playground's rusted swings, the baseball field's overgrown parking lot, and wandering down hospital hallways. I sway down identical-looking corridors until I find the nurses' desk. I walk up to the desk to find a nurse whose eyes are glued to the computer monitor.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where Elsie Crane's room is?" I say.

"She just got moved into the Intensive Care Unit an hour ago. You can only go back there if You're immediate family." She says without looking up from the screen.

"My name is Lucy Crane. I'm her granddaughter," My name twirls around my tongue and settles into cotton-mouth fatigue. "I can show you my ID or something..." I start patting myself down in the hopes that I have the small card, I feel a pair of callous hands being placed on my shoulders.

"She's with me, Ms. Debra." My grandfather tells her. She finally lifts her head to take a look at me. She stares at the small abrasions on my face and starts reaching for alcohol wipes and Band-Aids.

"Are You okay? Let me take a look at You really quick." She says, rolling her chair behind her.

"No, she's fine," He says without looking at me "I'll take her down the room now."

"I really feel like I sho-" Her words muffle and trail off into the hurried footsteps of doctors and my grandfather pushing me down the hall.

"I don't know where You've been for the last couple few hours. You should be ashamed of yourself, but that's not the issue right now. What is the issue is Your grandma.," He turns me down another white hallway. "She fell and hit her head trying to get out of bed. It's...bad. Ugly, actually. She's been out knocked out since it happened and it's caused other issues. She threw up and there's fluid trapped in her lungs. So, this isn't the time to be funny or smart or You. Be prepared when you go in there. Only one of us can be in there at time for right now, and since I've been here, You need to go in for a bit."

I stop outside the door and steady myself before facing her in

her bed. She's laying with the bed propped up and the only movement is from the rising and falling of her chest. Her once-white hair is stained a rusty brown from the fall and her stitches rest just below her hairline. Her lips are cracked and pale; the corners of her mouth are still crusted with vomit. She's hooked up to various machines. I watch her body unconsciously gnaw on the tube shoved down her throat and taped to her face; it pops and flexes under her teeth, filling the gaps left in between the rhythmic beeping of monitors. The hive in my skull buzzes so loud that the bees sting my brain, numbing it until I can't be reached.

You walk across the room to sit on the guest bench. Your eyes begin to well with tears as You stare her down, daring her to open her eyes. You stifle sobs and wheeze in the sterile air. Glitter spills down Your face in clumps of shiny shrapnel in an oil spill of mascara. The soft and oozing membranes of Your knees crash into each other like cymbals; the cacophony of pain makes Your ears scream.

You rise from the seat, crossing the room to her bed and loom over her. Her eyes twitch violently behind her eyelids, but that's all that moves. You look down at her hand; her crumpled paper skin is beginning to bruise from her IV. You place Your hand on top of hers, and the monitors begin to yell down the hall. Water begins to engulf You, and Your legs become petrified from Your glacial grieving. A white sea of lab coats pour into the room and wash You out into the hall. You watch Your grandfather wade back and forth through the water, pulling the water into his personal vortex His shirt is soaked from the chest down and clings to his body. The water splashes onto Your nose as You watch doctors pool around her bed through the small window. You're pulled down by the undercurrent and glide in liquid oxygen. You float untethered; water crashes into water as waves topple overhead.



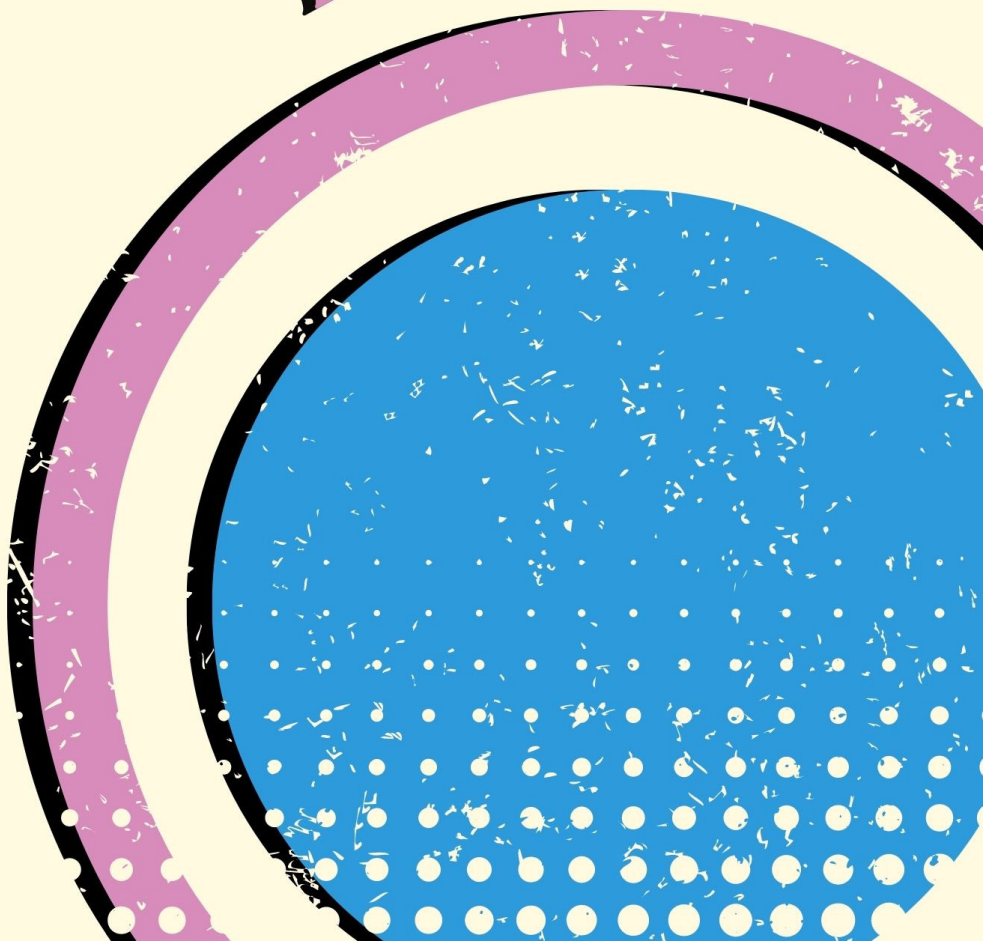
Bitch

Emily Saucier

She's locked and loaded on my tongue like a most-loved shotgun, like the pink pepper spray dangling from every bitch's key ring. She's my bestie, my litmus test for bitches when I first meet them. She's a lover, a high school sweetheart whose name sat daintily among sweet graphite hearts amongst Men's names in my history notes and my precious term of affection, of endearment aimed at all of my most favoritest bitches. My go-to unladylike son-of-a- shriek when I nick my leg shaving or burn my soft finger on the flat iron. She's my perfect vulgar insult whispered behind manicured nails and soft palms thrown only by me and the other 50.5% of the American population- no boys allowed- because what else does a bitch have in their arsenal? And listen, even if you didn't grow up to be a princess or a ballerina, you'll still be a bitch, and honestly? How wonderful is that?



There!



The Liminality of Social Spaces

Morgan Raper

Societal norms allow individuals to navigate their environments by determining whether or not behavioral expectations have been met. These environments known as “social spaces” are contingent on either physical or social proximity of those within the group as well as the location in which it takes place. However, when a setting is prone to change, it allows for liminality to exist within the social space, resulting in individuals drifting between two settled concepts of appropriate social interaction. Liminality plays an integral role within the various social spaces in J. D. Salinger’s short story, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” which entails Seymour Glass, a returned soldier, and his wife Muriel going on vacation to the beach. As the story moves through several contexts of communication, the unspoken rules of society are consistently twisted in the wake of Seymour’s presence. Salinger ultimately explores how social interaction is manipulated through the liminality of the transitional settings of social spaces.

Muriel and her mother create a social space through their phone call, which allows for liminality to be demonstrated strictly through conversation. While unable to be physically together, the phone call works to become an environment where personal connections can compensate for the lack of physical proximity, which emphasizes language rather than behavior. Salinger engages with this concept by creating a dissonance between how one means to communicate and how they are actually perceived by others through Muriel’s assumption of how her mother views Seymour. Muriel says, “[Y]ou

talk about him as though he were a raving maniac...you *sound* that way” (Salinger 7-8). This shows that Muriel and her mother stand on two different viewpoints regarding Seymour and his behavior. Muriel is more focused on what is being said rather than hearing the concern that her mother is trying to convey. Their interaction has then become further disconnected beyond their social environment’s physical limitation through miscommunication. The liminal gap in understanding between intent and interpretation illustrates one to see how language can be easily manipulated to distort social interactions. Indefinite language is also used to further this disconnect. Towards the end of their discussion, Muriel chooses her words carefully to pacify her mother’s anxieties while also allowing for room to work around the truth. Muriel says, “Listen, I’ll call you tomorrow, maybe” (Salinger 8). The use of the word “maybe” creates an intentional sense of uncertainty. With the channel of communication already distorted through persistent misunderstanding, Muriel’s engagement with fickle language extends the social sphere’s liminality into physical actions. Muriel’s mother is left in between the known and the unknown once the two hang up. The lack of a physical setting for the social space to take place makes it easier for alterations to take place.

For physical settings, the introduction of Seymour’s secluded section of the beach is used to show the correlation between social and physical proximity to others within social spaces. The beach acts as a fluid location by emphasizing positioning; it physically resides between the resort and the ocean while acting as a benchmark between Seymour’s full integration back into civilian life and utterly isolating himself from the outside world. Sybil, a little girl that has befriended Seymour, acts as a connecting force between Seymour and society. Salinger writes, “[Sybil] was soon out of the area reserved for guests of the hotel. She walked for about a quarter mile and [...]reached the place where a young man was lying on his back” (9). Although Seymour could easily reside in the guests’ portion of the beach, he puts great effort into his separation from the closed social space provided to him. This established conditional belonging of the hotel beach is ditched to self-create a private space with unrestricted communication with one another. The two talk with an open rapport centered around trusting the noncritical space they have created. Seymour exhibits this

connection through his redirection of Sybil's inappropriate actions through positive reinforcement, such as using the girl Sybil openly does not like as an example. Seymour says,

~~~~~  
What I like particularly about her is that she never does anything mean to little dogs in the lobby of the hotel [...] You probably won't believe this, but some little girls like to poke that little dog with balloon sticks. Sharon doesn't. She's never mean or unkind. That's why I like her so much. (Salinger 13)  
~~~~~

Seymour uses the seclusion of their private space to openly change Sybil's negative behaviors she exhibits in public to help make her a better person. While in public Seymour is subjected to confusion and judgment for his inability to align to social norms, he constructs a closed space to correct Sybil's mistake through interactions based on understanding. Seymour's part of the beach then becomes a liminal space where public matters can become private by being discussed openly without the harsh criticism that is seen in everyday society.

However, the ocean works to show how once clear social interaction can become muddled through fluid environments. The ocean acts as a liminal setting through the environment's ability to have no physical bearings, resulting in a placeless space for the characters to reside. Without the security of seclusion that the beach provided, Seymour is unable to continue a direct form of meaningful connection and instead, uses indirect conversation tactics with Sybil once in the ocean. This is primarily seen in his creation of the bananafish. Seymour says,

~~~~~  
They're very ordinary-looking fish when they swim in. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas. (Salinger 14)  
~~~~~

Although Seymour's ambiguous communication is discussed through Muriel and her mother's phone call, this is the first time that he constructs an elaborate narrative within the frames of the text. The bananafish are used as a metaphorical veil for Seymour to discuss darker aspects of society with Sybil without having to directly acknowledge

them. In this sense, Seymour depends on the liminality he created to blend taboos and public affairs under a symbol-driven narrative. Seymour also compensates for his lack of social stability through conveying meaning in physical touch. Salinger writes, “The young man suddenly picked up one of Sybil’s wet feet, which were drooping over the end of the float, and kissed the arch” (15). Seymour tends to speak his mind rather than depending on his actions to express what is feeling. However, he uses nonverbal communication to show Sybil what he cannot vocalize. The ocean acts as a liminal vessel for Seymour to display an act of vulnerability and admiration towards Sybil when the social space has become too inaccessible for literal-minded conversation.

By contrast, Seymour’s experience with the woman in the elevator shows how closed-off liminal settings constrict social interactions. Elevators are physically liminal due to their function being to move between floors, resulting in a short-term and private social space being created for those within it. However, unlike Seymour’s secluded beach, the elevator is temporarily inaccessible to and from the outside world when moving. With a physically-restricted environment, the social space becomes constricted along with it. Such environments leave little room to navigate social norms or interactions at all. Salinger shows how delicate this type of social space is through Seymour’s brief interaction with the woman, particularly through his use of language and accusations. Seymour says, “I have two normal feet and I can’t see the slightest God-damned reason why anybody should stare at them” (Salinger 16). Seymour’s discomfort and agitation is rooted in the nonconsensual staring that can take place in social spaces. Although Seymour appropriately gauges that staring is rude in most circumstances, he reacts disproportionately to the situation as a whole. Within the constraints of the elevator, his increasingly aggressive confrontation can make one feel cornered and threatened. As this woman acts as a stand-in for polite society, her confused and startled reactions show how Seymour has disturbed the narrow minefield that is proper interactions in a location that bases its social space on forced proximity. The woman says, “I beg your pardon. I happened to be looking at the floor [...] Let me out, please” (Salinger 15-16). Her use of polite diction contrasts Seymour’s vulgar language, which

shows a dissonance between their perspectives of social norms at play; whereas she judges Seymour for his inappropriate conversation, he judges her for making him the unwilling spectacle of her gaze, and in turn, judgment. In this sense, Seymour makes it to where social norms themselves can be weaponized within particular social spaces.

Within his short story, Salinger equips various settings to demonstrate the inconsistent factors of appropriate social interaction. Liminality affects the physical proximity as well as the social road map one needs to maneuver through social cues to adapt to transitional environments. By leaving social spaces that are contingent on excluding others, one can develop their own private sphere to openly engage in. Without physical or social stability, this vulnerability allows room to engage in new modes of communication. Restrictions in social spaces allow for social norms to be questioned in the face of confrontation. Through the use of liminal spaces, Salinger shows how communication and connection adapt based on the frame of the location.



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Forbidden Knowledge: An Analysis of the Inter- ests of Marlowe's Faustus

Justin Porter

The main protagonist, if he can be referred to as such when it comes to certain aspects of his character, in Christopher Marlowe's dramatic tragedy, *Doctor Faustus*, is no less than obsessed with knowledge. Early in the play, Faustus reveals his interest in a variety of different subjects. He takes an interest in different areas of knowledge, but his interests further influence his engagement with the occult. His attention is particularly drawn to ideas and knowledge surrounding the topics of black magic, mysterious symbols, and necromancy. These particular interests serve Faustus well enough to the point of spiritual involvement, thus creating a power struggle between good and evil forces for the sake of Faustus's soul. *Doctor Faustus* engages with certain ideas and abilities that go beyond the normal, everyday world, and the character of Faustus provides an insight into the realm of forbidden knowledge, where he knowingly struggles between diving further into his own damnation or attempting to gain salvation through repentance. The tragedy of *Doctor Faustus* is an example of one man's obsession with the power that lies outside of his control and how he justifies his passion for the unholy.

Early on, it is made clear that Faustus is a man of scholarship and a seeker of available knowledge. In the Prologue, it describes a brief history of Faustus's early life as a student where he excels in his study of theology. The Prologue makes clear that, "he profits in divinity, / The fruitful plot of scholarism graced, / That shortly he was graced with doctor's name" (15-17). Through his studies, Faustus is rewarded, and,

through further study, he goes beyond taking an interest in subjects which are arguably controversial to the point of fear and confusion. “He surfeits upon cursed necromancy: / Nothing so sweet as magic is to him, / Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss” (25-27). It is implying that Faustus becomes involved in these arts, where it comes to the point of obsession in Faustus’s mind.

It is interesting to see Faustus’s interests change from something considered common and purposeful, and then engage himself with things that are not so. But the real intrigue of this point is Faustus’s enjoyment of the occult.

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These metaphysics of magicians  
And necromantic books are heavenly!  
Lines, circles, schemes, letters, and characters!  
Ay, these are those that Fautus most desires. (1.49-52)

~~~~~

Faustus finds a particular enjoyment when engaging with such things, and he is hopeful to find gain through these undertakings of forbidden knowledge. “O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honor, of omnipotence / Is promised to the studious artisan” (1.53-55). So, with his excessive levels of interest and involvement, Faustus is hopeful to reap the rewards that he may find through his engagement in these evil arts.

However, the play touches on the point that Faustus did not begin taking these kinds of interests from the start of his scholarly career. After his time spent in the study of theology and his gain of more practical knowledge, Faustus desired to know more and more, consuming different areas of knowledge until his eventual fall into black magic and the occult. His range of study begins with theology until he gained his noteworthy title. Then he goes on to an intellectual pursuit of knowledge in a variety of subjects. Faustus engages in the study of law and medicine and is well equipped when it comes to expressing certain phrases in Latin. And Faustus even states that he will, “live and die in Aristotle’s works” (1.5). Faustus engages with such wide-ranging subjects, but the problem begins when he ventures too far into his pursuits and delves into occult studies. This is the point of danger to which Faustus approaches in his new interests.

He practices occult rituals, which then shift Faustus's focus from intellectual pursuit to an obsession with the dead, the damned, and the supernatural, eventually finding himself in a dramatic struggle for the security of his soul.

With the combination of both supernatural as well as realistic elements, *Doctor Faustus* shifts between moments of subjectivity and objectivity about the main character. Faustus, from his earliest engagements to his signing of the Devil's contract to his eventual damnation, is caught in a battle of spiritual salvation and gain. Between God and the Devil, Faustus is instructed from both sides to pursue one and not the other, leaving Faustus in a state of vulnerability on which side to choose. This is because one offers the salvation of his soul, while the other offers earthly riches and rewards for his soul. There is a difference between these two powers, even though both sides claim Faustus as, "the site of their power struggle" (Dollimore 107). Both seek to gain, but one can offer Faustus a better reward as opposed to the other, which is the logically sound choice between the two. And furthermore, Faustus continually finds himself engaged in their struggle through their agents—a Good Angel and an Evil Angel. Of course, it is not difficult to understand the kinds of messages the two angels convey to Faustus, but despite being warned to turn from the dark arts, Faustus is repeatedly enticed by the words of the Evil Angel and goes about his practices, after hearing their "obvious suggestions" (Brooke 96). Ultimately, the point of these angels is to show how, "The Good Angel and the Bad Angel dramatize Faustus' conflict of soul and show that his belief in unavoidable sin outweighs his faith in God's grace and the efficacy of prayer" (Masinton 115). Faustus is capable of understanding both the angels as well as his current state of progression towards damnation, yet he acknowledges, "God will pity me if I repent" (5.192). This is an indication of his knowledge of the existence and hope that lies with God, but he then turns away due to the words of the Evil Angel, "Ay, but Faustus never shall repent" (5.193), implying that Faustus has no choice. What is interesting is how both angels speak to Faustus, and yet, he only seems to truly recognize the words of the evil one and continues to listen to his false words.

It is possible to understand that Faustus sees no hope in God, and

this can result from either God's resistance to saving him or the fact that Faustus allows himself to get in his own way and hearing what he wishes to hear.

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The precedent set by Marlowe's Faustus is particularly provocative since despite his classical allusions it is not the pagan deities that Faustus opposes. Instead, Marlowe's protagonist rebels against a recognizably Christian and most probably Calvinist God. (Preedy 162)

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The idea of free will is not a reality when it comes to a fixed nature, but it can be argued that Faustus's condition, although it appears fixed, is not. It is true that Faustus repeatedly falls back to the words of the evil spirits, but it seems to be out of intrigue or fear, which can be attributed from both sides. It is both intrigue as well as fear that contributes to Faustus's state. More so, it is both the fear of God and the fear of the evil spirits that distress Faustus. This puts him in an awkward position since he is able to reach out to both sides, and yet, one side seems to respond more fluently than the other. Faustus cries, "Ah Christ my Savior! seek to save / Distressed Faustus' soul" (5.256-57). He can call out to God for help, but this always seems to be ousted by evil promises and whispers.

The nature of Faustus's condition seems to be that he seeks security from wrath and damnation, calling back-and-forth to both God and Lucifer and hoping for protection against the other. It is, "in the characterisation of the sin for which Faustus is ultimately damned, he seems uncertain of his ground" (Sanders 27). Again, Faustus recognizes, or at the least confesses freely, the saving power and grace of God, but he doubts the idea of God's mercy, therefore, turning back to evil. It is towards the end of Faustus's game with eternity that he finally calls to the higher powers for help and relief. Faustus proclaims, "One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah my Christ" (13.71). Then, through a moment of pain, Faustus corrects himself, "Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ; / Yet will I call on him--O spare me, Lucifer" (13.72-73). Here, the fear of pain keeps Faustus in line with the Devil's will; he is able to shift Faustus's call of relief in Christ to a call of relief in himself. The Devil, like God

admittedly, wants Faustus to be his. It is a power struggle over Faustus's soul, and his soul would enlarge either kingdom. His indecisiveness blinds him to think logically of his situation, and even though both sides are guilty of placing Faustus amid their power struggle, one is nevertheless more benevolent than the other.

Such a pressuring decision is difficult for Faustus, since he is human and flawed. His human ambitions and personal desires are what lead him to his eventual damnation. "When one considers Faustus's motives for taking up the magical arts, it becomes clear that Marlowe wants us to detect a serious moral weakness at the root of the decision" (Sanders 28). And there is "moral weakness" in Faustus's character. It is this which could either help him or destroy him, and yet, he allows his fear and pride to be his downfall. Faustus does not seek to find hope in his dire situation, but instead, he doubts the abilities of those above himself, believing one to inflict punishment whichever way he turns. This is a hopeless situation for Faustus.

Before his eventual deal with the Devil, Faustus is given a piece of advice, almost a significant piece of wisdom and knowledge concerning the nature of Hell and damnation. A servant and messenger of Lucifer is summoned by Faustus, and the two engage in a back-and-forth of questions and answers. Though his answers about Hell are delightful to Faustus, Mephistophilis tells Faustus of certain elements to the nature of damnation. Firstly, he gives a brief history on their fall to misery and tells Faustus, "Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer, / Conspired against our God with Lucifer, / And are forever damned with Lucifer" (3.70-72). Mephistophilis hints to Faustus in his words the nature of the angels who fell from Heaven, as they were in a state of unhappiness, and that Lucifer is the catalyst of the angel's rebellion and ejection from Heaven. It also reveals that, while Mephistophilis is a servant of Hell and the Devil, he still acknowledges God. He mentions the word in the sense of some great authority, and he labels him "our God," meaning that God is the ultimate authority who is above all. Mephistophilis includes himself, Faustus, Lucifer, and the fallen angels and does not name or exclude others to be either above or equal to God.

Of course, this is not persuasive to Faustus, who is seemingly stuck in a desire for what he is able to do with his use of conjuring and

sorcery. Mephistophilis tells Faustus that in his current state he is, “being deprived of everlasting bliss” (3.80). His words come off as though Mephistophilis misses what he has lost, and yet that is not an unreasonable response considering his current condition. And furthermore, Mephistophilis admits to Faustus that there is something better in heavenly Paradise than in damnation. Yet, these are not convincing words to Faustus, who responds by saying, “What, is great Mephistophilis so passionate / For being deprived of the joys of heaven” (3.83-84). In his question, Faustus seems to assert himself. His words give the implication that Mephistophilis is oblivious to his own state of damnation, almost challenging Mephistophilis’s knowledge of what Hell and misery is truly like. This shows the prideful state of Faustus, hearing and refusing to acknowledge the truth of damnation as the result of evil and sin.

To Faustus, the dark arts are a providing force. If he consults with the beings of darkness, who can defy the natural order of the material world, he can have the chance to get the things he wishes for himself. Whether it is power over the damned or power over a nation, Faustus allows these dark ambitions to influence his life to the point of corrupting his character. Yet, with the vast range of knowledge Faustus is perceived to possess, he never really grasps the error in his logic for justifying his dangerous pursuit.

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The seriousness of his commitment to a thorough-going rationalism is indicated here by the interesting, though not surprising, fact that he does not apply the same rational canons to the “arte magick.” (Sanders 33-34)  
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Willingly or not, Faustus’s ability to ignore the reality of his involvement with the occult and not apply the same sort of logical thinking to this situation is almost inconceivable. But this point stresses the power of human desire when it is approached with the possibility of gaining whatever is desired, and in the case of *Doctor Faustus*, the main character desires different personal wants to the point of becoming twisted in his own reasoning and finally condemning himself in the process.

Doctor Faustus is both an examination of human transgression and

how the power of knowledge can either grow into human wisdom or into human aspiration. Faustus achieves much in his pursuit of scholarly study. He finds his success in a range of studies such as theology, philosophy, medicine, and law, even succeeding in his understanding of the nature of spiritual knowledge and of the occult. Doctor Faustus is in a sense a warning. It shows the dangers of human ambition and where it can lead towards. The point is that there is a danger in the pursuit of knowledge because it is difficult to know when to draw the line. It is difficult to know when there needs to be a disconnect, and in Faustus's case, the character goes too far and pushes the boundaries between the knowledge that is a part of human curiosity and what is beyond. Faustus opens himself up to such knowledge, and this is what leads him to damnation. Here, *Doctor Faustus* expresses the idea that knowledge is a power tool, yet the danger lies in human desire, where it comes to the point of creating an obsession and disregarding the betterment of oneself for the sake of personal pursuits.



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ONE ACT PLAY

Cherry Filling

Kelly Foster

Cast of Characters:

Bonnie Bailey: Ten-year old girl

Mother: Woman in her early 30's; Bonnie's mother

Louise: Toddler; Bonnie's younger sister

Miss Franklin: Woman in her 40's; Bonnies pageant coach

Emcee: Man in his mid-30's; emcee for the pageant

Ensemble: Pageant contestants ranging from young girls to teenagers

Scene 1

Setting:

We open on a green room, numerous makeup stations lining its walls. The floor is scattered with loose lipstick and mascara tubes, hair curlers and ties, press-on nails, etc. Against one wall sits a closet with a number of decadent dresses inside, and off-center from the stage is a table with a nearly untouched box of cherry-filled doughnuts.

At Rise:

The green room is packed with pageant contestants who are milling about and getting ready at their makeup stations. They have all made varying progress in the process of preparing for the show. BONNIE sits at one of the makeup stations, hair in curlers but not wearing a dress, half-eaten doughnut in hand. At the station next to her sits MOTHER applying makeup to LOUISE, who she has propped up in her lap. As BONNIE starts to take another bite of her doughnut, MOTHER levels her with a piercing stare.

BONNIE: *(Noticing the look from MOTHER.)* You said I could have

some! If I was good at practice yesterday, I mean. Nice to Miss Franklin and all. You said I could have one of the doughnuts. And they have my favorite this time!

MOTHER: I know I did, honey, but did you have to do it now? Right before the pageant? *(To LOUISE.)* Rub your lips together for Mommy, baby! Like this, see? *(She mimics smacking her lips, and LOUISE copies her.)* There you go! Mommy's good little girl! Oh, you'll be a star in no time. *(BONNIE begins fiddling with her curls.)* *(To BONNIE.)* Don't play with your curls. *(BONNIE lowers her hand and kicks her feet back and forth nervously in her chair. She scoots the chair back, forth, then back again. Finally, her hand goes back to her hair.)* You're still scratching.

BONNIE: It hurts, Mama.

MOTHER: You should be used to it by now.

BONNIE: I am used to it, but it still hurts.

(LOUISE begins to fuss, so MOTHER turns her attention back to her. BONNIE takes the opportunity to stick her tongue out at MOTHER and take a large, mutinous bite of the doughnut. Some of the cherry-filling squirts directly onto her button-down shirt. Panicking, she hurriedly grabs a napkin from the desk, knocking over a few of her makeup appliances in the process, and wipes frantically at the lump of filling.)

MOTHER: *(Making silly faces at LOUISE to cheer her up, but speaking to BONNIE.)* See, Bonnie-Baby? That's what happens when you start to whine. Ten years old is far too old for tantrums. You're lucky we haven't dressed you yet. *(LOUISE continues to whine, so MOTHER begins addressing her.)* Oh sweetie, oh honey, please calm down. What's wrong? Tell Mommy. Please calm down! *(BONNIE sets her doughnut to the side and watches the scene silently. Her face scrunches up and reddens. MOTHER'S eyes don't leave LOUISE, but—)* *(To BONNIE.)* Bonnie. Your lashes. You're old enough to know better.

BONNIE: *(Abruptly standing.)* I've gotta go to the bathroom.

MOTHER: Fine, fine, dear. Just know I may have left when you get back. I need to walk Lou through her routine again. Hopefully Miss Franklin can do something about that acne of yours when

she gets here.

(BONNIE nods sullenly, crosses her arms, and shuffles OFF-STAGE to the bathroom.)

BLACKOUT.

Scene 2

Setting:

The green room, still crowded before the pageant.

At Rise:

Now the only person at BONNIE'S makeup station is MISS FRANKLIN, who stands impatiently tapping her foot and glancing at her wristwatch. Suddenly, BONNIE rushes onto stage and plops herself back into her seat.

MISS FRANKLIN: I hope you actually went this time, dear. That's the third bathroom break in fifteen minutes. We don't have time for another interruption, especially if your mother expects perfectly glowing skin. Come here, come here, let's add another layer of powder. *(BONNIE obediently leans forward so MISS FRANKLIN can run a brush lightly over her face. She shifts in her chair and strums her fingers in her lap, clearly distracted.)* Hold still! We have to make sure you look your absolute best, you know. Aging up a division is always so difficult, I remember back when it happened to me. You're up against girls with much more experience than you. Twelve-year-olds, for goodness' sake! I had to fight for my spot back at the top. But I'm sure your mother's explained this all to you already. *(BONNIE nods absently, gaze distant.)* You can't be a Miss, anymore. Notice how they don't even have the word "miss" in the title? Just "preteen." Misses are cute little babies. That's not what they want from young ladies like you. Young ladies are poised. Elegant. Mature.

BONNIE: *(Frowns at this, fingers falling still at her sides. She peers up curiously at MISS FRANKLIN.)* "Mature." . . . Does that mean I need to "be a woman" now?

MISS FRANKLIN: *(Nodding.)* Exactly, honey! You're getting it!

BONNIE: *(Staring off in the direction from which she just entered, toward where the bathroom would be. Her face begins to brighten.)* I need to go to the bathroom. *(A glare from MISS FRANKLIN,*

who opens her mouth presumably to start lecturing.) Just one more time! I promise! (BONNIE rushes back toward the bathroom, OFF STAGE again, with MISS FRANKLIN gaping after her.)

BLACKOUT.

Scene 3

Setting:

We have now moved to a pageant stage (utilizing the stage of the play itself). Placed just in front of the stage is a slightly raised platform, atop which is a table of judges with pens and papers at the ready. We have one spotlight directed at the stage, and another ready to point to the audience as needed.

At Rise:

An immaculately dressed EMCEE stands off to the right of the stage, microphone in hand, the spotlight on him. Discreetly, MOTHER has taken a seat in the front row of the audience with LOUISE. The judges stare expectantly at the stage.

EMCEE: Introducing . . . Bonnie Bailey! (BONNIE, now wearing her extravagant pink pageant dress and in full makeup and hair, enters from STAGE LEFT. She walks slowly across the stage with poise and confidence, a true master of the “pageant walk” as, midway through, she turns, poses subtly, then strolls forward to CENTER STAGE. Her chin is lifted high, and all the while, her hands are clasped firmly behind her back. Those sitting to the sides of the stage might just be able to make out a small white bundle in her hands.) Bonnie is ten years old and attends Madison Elementary. Her hobbies are finger painting, helping her mother bake, and figuring out cute new fashion trends with the help of her favorite Barbie dolls!

(A rumble of laughter from the judges. BONNIE doesn't even blink, meets their gazes head on. A beat passes, then . . . BONNIE lifts her hand from behind her back and lets BLOOD-STAINED PANTIES dangle from her fist. Gasps erupt from the judges, the Emcee, the audience. BONNIE beams regardless, eyes scanning the crowd. Everything darkens, as one spotlight highlights BONNIE while the other moves to the crowd, landing on MOTHER. All

that is visible are these two solitary figures, staring at each other. BONNIE'S smile begins to fade.)

BONNIE: (*Sputtering, blushing.*) I-I-I'm a woman now! A real woman Look! (*She waves the bundle of underwear fruitlessly, but when met with silence, she simply continues with her rehearsed pageant walk, curtsying and turning to exit STAGE-RIGHT, the spotlight following her. As she walks, however, a line of toilet paper begins to trail down from underneath her dress. She trips over it. Doesn't get up. We can hear quiet sniffing.*) Sorry, sorry, sorry. . .

(The second spotlight moves back to the stage and follows MISS FRANKLIN, who has just entered. She scuttles over to BONNIE, picks her up, and holds her against her chest. They exit the stage.)

BLACKOUT.

Scene 4

Setting:

The green room, dimly lit, nearly empty.

At Rise:

BONNIE and MISS FRANKLIN are alone at their makeup station. BONNIE is still in her dress, but she has kicked off her heels, and her hair falls in a cascade of tangled disarray. Her makeup is runny and smeared. She is still in tears.

MISS FRANKLIN: You can't afford to pull a stunt like this. Mistakes aren't cute anymore, understand?

BONNIE: (*Sniffing, blubbery.*) You said . . . You said, and Mom, you said I had to grow up. I'm a, a young lady now. You said . . .

MISS FRANKLIN: (*Tutting.*) Little girl, what are we going to do with you? Here, something to cheer you up. (*MISS FRANKLIN grabs her purse and rifles through it. After a moment of searching, she grins and lifts her hand, extending it toward Bonnie. In her palm, wrapped in a red, tinselly wrapper, is—*)

BONNIE: Chocolate! (*MISS FRANKLIN chuckles as BONNIE launches forward, instantly cheered. She grabs the chocolate, unravels the wrapper, and lobs it in her mouth. But after chewing for a second, she suddenly grimaces and spits the candy out.*

Scarlet goo lands on the skirt of her dress.) Yuck! What—?
MISS FRANKLIN: (Endeared, through laughter) I know, I know. The cherry filling, or whatever that is, isn't always the best. But you'll have to get used to it sometime, right? Especially when you get yourself a boyfriend. Those giant red hearts don't just have Hershey's in them, you know. (BONNIE begins to scratch at her acne.) Stop scratching, dear.

BLACKOUT.



SCREENPLAY

What Is Kept in the Attic

Mason Smith

INT. ATTIC - NIGHT

JAMESON is moving large cardboard boxes and mattresses lit only by the moonlight from a window in the attic and some light from the attic entrance. We hear grunting as he labors to move the last few large cardboard boxes in front of a bedroom set and about a dozen of similar boxes. Jameson is deep in thought, sweat dripping from his face. As he sets the last box down, a picture falls out of his wife. He starts to tremble and quickly stuffs it back in the box before taking a step back to calm himself down.

CUT TO:

EXT. JAMESON'S MOTHER'S FUNERAL - AFTERNOON

We cut to a close-up of a YOUNG JAMESON'S face, he's dressed in a suit with tears running down his face, we don't see the casket on screen; however Jameson starts to cry more intensely but he cannot break his gaze from the casket. Suddenly, DAD puts a large hand on his shoulder. Jameson looks up.

DAD

Listen here, Jamie. When hard times come, look ahead, and move. Look neither up, down, left or right. That's how men should behave. Jameson looks up at his dad, and then at the casket. Still softly crying.

YOUNG JAMESON

(softly) Dad, are you sad?

DAD

Well, of course. (frustrated) Don't you think I would be

“sad” over my wife’s death?

YOUNG JAMESON

Sorry, it’s just uh, never mind.

Jameson’s attention turns towards the casket again. His dad takes his hand from Jameson’s shoulder and walks away without a word, leaving Jameson alone.

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Jameson is climbing down the last few steps of the ladder that leads up into the attic. The camera looks down on him from the entrance to the attic. He looks up into the attic to get one last look at boxes and bed frames he hopes to never see again and closes it with a thud.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONT LAWN OF HOUSE - MORNING

Jameson steps out of his house and locks the door. He then turns to walk down the driveway to get the newspaper before walking back up to get in his minivan. Out of the corner of his eye he sees HIS NEIGHBOR a couple houses down getting his KIDS in their minivan and kissing his WIFE before he leaves. Jameson stares longingly. We get the feeling that he wants to look away, but he can’t. The couple notice him, but as soon as they look his way, he quickly turns his head away and gets into his minivan.

CUT TO:

INT. MINIVAN - MORNING

Jameson drives in almost complete silence except for the ROAD NOISE. He eventually pulls into a parking lot of a tall corporate looking office building.

CUT TO:

INT. WORK - MORNING

Jameson walks to his desk situated in the midst of ten cubicles, two rows of five. He takes off his jacket and puts it on a hook he has on the wall closest to the cubicle’s “door”. As he turns around to sit down at his plain workspace, he is greeted by his coworker, SAM.

SAM

(cheerfully) Hey how're you doin'? I heard-

JAMESON

It's alright. I've been doing fine . . . really.

Sam pauses for a moment, looks around and gets a step closer to Jameson and leans in.

SAM

I just... wanted to let you know that I know how it is, I've walked this path before.

JAMESON

Oh, so it's *just a path*?

Jameson turns around and sits in his chair, his back towards Sam who has his arms resting on the cubicle wall.

SAM

I'm sorry I didn't mean it that way. (pause, in a quieter tone) Jameson, losing someone you love is hard. It's okay if you're not well. You should get some rest. You haven't taken a day off.

Jameson picks up a notebook and flips through it for a second before putting it down and swiveling around to look at Sam.

JAMESON

Did you get those reports done? They were supposed to be done today by noon.

SAM

(confused) Um well yeah I did but that's not-

JAMESON

Okay then can you send them to me? I really need to get started on work.

Sam looks at Jameson as Jameson swivels back around to look at his computer. Sam hesitates.

SAM

(sigh) Sure thing.

Sam taps the wall before he walks away.

CUT TO:

INT. MINIVAN - EVENING

Jameson gets into his car with a sigh and sits there for a second before turning the car's ignition. He takes awhile to put the car in drive and to exit the parking lot. He noticeably goes slower on the way back home (emphasized by more shots than the morning commute.) When he turns on to his street his house is the only one on the row that has no lights on. Neither interior nor exterior.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONT OF HOUSE - NIGHT

Jameson pulls up into his driveway. Gets out and walks to the door. He pauses for a second before opening the door and going in.

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Jameson shakes his boots off just inside the doorway and hangs up his coat. He walks past a room that is lined with pink wallpaper but barren of any furniture. Jameson doesn't even look its way as he walks past it. Jameson takes a quick shower and makes his way to the couch that has a blanket and a pillow on it. The coffee table is littered with trash and other things to make it obvious that he has been sleeping on the couch for a considerable amount of time. He rolls onto the couch and tries to go to sleep, but he stares up at the ceiling.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. WORK - MORNING

Jameson is already at his desk, typing on the computer, for a second he looks past the computer screen ahead of him to see Sam walking towards his cubicle with two mugs of coffee and a big smile once Sam makes eye contact with Jameson. Jameson quickly darts his eyes back to the screen.

JAMESON

Hey Sam. What do you need?

SAM

Well, nothing really, just thought I'd say good morning and

bring you some coffee. Noticed you didn't grab yours today.

JAMESON

Oh, thanks.

Sam, still standing on the outside of the cubicle, reaches down and sets Jameson's mug on the desk and fumbles around in his breast pocket to grab a few cups of creamer and sugar packets.

SAM

If I...uh...If I remember correctly, you like three creams and two sugars.

JAMESON

Thanks, I appreciate it, but I don't appreciate you watching me.

SAM

Aw, Jameson, when you work across from someone for almost a year, you pick up on some things. Say, your one-year anniversary at the company is coming up, isn't it? We gotta celebrate!

JAMESON

Sam, I'm not in the mood for celebrating right now. We're in the busy season. Thank you for the coffee, but I'm going to work.

Jameson starts to turn in his chair.

SAM

Ah hah, that's where you're wrong! wryly) I figured that over the week-end, I'd get ahead of work for the both of us. Let's go out for lunch downtown, at that café we went to for Reese from Accounting's birthday last month, we might be able to see the Christmas lights being put up!

Jameson seems sick to his stomach. He turns to look at his computer and notices himself in the reflection. Suddenly, he gets up and pushes past Sam, forgetting everything except for his keys. He is walking fast in his office, but once he hits the hallway he begins to run towards the exit. He sprints to his car and gets in and cranks the car to leave.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR - DAY

Jameson speeds home, much faster than his last drive home. He is crying and wiping his eyes with his sleeve, mumbling incoherencies. He whips into his driveway and parks awkwardly.

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Jameson practically runs inside and crumples into a heap on the floor and tumbles into a sob. We hear his labored breathing as he is on the floor. He looks up and sees that he has ended up in the pink room, and with anger, he starts to rip the wallpaper off the walls.

CUT TO:

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Jameson is still ripping wallpaper off walls; his hands are bleeding. Finally, he leans back against the wall and slides down with his hands on his face, crying. Eventually, he drifts off into sleep.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. HOUSE - MORNING

Jameson wakes to the CELLPHONE RINGING in his pocket. He groggily answers it.

JAMESON

Hello?

SAM (OFF)

Jameson, it's Sam, it's 10:00 in the morning, are you okay?

JAMESON

Oh shit, work. Tell the boss I'll be there in a few.

SAM (OFF)

Will do, hope you're alright I didn't mean to upset you yesterday, I just...

JAMESON

...No, no, it's fine.

There's a pause for a few seconds before anyone speaks.

SAM (OFF)

Jameson, aren't you sad?

Jameson is taken aback by this and immediately looks frustrated.

JAMESON

Well, of course. Don't you think I would be sad over my wife's death?

SAM (OFF)

Yes it's just you don't seem to want any help.

JAMESON

(fighting urge to cry) You know, that's crazy because that's the only thing you have gotten right in the past two days. I don't need help. I just have to move on. I'll see you at work.

Jameson hangs up the phone before Sam can answer. Jameson doesn't move, however. He just sits in the corner. He looks around him and at his hands to see what he's done. He crosses his arms and rests them on his knees.

FADE OUT.



The White Dress

Raven Runnels

There's something about a white dress that is so beautiful.

The way the lace floats on the breeze. How the slip tangles about your legs as you run. The contrast of a field of bold-colored wildflowers that makes up the backdrop to another blissful summer afternoon.

The light airiness of the soft, worn cotton as it dances along your skin.

The innocence and purity that comes to mind when gazing upon the delicate threading.

There's something about a white dress that is so tragic.

The dirt that stains the hem when playful feet come to a rest. The grass that colors the back as you lie hidden in the fields. A gasping breath revealing where you are.

The tears in the lace as it tangles in the brambles, gripping you in their tight claws until you rip loose.

The skirt billowing as you turn around, caught in a gust of wind.

The splash of red that blossoms across your chest.

The fabric tattered and shredded as you tumble down the hill.

The translucency as the water from the pond seeps into the fabric as you come to an abrupt stop. Water lapping against your sides.

The tangled brown curls, caked with mud and grass and dark against pallid skin.

Dulling eyes, staring into the pond and past your outstretched hand.

A puddle of red turning the ripples a watery pink.

Dirt-stained ankles.

Broken skin and bloody heels.

A shadow that crawls across your prone figure, kneeling down beside
you.

A tender caress, the hair is moved out of your face.

Is that a rattled breath shaking out of your broken lungs, or just the
water shifting the weight of your body?

Air whisks beneath you, the world shifts as you are lifted.

This dress is so heavy, the weight becoming unbearable.

A slow, silent trek through the woods, a jagged cliff

The world stretches onwards, stretches onwards, at the edge of your
reaching fingers.

And then flight! Soaring between one moment and the next.

And then falling! Body breaking against cruel, jagged rocks.

The water pulls you into arms of numbing cold.



Untootled

Kelly Foster

Bare toes wiggle at the bank.
Hands plunge into moist, padded dirt.

I **gropegripGRAB** the mud!

I slip and I slide and I fondle

For the worms; I yank at a fern

And they come out in a tangle of

Twisted pink roots. Did my

Fingers worm their way into the

Dirt and pop up with them?

Hmm??mmum?ming bird and what.

Call me feral from the age of babeblood chords and

Roots of skin in woven clouds.

I will kick out with my

Undirted pigs,

Cry out with my

Unfogged breath.

“Hey,” say

Little wet tears to the

Unbroken sky
As it lifts them in its airy palm.
They freefall down to me
Again,
And I stick out my tongue and
Laugh, dance, *again*, agoop,
I flirt through yellow teeth
And wink.



Sickeningly Lovely

Morgan Raper

I scrubbed my face with baby powder until the blood vessels underneath screamed with delight. I brushed my teeth with sequins until my gums cried. I sat in front of the mirror to catch glimpses of myself in between the cotton candy fog on the hot glass. You'd like Clean Girls™, I thought. I shot a stream of saliva at the mirror-me, hopped off the counter, and passed the dried glitter-vomit in the hallway: the aftermath of all the other yous.

I walked hopelessly down piss-gilded streets, and the aroma of burnt caramel carried me down blurred alleyways as I searched in vain for You in a sea of yous. You stayed amorphously adjacent: Up in an ocean of honey blossoms one day then down in storms of midnight lacerations the next. My heels crunched a symphony of syringes and eggshells through the streets to the outdoor markets. I fell victim to the labyrinth of vendors. The looming cloud of fruit flies whispered me rotten everythings. I wandered until my blisters burst with confetti. The recoil from my ruptured sole caused me to stumble into a produce stand and knock it over.

Fishnets ripped from the ankle to knee, I dropped to my knees to pick up loose plums. I inspected them for cuts or bruises from their small avalanche. As I settled them back on their display, You approached me, hand dripping fruit blood, thumb jammed in a seeping wound.

"Are you alright?" You asked, handing me the mutilated plum.

"It's nothing a honey-globbed cigarette can't fix." I stared at the pink liquid sloshing along the walls of the tumbler in your clean hand.

"Oh, what are you drinking?"

"Just perfume. Would you like some?"

"Oh no, I can't drink my calories away."

“Really? It truly does make you feel oh so pretty on the inside.”

“Well, if you insist.” I sipped.

I threw up churned cream and maggots all over your shoes. The maggots wriggled into your Mary Jane’s, and the curds left foil-smelling stains.

“Oh good, don’t you feel better? Just oh so pretty?” You said, smiling so hard I could hear your teeth crack.

“No,” I said, stabbing my thumb into the exposed plum, still warm from your touch. “I feel sickeningly lovely.”



The Blood Drive

Lauren Harvey

The butterfly needle pulled her blood from her arm. It stung but she was used to it. One thing about Melanie was, she never turned down some extra cash.

Times were hard and college was expensive. Business at the diner was down and her waitress tips barely covered her rent, not to mention the tuition bill due in a few days. If someone would pay her for blood she wasn't really using, she was all for it. This wasn't the first time she had used this service. Every time she was racing for a few extra pennies to rub together, she would call the nondescript number and set up an appointment for the next morning. At this point, she had walked into the dingy clinic, if you could even call it that, for the fifth time.

The folding chair she sat in squeaked as she readjusted it. Not for the first time, she wondered about the validity of this hole-in-the-wall clinic. She had never heard of being paid for straight blood. Plasma, but not blood. It was sketchy, but she didn't have another choice. She would finish up here and get out of there like always.

She spied a small bug crawling around the edge of the room. As she visibly cringed, Melanie wished she had brought some disinfectant wipes to give the room a run-through with. It was honestly disgusting.

Fluorescent lights illuminated the wide room. Three or four identical chairs to her own were laid out haphazardly and one singular folding table sat in the middle. A door to a single-stall bathroom that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in thirty years was to Melanie's right. Disinfectant wipes, needles, and blood vials sat on the surface of the table in a neat little caddy. Despite the dirt that caked the floor and the

dead bugs in the corner, the smell of disinfectant assaulted her nose.

“Miss Caufield?” The nurse said as she smoothly switched vials, Melanie’s blood beginning to fill another one of the thin containers. Even if this place was crappy, she trusted this nurse. Her wide blue eyes and short blonde bob gave Melanie a sense of comfort. She had only ever seen Nurse Smith on her visits here. There was never another nurse that took her blood, only Nurse Smith. Melanie felt a strange bond with the woman, one-sided as it may be. She also always knew what she was doing and always had cash to hand over at the end. The clinic may not have been legit, but Melanie did not doubt that Nurse Smith was a legit phlebotomist.

Every time Melanie made her way to the back-alley clinic, she never met anyone but Nurse Smith. There was never a receptionist or doctor, just Smith. Another aspect that made Melanie’s skin crawl with the apprehension of the validity of this clinic, but she guessed it was better than seeing tons of people at once or being ambushed upon arrival.

“Yes?”

“Are you feeling okay, sweetie? You’re looking a little pale.” Concern was written on Nurse Smith’s face and Melanie gave her a reassuring look.

“Just a little faint is all. You know how it is.” Nurse Smith’s hair wobbled back and forth as she nodded.

A few more vials were taken in silence. Melanie decided to stop counting how much blood she was watching leave her arm in a small tube after the sixth vial, instead focusing on not passing out.

Her eyes were closed as the nurse finally pulled the needle from her arm.

“That’s enough for today, don’t you think?” Melanie nodded, taking a second to right herself as Nurse Smith cleaned her plastic folding table and wrapped a bandage around the pinprick hole in Melanie’s arm.

“Five hundred for you today, sweetie.” Melanie watched as Nurse Smith pulled out a roll of twenties, wrapped together with a thick rubber band. Melanie instantly grabbed for it.

Melanie loved the feeling of it in her hand. Just a small amount of discomfort for such a large stack of cash. She would be set for at least the next two weeks. Naps and an insane amount of hydration

were always needed after these sessions, but the cushion of cash in her pocket made it all worthwhile. She was off work tomorrow; she would recover soon enough.

“Thanks,” Melanie didn’t expect a reply and walked to the exit. The large metal door was heavy to push on, especially with her now weakened arms but she did it.

Sunlight warmed her face as she walked on down the road. The clinic wasn’t in the best part of town but close enough to her downtown apartment that she never felt the need to waste money on gas. She also loved walks in the fall air. The sun was warm enough on her face, but the breeze had a certain chill in it that wasn’t there any other time of year.

A particularly brisk breeze rushed through the street and goose bumps appeared on Melanie’s arms.

Dang it. My jacket.

Melanie’s vintage leather jacket she had thrifted two years ago was still sitting on that dang folding chair. If it had been any other jacket, Melanie would have said to hell with it and walked away without a second thought, but this was her favorite jacket. It had been through all her crazy college nights and long work shifts. Not to mention, she bought it on a shopping trip with her mother; one of the last of those trips she’d ever taken. There was no way she was leaving that thing in a back-alley clinic for a crack addict to pick up.

She quickly turned on her heel, making her mind up that she would head back to the clinic. She brought up her pace from a stroll to a brisk walk. She didn’t want to go back in there today, but the jacket was more important than her comfort.

After a few minutes of her brisk walk, she was back in front of the metal door. Helping Hand’s Blood Drive was written above the door on a makeshift paper sign. She rolled her eyes. This was a sorry excuse for a blood drive. Melanie had never once seen another person besides her in the clinic, never seen advertisements, and by the looks of it, they weren’t equipped for more than one person at a time. Melanie didn’t know what they did with the blood they paid her for, and most of the time didn’t care, but this second trip to the door today was bringing back all her anxieties that she had felt the first time she’d ever been here.

The jacket. She wanted her jacket back.

Melanie gave the door a hard shove, despite the weakness in her arm.

An empty room greeted her. She looked from one corner of the room to the other. The table had been cleared of the medical supplies. Her eyes searched for her jacket as she took a few steps inside. The door closed heavily behind her, but she ignored it.

Where in the world did it go?

“Looking for something?” Melanie jumped out of her skin and whipped around.

“Holy crap.” She gasped. She reached up and held her chest as she bent over. Her heart was racing. That voice. It had scared her more than she had in a long time. In the back of her mind, she thanked God she hadn’t peed her pants.

“My apologies.” She looked up. “I assume I frightened you.” A man stood in the doorway. In every sense of the word, he was gorgeous. Tall, olive-toned skin, and black wavy hair that swooped over his forehead at the perfect angle. Melanie could tell he put time into getting ready in the morning. His black button-up and slightly tight slacks were freshly ironed and seemingly tailored to his perfect body.

She gave off a dry laugh. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“You never answered my question.” He leaned up against the door-frame, his foot propping the door open. She guessed he figured she couldn’t remember his question by her confused look. “Were you looking for something?”

“Oh,” She reached her hands up, absentmindedly adjusting her hair. Something about Mister Tall-Dark-and-Handsome made her self-conscious without her even realizing it. “Yes, my jacket. I was in here earlier and left it.

“Haven’t seen a jacket.” She continued to look around the room, pointless as it may be. Her heart sank. If it wasn’t here, there was nothing she could do. Maybe Nurse Smith picked it up on her way out to return to her the next time she came to the clinic.

“I guess it’s gone then.” She took steps towards the door. “Thanks for your help.” Melanie hoped that he’d get the message that she wanted to get through the doorway.

“Was it important?”

“Was what important?”

“The jacket.” Strange as it may be, Melanie felt comfortable around the man. Maybe he could help her find the jacket after all. She silenced the remaining alarms in the back of her head, choosing to talk to the guy anyways.

“A little. I’ve just had it for a long time.” He nodded back to her.

“And why were you in here?”

Melanie pointed to the door. “The blood drive; brings in a little extra cash.” His eyebrows knit together.

“What blood drive?”

“The one that the signs for obviously.” Amazingly, his face became even more confused. He leaned back, reaching his body out to get a better look at the door.

“I hate to break it to you, but there’s no sign.”

“What do you mean there’s no sign? I literally just saw it as I walked in.” She gestured to the door, anxiety creeping back into her mind. Maybe she shouldn’t have silenced those mental alarms that she had just pushed down.

“Take a look for yourself.” Against her better judgment, she took long strides to the door, trying to confirm that the sign she knew was there, really was there. “I own this unit. I’ve never seen any type of sign here.”

“What the hell?” Every trace of the blood drive sign was gone. There was no residual tape or paper, and the worst part was it had been there not five minutes before. Melanie took a step back, running her hands through her hair. “I swear it was just there.” She looked at him and he shrugged.

“I must say, you’re beautiful.” Her head whipped around to look at him. At that moment, the man reached out with lightning speed, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her flush with his chest. She could smell his expensive cologne. She began to struggle against him, but there was no use. His arms held her in an iron grip, leaving her unable to move. “I’m sorry, my love.”

“Let go of me! What are you doing?” She was yelling into the alleyway now. “Help! Help me!”

“Trust me, my love, I didn’t want this to happen.” He reached an arm up, caressing her cheek with a light hand. She continued to

scream. The louder she was, the more likely someone out on the main street would hear her; help her. He moved his hand from her cheek, wrapping it tightly around her mouth to quiet her. He dragged her into the dingy one-room unit, the door shutting loudly behind them. Not once did his grip loosen, even with her biggest attempts to struggle away from him.

Tears fell out of her eyes and true, deep fear hit her at full force.

“This is all your fault, you know. If you hadn’t come back, I never would have even seen you. Now that I’ve seen you, we can’t go back.” He released his grip on her mouth for a split second and brought his hand down hard on the side of her head.

Her vision went black.

§

Everything was fuzzy. Her body felt feverish, and her sight went in and out of focus. She couldn’t even really tell what she was looking at. She tried to turn but felt a tightness around her body. She couldn’t make out what exactly was going on.

A few minutes passed, or maybe longer, she wasn’t sure. Nothing felt real. She was in a haze, letting time pass by without even thinking. The small voice in the back of her head told her to get up. Didn’t she have that assignment to do? Yeah, she was pretty sure she had an econ paper due at midnight. Strange that her alarm hadn’t gone off yet.

Finally, she forced herself to move, opening her eyes. She couldn’t exactly make out what was around her, but she could tell she wasn’t in her bed like she should have been. After a long period of trying to move her limbs, she realized her arms and legs were bound together. This woke her up. She started to struggle against her bonds, screaming behind a strip of tape that held her lips together. She was still wearing all her clothing though, which she told herself was a good sign.

Melanie was confused. She remembered walking back to the clinic to get her jacket but nothing afterward. Wasn’t someone there with her? Why couldn’t she just remember? Tears were beginning to overflow. “You’re awake.” Her eyes snapped over to the right. There he was: the gorgeous man. Everything came rushing back to her memory. His niceties, the sign, and ultimately his attack on her. Tears finally fell out of her eyes. She was on the edge of a panic attack, her breath coming in quick bursts. This wasn’t right. She was supposed to be in

her apartment, snuggling her cat, and working on homework. She was not supposed to be bound by tape, struggling to breathe.

“I’m sorry it happened like this, my love.” He kept talking despite her failed attempts to move. He stared at her unimpressed as she began writhing on the floor. “I meant for you to fall in love with me eventually. I even thought about dropping into one of your appointments; saying hello.” He moved around the room, making gestures with his hands in the air. He was obviously a person who talked with his hands. “I beg you not to hold any animosity towards Nurse Smith. She knows nothing of this.”

At this point, her vision was clear enough to be able to look around. She was laying on the concrete, grease stains adorned the ground, and the same plastic folding table that was in the clinic sat about ten feet in front of her. She could tell it was the same from the bent leg on it. The man stood about six feet from her.

“I feel the need to confess my sins.” Her eyes quickly shifted back to him as he spoke. “I have loved you for a long time now.”

What is going on?

“I started to drink your blood months ago.” This was when Melanie was thrust into a full-blown panic attack. She couldn’t breathe, it felt like a thousand-pound weight was sitting on her chest. This wasn’t right. This man was crazy, and she started to wonder if she was about to die. Nothing about this situation was right. “You came into the clinic, and you’ve been the only taker so far. And God, your blood is so sweet. I love you, Melanie, trust me.” He’s crazy.

He took a few steps towards her, and she tried to struggle away but the tape around her was too strong.

“I’m sorry but I can’t help myself anymore. I want you so bad.” She tried to scream. It didn’t work through the tape. He sauntered over to Melanie. Then he reached out and touched her face. “I deeply regret this, my love.” What he did next drew the biggest scream out of her that she had ever produced. Melanie didn’t even know it was possible to scream that loud. Even though the tape, her screams bled through. All she wanted was for someone to hear her, to save her.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife, slashing it across the side of her neck in a quick motion. He pressed his lips into the two-inch-long incision as he held her neck in place, sucking out her

blood. He stayed there, pulling the lifeblood out of her. “Wow, you’re amazing.” He started again and somehow, she felt fainter than she ever had in all her experiences of getting blood drawn. How much was he drinking from her? What did his knife hit? Her jugular?

I’m about to die, she thought.

His mouth was pressed against her neck still and her vision was speckled with black spots. She knew she was about to pass out. She felt her blood dripping out of his mouth and down her neck. Red stains ran down her grey T-shirt.

He removed himself from her neck. “Sorry, I know that was probably a lot at once.” He brought up a gauze pad, seemingly out of nowhere, and pressed it to her neck, stanching the blood flow. “Sometimes, I just can’t help myself with you.” Her vision swam but she was quiet. She couldn’t even think straight after that. How much blood had she lost today? This mixed with the blood she had lost at the clinic earlier. This must be unhealthy.

The tape around her mouth had loosened just enough for her voice to be heard. “You’re...You’re a psycho.” She barely whispered. The black dots dancing in her vision expanded and she lost consciousness.



Russian Roulette

Canderrian Brown

Let's play a game!" exclaimed Aurélius. In his hands was a Hermès shoebox that belonged to the sneakers on his feet. Walking towards his childhood friend Logan, he sat the box down on the coffee table that currently hosted Logan's feet.

"A little game I like to call," Aurélius took the lid off the rectangular box, "Russian roulette."

With an eyebrow arched, Logan sat up, removing his legs off the wooden table to take a glimpse into the shoebox. Lying square in the middle was a matte black revolver that looked as if it had never been touched. Logan figured Aurélius had just purchased it, but was surprised at the color as it was too depressing for his best friend's tastes.

Reaching into the box to grab the weapon, he examined it closer, taking into account the details and engravings. "I thought Mr. and Mrs. Dawson taught you not play with guns," asked Logan, bringing his eyes back to the brown ones before him.

Rolling his eyes, Aurélius rounded the table to sit next to Logan on the chestnut couch. "They also told me not to befriend that weird kid across the street that enjoyed terrorizing Old Lady Fester's dog, but here we are."

Releasing a huff, Logan turned to face Aurélius. "Why do you even want to play this game, let alone with a real gun?"

"You said you were bored, so why not give you a solution to your problem? Besides, we've played it before when we were younger. What's the issue now?"

"The issue is that we played with water guns. You wanna play with an actual gun loaded with bullets."

Logan was genuinely confused with Aurélius' idea of fun. The two

of them hadn't played that game in years—a decade even. They wouldn't have even found the game if it wasn't for Logan showing it to Aurélius at a sleepover in the sixth grade. Logan had told Aurélius about the game before and how he wanted them both to try it. Both boys were perched at the desk watching the video on a website that eleven-year-olds had no business on. The first sight of blood made Aurélius double over and vomit, which then followed an outburst of tears. Logan felt bad for two reasons: He scarred his friend for life and was responsible for Aurélius vomiting on himself. The boy could barely handle his own saliva, so being covered in his own puke sent him over the edge. Not wanting to subject him to gore, he showed an alternative that consisted of plastic water guns. It was the better option especially since neither of them had access to guns yet. “You couldn't even handle it when we were kids, and you want to play now?”

“It's different now, I'm a grown man!” Aurélius proclaimed while flexing his left bicep. “This time is different, since there's a specific rule of playing.” With a smirk, Aurélius took the revolver from Logan's hands and fiddled with it as if he knew how to work it. “We play in the game of love.”

Blinking at his friend with both confusion and intrigue, Logan scratched the stubble around his jaw. “I'm gonna need you to elaborate.”

“We're both in relationships, and they've both been going on for a couple months. Eventually that tricky little word that starts with 'L' is going to seep its way into the heart.”

Not exactly sure what Aurélius was getting at, Logan arched his eyebrow for more clarification from his dear friend.

With a roll of his eyes, Aurélius sighed. “Let's just put it this way. Love is a game, and there's always a winner and a loser.” Clicking the spur on the firearm, “First person to fall or even admit they're in love...” he took a pause and pointed the revolver at the ceiling.

“...Takes a shot.”

There was a mischievous glint in Aurélius' eyes and it frightened Logan. He had never seen this attitude from his friend. The Aurélius he knew was the total opposite of the way he acted right now. Usually, Logan would have the terrible ideas and Aurélius would be the one to oppose. Some part of Logan knew that this was a horrible idea, but who was he to turn down a challenge?

Logan studied the face of his friend for any sign of reluctance and formed a smirk of his own. Spitting in his right hand, he offered it to solidify the deal. “You’re on, Dawson.”

Aurélius scrunched up his face to where his mouth nearly connected with his nostril and immediately got up.

Laughing at his friend’s clear disgust, Logan held both his hands in an inquisitive way. “What happened to being a grown man?”

Gathering the box, Aurélius shook his head and responded with a sincere, yet playful smile, then headed towards the stairs to return the firearm to, presumably, his room. Logan knew he had this bet in the bag. Aurélius had always fallen hard whenever he was in a relationship. Just last week, he suggested his girlfriend Joy move in, despite sharing an apartment with Logan. It wouldn’t be long until he popped out the ‘L’ word. However, Logan was iffy on actually shooting him if he lost. The whole idea was wonky, and he would’ve accepted any other alternative than to hurt his best friend. Aurélius himself knew this. Maybe he would just force Aurélius to pay a hefty amount of cash, considering the dude was loaded. Still, he was interested in winning this fun, yet crazy bet.

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Three months passed since the initial bet, and things were going great in both relationships. It was hard to tell which one of them would make the first declaration of love to their partner. The majority of weeks consisted of double dates between the pair, which meant both would be keeping a close eye on the other. Aurélius and Logan had no problem spending this time with each other, considering they’d been together since childhood. In fact, they’d grown closer if that was even possible. However, the positive atmosphere changed once Aurélius and Joy called it quits. There were no more double dates at the nearest diner and zero movie nights hosted by the two male friends. Logan didn’t know why the relationship suddenly ended and what could’ve made it sour. Likewise, Joy shared the same confusion when Logan and Penelope asked.

“He simply just called me one day and told me that he needed a break. No explanation or anything. He wouldn’t even return my calls or texts afterward.” Joy said, showing the former blue text bubbles turn green.

Logan was even more confused. Were they having troubles? Why wouldn't he tell me about this?

Around the apartment, it was as if Logan had the plague the way Aurélius avoided him. The usual banter between the two friends was no longer present. Desperately wanting the warmth of friendship to return to the household, Logan did anything to elicit a reaction out of Aurélius. Leaving dirty bowls in the sink, not flushing the toilet, and even ruining Aurélius' favorite Louis Vuitton sweater did little to warrant an outburst. Hurt and confused as to why his best friend wasn't talking to him, he decided to corner him to get the truth about both the relationship and bet.

Coming home one night from the gym, Logan examined the apartment. It was quiet with only noise of music coming from Aurélius' room. Logan took a deep breath and trudged upstairs enroute to his friend's room. With two knocks upon Aurélius' door, Logan heard a faint "come in" behind the wooden barrier. Logan opened the door, finding Aurélius sitting on his bed with a familiar box. His sullen expression, swollen lips, and puffy cheeks stare back at him. Logan carefully walks over and sits next to his despondent friend. "Aurélius, please just talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

For a brief moment, Aurélius stared at Logan. Truly studying his face, Logan could see the angst and aching that his once vibrant friend was currently feeling. He felt terrible that his best friend was hurting and there was nothing he could do about it.

Finally, Aurélius let out a sigh and opened the box between the two of them. Inside was the familiar gun, still untouched, lying in the middle of the box. Taking it from its place, he studied it for a minute and looked up at Logan with tearful eyes before raising the revolver. Two words filled the room, yet only one gunshot was heard. Two hearts broke that night.



