



# Harbinger

2020

*Outside the Lines*



# Harbinger

2020

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•j r]

a person or thing that comes before to announce  
or to give indication of what will follow

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# Foreword

## Outside the Lines: Defying the Rules of Art

Often regarded as the “princess of polka dots,” Japanese artist, novelist, and poet Yayoi Kusama has forged a unique path in life since the 1930s. Despite all odds—her parents’ disapproval of her artistic endeavors and a lack of money and supplies—Kusama made a name for herself in the art scene. When introducing her exhibits, critics describe them as a “weird and wonderful world.” She refuses to do what others expect of her; spontaneity and vibrancy are her strong characteristics. She is not a surrealist, or a pop artist, or a minimalist; her work defies categorization. Simply put, Yayoi Kusama does as she pleases. She colors outside the lines or skips the lines altogether, opting for exciting polka dots. Like the world of Kusama, the pages of *Harbinger 2020* are filled with the invention of surprising new worlds, rule-breaking characters, and strange conquests.

*Harbinger 2020* is about redefining itself and defying the rules of art. In an interview, poet and Stephens alum Krysten Hill describes her process of becoming a writer. She tried hard to fit the definition of a poet by mimicking voices she admired but truly became an artist when she discovered her own simple, straightforward approach to style and subject matter. Donna Kozloskie, in her interview, talks about her many roles as someone in the arts—musician, filmmaker, writer, film festival programmer, projectionist, critic and educator. She refuses to label herself or narrow her career choices because she believes “knowing more about other [mediums] is important.”

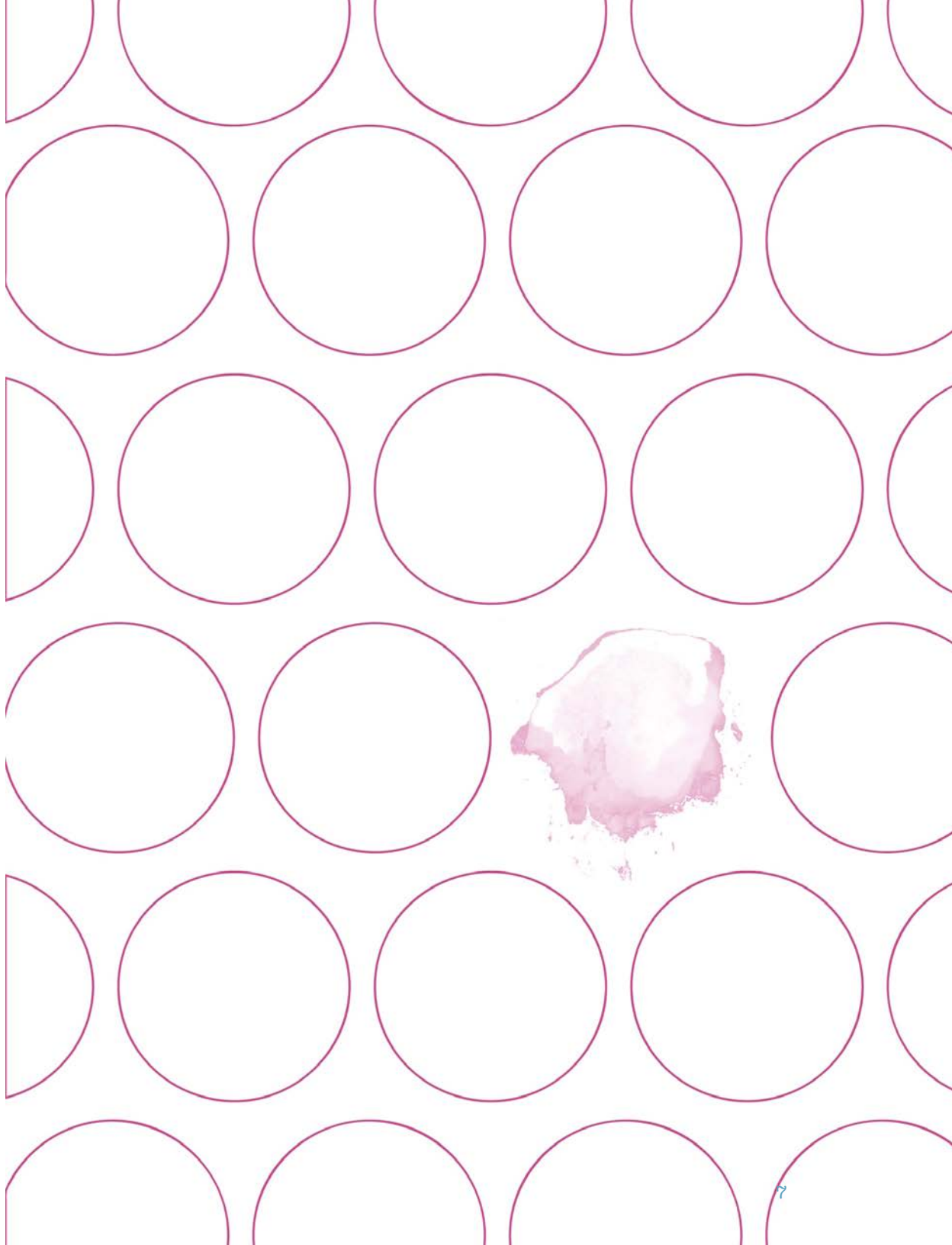
The characters and narrators of this year’s prose and poetry also defy the rules in both art and life. Katherine in Gabrielle Dooley’s “Lost and Found” discovers her identity through mirrors and falls in love with herself despite others believing she is vain. She refuses to be a silent woman who denies her own inner and outer beauty. In Cassi Jonen’s poetry feature “Finding Prayer,” the narrator carves out her own identity, discovering religion on her own terms. Natia Compton, in her nonfiction piece “Resting Bitch Face,” redefines herself in a world that demands the outward appearance of

happiness. Compton rejects the stereotype that women should always be polite and desirable by unapologetically embracing her “resting bitch face.”

Quinn Doll’s “Enable Diction” is a stream-of-conscious prose poem that embodies communication in the modern world and serves as a voice that demands to be heard. The writer forces a close examination of each line, placing the audience in an active listening role. “Paper Crown Kids,” Ana Green’s poem, is a call to action, demanding we honor the kids who have been either forgotten or tossed aside. The poet demands we improve society for the sake of children and declares that “paper crown kids have a future together if they rise up.”

Historically, rules and boundaries have restricted artists across all creative endeavors—don’t color outside the lines, don’t step outside of the lines, and don’t be an outsider. However, Kusama herself said that “it feels good to be an outsider.” The characters and narrators in this edition of *Harbinger* 2020 reject rules, and we invite you, our valued readers, to step outside the lines and live on your own terms. What more effective way to celebrate *Harbinger’s* 100th anniversary than with this celebrated literary magazine that defies all boundaries in fresh and meaningful ways.

M.C. & G.D.



# Big Dreams, Little Lungs

Julienne Graebner

Smoke lazily spills through the window screen as I struggle to fan it into the night. It licks around the sill before spiraling back, determined to remain inside. My bedroom fills with a gray haze. As a fourteen-year-old ne'er-do-well, I make few good decisions, and as I sit cross-legged on the cold wooden floor, I realize that hotboxing my bedroom is not one of them, especially considering that my parents' bedroom is across the hall. To make matters worse, instead of lighting up a joint like a normal teenager, I have been smoking a Pall Mall Blue gifted to me by a friend's cool-but-irresponsible mom.

Looking at myself in the mirror on my wall, I pretend I am someone else. I'm no longer a pimply freshman dressed in clothes from Grandma Judy. With a cigarette casually placed between my fingers, I'm a French woman wearing red lipstick waiting for her lover outside of a Parisian cafe. I'm a badass angry chick backstage at a concert, fishnets ripped and hair spiked. I'm Holly Golightly draped in pearls and opera gloves, spurned men falling at my feet. I'm so enchanted by my imagined appearance I realize too late that my dad has entered my room.

My dad is not an imposing man. A few inches shy of six feet, he is frail from a lifelong aversion to team sports, and his dark hair is salted with dandruff.

“With a cigarette casually placed between my fingers, I’m a French woman wearing red lipstick waiting for her lover outside of a Parisian cafe.”

In regular circumstances, Dad is an unassuming, friendly guy. But his reflection in my mirror, eyes red and fixed on the discount cigarette in my hand, is of the Hulk. I hardly have time to put out the cigarette before he carries me into the kitchen and plops me down on a chair. Dad huffs back down the hall as my mom sleepy-eyed and swaddled in a blanket wanders into the kitchen. Dad reappears, slamming down the half empty carton of cigarettes onto the kitchen table. I'm in big trouble.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?”

I've seen my dad this angry a few times, but it has never been directed at me. I should have smoked weed instead. I bet he would be less mad at me then.

Unsure whether I'm ashamed, scared, or sorry I got caught, I begin to cry, hot tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Seriously? Do you know how bad these things are for you?"

Dad is crying now, too. He has always been a crier, and although I know he's embarrassed about it, it gets the point across that he's disappointed in me.

"Julienne, your mother and I have been trying to quit smoking for years. Why would you do this?"

I try to speak, to say something better than "I'm sorry," but nothing comes. I stare at my pudgy fourteen-year-old fingers that smell of cigarettes. They are nothing like Audrey Hepburn's hands at all.

"Are you doing this to punish your mother and me?"

Punish them? With my face swollen from crying, I look up at my parents. All three of us are crying now. I hadn't thought about punishing them. I just wanted to look badass in front of my friends.

I muster a pitiful expression before looking Dad straight in the eyes and then turning to my mother who seems heartbroken. I feel bad and decide it is best not to say anything.

"Just go back to bed, Julienne. We'll talk about this tomorrow." My dad gestures toward the clock on the microwave. It is almost 2 a.m.

I shuffle back to my room, the smell of cigarette smoke becoming stronger with every step. It doesn't smell good. I should probably take a shower, but I'm not going to risk crossing either of my parents again. I close my bedroom door, careful not to lock it, and settle into bed. I'm too shook up to fall asleep any time soon, so I pull the covers over my head and wait to hear my parents close their bedroom door or at least overhear them discuss my punishment. Instead, the back door creaks open and clicks shut.

I peek out my bedroom window. Outside on the deck, my dad sits on the steps with his head in his hands, muffling the sound of his sobs. I don't know if he knows I can see him. Maybe he doesn't care.

Dad reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. He lights one, taking a few drags with a shaky hand. He exhales and watches the smoke curl up toward the stars.



# A Record Year for Rainfall

Chloe Dubisch

I  
We'll Get There Tomorrow

it rained so hard  
it snowed  
and late at night  
after your curfew  
eyes half closed  
you told me I looked better  
with a kiss on my lips

we slept until the part  
where everything ends  
and when it was time to wake up  
the world remembered we were there  
and swallowed us

while I was falling  
I realized  
the stars were gone  
had taken time with them  
and no matter where I reached  
I found only hollow

happiness comes from  
forcing gears to the surface  
a smile pulled taut  
the strings on my father's dusty violin

and nobody knows the guy  
who knows everyone  
someone whispers  
the secret to it all

I can't quite hear what  
they're saying  
and then I realize it's just me

we'd be better off  
leaving now  
crawling to the backseat  
forgetting we got out  
in order to begin

your worn cotton shirt catches  
on my hand  
one blissful moment  
sliding away  
to join the rest of you

like lies we didn't mean to tell  
we crack across the last of our lives  
spelling out a truth  
we forgot we knew

I follow your footsteps  
until I realize the desert  
is a fool's land  
and paths a mirage  
for the hopeful

for when splendid things  
come catching  
we watch our backs  
and keep unsought marvels  
from arising

## II

2-2-17

take me out of my body  
whisper sour things on hot breath  
and hit me  
so that my eyes are still watering  
when you tell me to roll over

I am rubber limbs  
limp for you, and you  
are all hard edges  
sharp and grasping and

I want you to control me  
and hold me  
tell me what I really am  
what to do  
because loss is what I thrive on, I  
was made for rough handling  
for tumble down  
tossed around  
forgotten bruises  
hands around my neck

I exist to be possessed  
owned until all of me is forgotten  
under the heaving form  
of your sweating chest

### III

kissing—  
your eyes are closed  
sometimes something sad

the relative nature of symbolism:  
when we describe words and people  
as things they'll never be

her eyes make you want  
make—  
someone—  
clutch—  
you could taste time  
and my body

after they fall asleep  
place a yardstick between  
make them still

not mine  
to hold  
shatter  
handle  
fuck

we collected what we wanted  
we took separate exits

if you could sense your world . . .  
a stone bearing

hurt me  
I get tired when I think  
that what I really  
want  
to kiss until our hands are melting  
and I won't be anyone

love is  
to never stop

why I like sex:  
after he leaves and I can  
feel my body through my heart  
I want  
fire  
inside me—  
running fast  
gets the better of my heartbeat

how this works:  
all that tumbling back down  
the crumpled sheets of my bed  
the sun comes up again  
watch light wash the  
room gasping  
we are no bigger  
chest is tight

I want a way  
back to the beginning  
to be allowed inside

## IV

### After the Hurricane

I wanted to hear your voice  
but my mom picked up the phone  
here's all the people  
who have asked about you  
a lot of your friends have changed  
and I don't recognize you

I've been trying to go away for awhile  
I'm telling you because  
I don't want to be one more death in the family  
and I haven't called because  
I love you  
and I want you to be happy

all you need to stay alive:  
a history of having a bright future  
and waking up sober

I owe you an apology:  
you carry everything I haven't told you

he looked better with the lights off  
hot, cold, and painful  
but I'm the only one here

impulse hands  
catch me every  
time  
can be as bad as distance  
and words  
are the only thing between us

now I hold everything  
in the palms of my hands  
your voice sounds the same  
but I'm losing fast

V

### Midnight Song

the beach is a crack in the Earth  
where our words go and  
I wonder—  
where were my hands  
that night  
if you were angry, but

I can't  
and I wasn't then, so  
I guess I'm sorry  
since you're not

the sky pans out above us  
you ask if I'm ok  
and maybe I wish  
you kept more secrets  
kept me better

plunging into ocean  
December cold  
I  
don't like everything about you  
but I'm out of the practice  
of fighting for myself

so keep my armor  
I'll sleep alone

# An Interview with Krysten Hill

Madison Crist & Gabrielle Dooley



*Krysten Hill is an educator, writer and performer who has showcased her poetry on stage at The Massachusetts Poetry Festival, Blacksmith House, U35 Reading Series, and many others. She received her bachelor's degree from Stephens College and her MFA in poetry from UMass Boston, where she currently teaches. Her work can be found in B O D Y, Boiler Magazine, Up the Staircase Quarterly,*

*Word Riot, Muzzle, PANK, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Winter Tangerine Review and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the 2016 St. Botolph Club Foundation Emerging Artist Award and a finalist for Boston's 2019 Artist Fellowship Award. Her chapbook, How Her Spirit Got Out, received the 2017 Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize.*

**Gabrielle:** We would like to start by asking you about your discovery of poetry? What drew you to the genre?

**Krysten:** I started writing poetry when I was maybe eight. Poetry was a way in for me because I was so worried about reading. I was a bad reader, an extremely bad reader. It was hard for my mom to teach me how to read. For some reason, poetry came more naturally. It might be because it doesn't involve complete sentences, and maybe because you can be more creative with what is on the page. It was a good gateway for me in terms of literacy. My mom gave me a copy of Maya Angelou's *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*. It's a children's book that is illustrated by Jean-Michel Basquiat. That beautiful book was my first introduction to poetry.

**Madison:** Poetry is like creating a different language. Do you feel like you have an obligation to create a language that is accessible to a wide variety of people, or does it vary with different works?

**K:** Over the years I tried to sound like other poets. I tried to sound more bloated and complicated, and then I realized that I could just sound like me and that it was okay. I bet you guys experience this in creative writing. You question if you're saying things too simply? Or too straightforward? Where's the art in being straightforward? But then I had to figure out how to own that, and how to be okay with the way I sounded.

**G:** Yeah, fancy language doesn't always make a good story.

**K:** Absolutely. I always said that I wanted to write poetry that could talk to everyone. That doesn't mean that my language doesn't get weird sometimes, but I do prioritize simpler sentences. You can still say things beautifully in a simple way. See Lucille Clifton, for example.

**G:** You talked about how you want to speak to everyone. So, we read your author bio and your poetry on a few websites. You talk about the front porch—the front porch girls. What does that mean to you?

**K:** I grew up in Kansas City on Prospect Street, and as a kid, I learned to be a watcher. I was not allowed to go out in the yard because the neighborhood was kind of dangerous. The front porch was the first place my mom said, "You can go outside but you gotta stay on the porch." So I had to stay there, and I found that the porch was the place where I could watch everything happening on the street—good and bad. I'm writing poetry for the girls on front porches. I'm talking to those little girls who are the watchers in their community and who are silently seeing a lot of messed-up stuff, absorbing it all, and learning what it means.

**M:** You said you wanted to create a collective of poets who traveled around the world teaching about the "voice in your chest

that you can't get out." Who would you want to be a part of that collective? How would you structure it?

**K:** Oh, stop that! I wrote that a long time ago. Now thinking back, I realize there are people already doing that work. At the time, the Columbia I was living in was not doing that, but now I come here and hear y'all have Louder Than a Bomb. Is this true? I love that there is a poetry slam competition for youth. But to answer your question, if I created my fantasy collective it would include Morgan Parker, Audre Lorde, and Porsha Olayiwola who is out there doing amazing work.

**G:** What advice do you have for emerging poets? How do they become a part of the world of poetry?

**K:** It's important for poets to do open mics. These events have a stigma. People imagine that the people who are participating are practicing, that they are inexperienced. But open mics open you up to practice, and you learn what people in your community are doing. I love open mics. They're really underrated. I know a lot of poets back in Boston who are like "Ugh, there's an open mic. This is terrible. I'm not going to stay for this." But why would you do that? That's your community. I know that was my space when I was attending Stephens College. Other advice. Just read a lot. Also read outside your genre. Reading plays informs my work, and I don't write plays. But when I'm writing poetry, I feel like I must go outside my genre to get inspired.

**M:** Alongside reading, you also seem to love music and film. How do different artistic mediums influence your poetry?

**K:** I love going to plays. I love seeing people perform. I love listening to jazz. All of it is helpful to my process. I must listen to something without words to concentrate. Sometimes the tone of a piece will inspire me to write something. Movies. Pop culture. My former professor at Stephens, Dr. Judith Clark, taught me

how to read a text, no matter what it was—a video or *The Simpsons*. If you can learn to read anything in terms of what to look for, it's informative.

**G:** We were always told that while learning to write, sometimes you don't have a voice yet, so they tell you to kind of mimic someone else's voice. Are there voices in poetry that you looked up to and tried mimicking until you found your own voice? And how did you find your own voice?



**K:** I really admire Sylvia Plath. I tried to sound like her, but sometimes she can have this affected presence on the page. It's great, but it wasn't me. In school, we mostly read white writers and poets. As a black poet, I felt I was mimicking something I didn't understand yet. Call it internalized racism. I wanted to sound white. My diction was mimicking something that I wasn't aware of yet. At Stephens, my professors provided me diversity in terms of reading, but I didn't know what else was out there. So, I found Audre Lorde. I found writers that helped me think about how I wanted to sound on the page and how to try on natural dialects.

**M:** Do you play on the page with a poem's structure? Will you talk a little about how structure influences your work?

**K:** It's changed over the years, and I'm glad it has. I used to love the vertical plunge of Yusef Komunyakaa's work. They're skinny lines, and you just plunge down the page. I love writers who try on form. I like playing with space on the page, but I never used to do that. I was a little hesitant whether people would question "why it looked this way?" Or even ask about how it works. But of

course, you just play anyway. Do you have anyone you really admire in this way?

**M:** Kai Cheng Thom's *A Place Called No Homeland*, which explores colorism and racism. Half the page is white and on the bottom are the words, small and in black. It is a powerful collection.



**K:** Monica Hand did that in her book. She played with space in her poetry collection *me and Nina*. I remember that one page was black with white letters on top.

**G:** If you had to pick three words to describe poetry, what would they be?

**K:** I would say life, material and heart. That seems silly but you must be invested that way.

**G:** Who are you outside of being a poet? What are your interests or hobbies? What do you do for fun?

**K:** I watch a lot of movies. I love trash TV, especially reality shows. I cannot get enough of *The Kardashians* or *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. The shows are trash, but they are so fun. I also love walking around the city by myself. You must learn how to be alone with yourself and hear your voice.

Photo credit: Jon Beckley

# The Song of Violets

Eliza Larson

Hazel Sparrow grew up surrounded by white; the walls, the curtains, the sheets, the floors were all a variation of the empty color. Sometimes the sky, it didn't matter which hue it was, was the only reminder that outside her marble cage a world of color existed. Every spring, after the final snow, violets would start to bloom, their petals opening to the warming sun. Children younger than Hazel would rush into the fields, hands eager for green stems and darkened earth. Hazel would watch from her window with her hands pressed against the cold glass. If she could have opened her window, she would have heard them laughing, but it remained shut.

“How's our princess doing today?”

Hazel's father gently guided her mother to a chair next to the hospital bed. They both wore blue surgical masks like the doctors and nurses.

Hazel approached them quietly. Her mother who stared at the dwindling frame in the bed beside her had become withdrawn shortly after her daughter had fallen into a coma. Her father did all the talking.

Hazel floated above, watching her own sleeping form. It was strange looking down on her body. She finally understood what her mother meant when she said her hair was like honey. Golden curls hung loose around her shoulders. She resembled a princess from one of her father's fairytales. Almost. But her skin was too pale and her frame too thin. She always knew that she was not long for this world.

Back when she was conscious, Hazel would often sense her own impending doom. Perhaps it was from living in a hospital for most of her life. She endured countless tests and overheard nurses whispering about special treatments. Hazel knew she would be gone sooner than most. She didn't understand her condition; she just knew that it could be stalled but not cured.

“Psst, Hazel.” From the doorway, Alexander, a little boy who passed away earlier that season, beckoned her.

“Alexander, why are you whispering? My parents can’t hear you.”

Alexander played with the edge of his sweater. His chocolate-colored curls bounced slightly as he looked down at his feet.

Hazel sighed and then whispered, “Did you need me for something?”

“It’s Mel. She’s acting up again.” At the end of his life, Alexander had grown softer, resembling a puppy left out in the cold.

Mel was Alexander’s older sister. The siblings were both in a car crash that past fall and had been in comas ever since. Well, that was until Alexander passed away, leaving Mel with a dilemma. Should she return to her parents or move on like her younger brother?

In Mel’s room, Hazel and Alexander found her surrounded by nurses. Their parents stood in the hallway, clinging to each other. Alexander drifted over to them and spoke comforting words they could not hear.

Hazel sat next to Mel. Her soul was about to slip from her body but remained barely tethered at her toes.

“I don’t know what to do,” Mel said.

“Why are you asking me?”

The nurses positioned a defibrillator over Mel’s body.

“Because you know what the other side is like.”

“Your brother would know that better than me.”

Volts of electricity shot through Mel’s body. Her spirit was unmoved though the connection to her body seemed on the verge of snapping.

Mel began to cry. “I don’t know who to choose. Please help me choose.”

The next volt of electricity resurrected the dying girl who sat up and wept into her hands.

As Mel sobbed, Hazel envied that she had had a choice, but she also knew that the hospital was a cemetery always waiting to claim another victim.

Hazel placed her hands on Mel’s shoulder. “I’ll look after

Alexander. You just worry about yourself and your folks, okay?”

Mel looked at her startled, but her eyes softened as she realized that her choice had been made.

“Thank you.”

Alexander and Hazel watched as the nurses pushed Mel out of her room. They explained that she would be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Mel was too overjoyed to be hugging and kissing her parents to listen.

Hazel gently stroked Alexander’s hair. “Your sister has a long road ahead of her. Come on, let’s get going.”

Alexander wanted desperately to stay with his family, but Hazel dragged him away by his sweater. “Come on. You know you can’t go with them.”

“Is it true that Mel made it?” Cassie asked when Hazel and Alexander arrived in the small room near the back garden. All of the children who didn’t make it gathered there to play. The white walls were hung with pictures of flowers. The tile floor, scrubbed daily of dirt and grime, shone bright as the sun streamed through the windows.

“The few living ones, most too young to really understand what was happening, stumbled about laughing and chasing, assuming another game had begun.”

Alexander nodded and held tight to Hazel’s arm

“That’s amazing!” Cassie hurried out the doors into the back garden, turning briefly to say, “I’ll go get the others.”

“Do you wish to follow her?”

Alexander shook his head, clutching Hazel’s arm even tighter.

“You do realize that I can’t go outside because my body is here, right?”

“I know that.”

Hazel floated quietly, watching as Cassie flew around outside

spreading the news about Mel. A few others followed her, almost all of them dead. The few living ones, most too young to really understand what was happening, stumbled about laughing and chasing, assuming another game had begun.

Hazel glared. "What's so great about the outside anyway?"

"Hazel, can we go to your room?" Alexander's big brown eyes staring up at her softened her heart.

"Yeah. Just know there's nothing interesting to do in there."

"I don't mind." Alexander watched Hazel disappear through a maze of tiles and walls.

Hazel's room looked the same as it always did. The windows were shut, the curtains hanging stationary like marble guards. Her body was hooked up to machines that helped her breathe, eat, and drink. She didn't see the point to them. Couldn't they tell she wasn't coming back?

On the side table sat a vase of violets that were replaced weekly. Excluding the gray machines and the blue surgical masks, the violets were the only color Hazel normally saw. Her mother sat at her bedside, softly reading a story about a sleeping princess and a fairy. It was the only time Hazel heard her speak anymore.

"Your mom has a pretty voice," Alexander whispered, still unmoving from Hazel's side.

"What is she reading?"

"It's a story my dad wrote. His way of dealing with this, I guess."

"Where is your dad?"

"At home I'd assume." Hazel sat next to her body and watched her mother read. Alexander curled up beside Hazel and rested his head on her lap. Hazel ran her fingers through his hair, something her mother once did for her.

Summer melted into fall, which faded into winter. Most of the living children were kept indoors to protect them from further

illness. The un-living children would stay inside too, not knowing what to do without their friends. This often led to large games of hide-and-seek, taking up weeks at a time depending on the child everyone was trying to find.

“Ready or not, here I come!”

A few months back, Alexander had started playing with the other children after he got over his initial shyness. He still spent the most time with Hazel and would often drag others inside so she could play with them too. Hazel would never admit to Alexander that she enjoyed the company, that it helped her a lot.

Alexander and Hazel hid in a storage closet on level 3. The sharp smell of cleaning supplies was suffocating, which made it an optimal spot to hide. They sat quietly as the other children started to search for them.

“Do you think they’ll find us in here?”

“They will if you keep talking.”

Alexander put his hands over his mouth. They sat in silence, the chemicals irritating Hazel’s nose. But she was a ghost, and ghosts couldn’t feel, right?

“Hazel,” Cassie’s voice called out in the hallway. “Hazel come out. It’s an emergency. Something is happening in your room.”

Hazel looked toward Alexander who stared back at her wide-eyed.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back, okay?” Hazel glided through the wooden door of the closet. “What do you mean something is happening? Nothing happens in my room.”

Cassie’s eyes were frantic. “You have to see for yourself.”

“This better not be one of your stupid pranks, Cas,” Hazel said, narrowing her eyes.

Hazel returned to her room to find her parents crying. Her mother kept kissing her forehead and stroking her face and hair. Her father sat on the edge of the bed, his book for her on his lap. The colorful book cover was dotted in droplets from his tears.

“We love you sweetheart. We love you so much. Please never

forget that.”

“Mom? Dad? Why are you crying?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow, we are ready now.”

Hazel looked up to see a couple of nurses and a doctor hovered over her bed.

“Yes, of course.” Her father swallowed, and his voice shook. “Could we possibly have a few more minutes?”

One of the taller nurses gave him an apologetic look. “Of course. Take all the time you need.”

Her father opened the book in his lap. Her mother sat next to him, taking his hand and leaning her head on his shoulder. Hazel drifted forward slowly, listening.

“Once upon a time in a castle known by only a few was a princess. This princess, like most princesses, loved to play and smile. One day while she was playing with friends, the princess pricked her finger on a magic thorn, causing her to fall into a deep sleep. While she slept, the princess dreamed of many things that made her content and peaceful. Unbeknownst to her, the king and queen had summoned a magic fairy.”

Her father’s hand trembled as he turned the page. “The fairy agreed to wake the princess from her slumber, but at a cost. ‘I require the thorn on which your daughter pricked her finger.’ The king and queen agreed, sending many knights to search for it where they found the sleeping princess. However, after many days and nights they were unable to recover the thorn.”

Her father placed the open book in his lap and said softly, “I’m so sorry princess. I’m so sorry that I couldn’t be the one to protect you. I never imagined that I would lose you this fast. You were supposed to outlive me. You were supposed to . . .”

Her mother held her father close, gently caressing his hair.

“Shush. It’s okay,” her mother said as her father sobbed in her arms.

Hazel reached out and gently touched him. She knew he couldn’t feel her, but she had to try. “Dad. Finish the story. Please.

Finish the story.”

Hazel watched as her mother turned her head toward the doctor, giving a small nod. The doctor then flipped off the switch of the machine that was keeping Hazel alive.

“Time of death 15:42,” the nurse said while writing on her clipboard. “I’m truly sorry for your loss.”

Hazel shook her father’s arm even harder. “Dad, no! Please. Finish your story. Don’t leave me here alone. I’m not ready to die. Dad, please. Don’t leave me here alone.”

Her parents held each other while Cassie and Alexander watched from the doorway.

“Hazel.” Alexander hugged her from behind, squeezing her tight. “We won’t let you be alone.”

Cassie wrapped her arms around her too. “No one is ever left alone here.”

Hazel didn’t know when her parents left. She sat quietly in the bed that once housed her body, a white cage that seemed emptier than before. Outside, the children ran among the freshly budding violets that returned every spring.

Hazel’s thoughts were interrupted by a squeaking wheelchair rolling into her room.

“Hazel,” Mel said. “I can’t see or hear you, but if you are here, I wanted to say thank you.”

“Mel?”

“You’ve done a lot for me, so I came to return the favor. Since you are looking out for Alexander, I’ll look out for your parents. So please, just live for yourself, okay?” Tears welled up in Mel’s brown eyes.

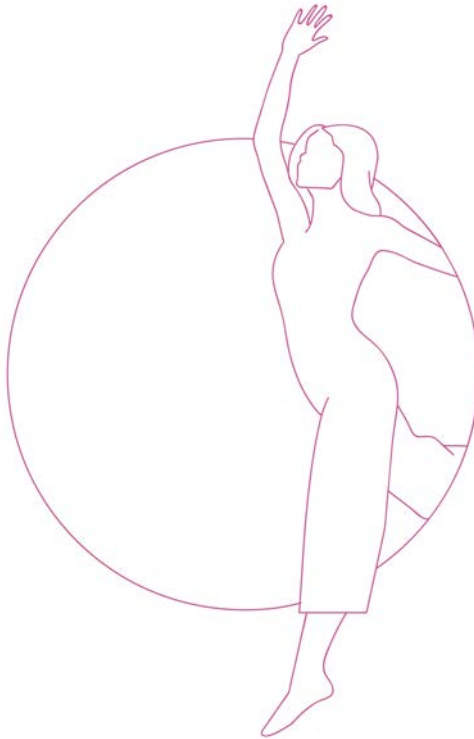
Hazel hugged Mel and said, “Tell them I love them.”

Mel nodded as if she heard her. “I will.”

Hazel stared at the garden. She was finally allowed outside. The white field of flowers swayed in the spring breeze. A few birds chirped in the blue sky. Alexander and Cassie chased each other

among the violets, twirling like kites as they weaved between the other children. A smile crept across Hazel's lips as she stepped into the sun.

It was called the children's garden, for when a child died, they were cremated, and their ashes spread across the field. Hazel was merely one of many who had been told to move on. Some of them would go beyond to a place that no one knows. Others would stay, singing songs and playing with the living children among the boundless bundles of snow-colored violets. They knew that many of their new friends would join them, but they were grateful for the ones who didn't. Maybe one day those who made it could simply look back, their own healthier children playing around them, recalling days long lost when a violet was merely a flower instead of a song.



# Paper Crown Kids

Ana Green

paper crowns and broken light bulbs litter the ground beneath my feet  
no, i'm sorry, i can't hear you over the sounds of rain like glass shattering on rooftops, rooftops raised like rib cages that protect the vital parts of humanity—

paper crowns on the heads of the kids of the future,  
kids who have no future,  
kids who have no place in a future that is riddled with corruption,  
kids who have nothing to eat tonight,  
kids who have paper crowns with glitter jewels that rain down around them as they give their kingdoms the crumbs on the pantry floor—

their paper crowns are made in classrooms that surround them like jail cells, like rib cages,  
wrap them up to protect them but there's always a pressure that swells from inside—

they swell like the beating heart buried underneath their rib cages  
they pulse with life in waves, white crests that reach the shore and fall back  
when the moon pulls them back in

broken light bulbs and the reflection of the moon are all they have to see their way, broken light bulbs and paper crowns forgotten and trampled on

but kids break like glass when they are overheated,  
when they are stepped on,  
when the electricity that courses through them is too much for their  
wire wrapped  
veins to hold,  
kids hum like broken light bulbs with electricity flowing through  
them

paper crown kids who have no future are broken light bulbs that are  
thrown away and  
replaced with bright new ones  
they will always be paper crowns and glass button eyes  
painted smiles on light porcelain skin  
paper dollie heart and tissue paper clothing  
kingdoms made of cardboard and painted with golden marker  
filigree  
paper crowns falling off and stepped on and broken  
legacies torn right down the middle and crumpled like they meant  
nothing because  
    they always. meant. nothing.

we are all paper  
crown kids,  
    we live in houses made of broken glass  
    we love like sunlight that filters through torn, sheer curtains  
    we may mean nothing until we rise up  
from our homes made of broken glass

# To End a War Story

Cindy Harbour

Cold metal pressed between wet lips, drool rolling down the corner of his mouth, he breathes in the sharp scent of gunpowder. His hands quiver and his chest heaves, but the cylinder in his mouth cancels any sound. A sweaty finger trembles against the trigger. The first time he tried pressing it down, he couldn't make his hand move a muscle. He sat there, trembling, his dog tags like shackles around his neck. His heartbeat sounds like the thundering rain of an aerial bombing. The gurgling choke of a woman drowning in her own blood joins the ringing in his ears, blood the soldier can never get off his hands. He tried to wash them clean, scrubbed raw, but they always seemed sticky and red. The sweat on his hands feels like blood when his slick finger finally pulls the trigger. His mother finds him after.

Another ending:

He came back from the war, put down his gun, and picked up a bottle of whiskey. He drove fast down the endless winding highway to clubs and dance halls, calling his mother to wire him money when he ran out. He shows girls the puckered bullet wound on his bicep, and the knife scar on his collarbone, charming them with a devil-may-care grin and a few drinks on him. He takes whichever girl he can stand to look at back to a cheap motel room, or his car if she doesn't turn up her nose at the idea. Sometimes he asks the girl if she has a place they can go. He enjoys a jaunt between the girl's legs, and then sneaks back out before his belt is even buckled.

He shoots up with a girl whose face he can't recall. He remembers a birthmark on the back of her thigh, and her lipstick smudged on his bottle of vodka. He thinks he slapped her for it. He thinks she fell to the floor crying. He remembers filching a couple of bills from her purse.

He drinks. He drives. He doesn't bother with girls much anymore. He parks his car off the highway. He hasn't called his mother in a while. He thinks about it, but he doesn't. He puts down a bottle of whiskey and picks up his gun from the passenger seat. His

dog tags bump against his chest as he walks, closing the car door behind him. He puts the barrel of the gun to his temple and pulls the trigger. It's a while before anyone finds him lying in the dirt beside his abandoned car.

Another ending:

He goes home to his mother. Back to their little town, his mother's little house that had been his father's before he died of

“He tried to wash his hands clean, scrubbed raw, but they always seemed sticky and red.”

black lung. The doilies on the end tables, lace curtains around the windows, and the rickety sun-bleached fence surrounding the small property are all still there. He tells his mother he'll fix the fence and paint like he always did. His mother aired out his room, but a musty scent lingers. The pharmacy has bottled sodas out front. The postman comes at the same time every morning. His mother puts the coffee on at the same time before frying eggs. It's all the same.

His mother tells him he's quiet. Aside from that, nothing's changed. The baker's son is gone. His mother's doctor mentions they brought his son home in a box. A woman from his mother's bridge club won't stop crying about her son. One of the boys from the soldier's high school returned with his legs amputated below the knees. He works as a sales clerk at the pharmacy now. They never really talked before, so sometimes they just meet, smoke, and sit in silence. Aside from that, nothing's really changed. When he was gone, he really wanted to go home. Now he is not so sure.

Another ending:

“The war is over! The war is over,” scream the headlines of every newspaper. Civilians wave small flags as parades roll down the streets. Trumpets blare as bands play the *National Anthem*. His hand clenches tightly to the handrail as the train rumbles along; he thinks of little else but when the train will finally stop. The men around him are bursting with energy. Crowded but excited all the

same, they add to the train's movement. He isn't much better.

Someone already cuffed him for tapping his foot like a jack-rabbit. He fiddles with his dog tags instead. The chattering of the passengers only grows louder as the train slows. Like fish breaking free from a net, they all tried to rush past one another through the train doors.

He scans over the masses until he hears a familiar voice screaming his name. He sees his mother's flowery headscarf first. His mother is taller than his father had been. His girl screams his name, jumping to see over crowds of shoulders, her curls bouncing. He pardons and bumps his way through the hectic station. He drops his bag to catch her in his arms. She clings to him and covers his face in kisses. He holds her and grins with his eyes glistening. His mother stands next to him with her hand clutched to his sleeve, as she cries into her handkerchief. The soldier pulls his mother closer to him and kisses her graying temple. The war is over. He's home.

Another ending:

He goes home. He marries his high-school sweetheart. He has a family—a girl and a boy. They're good kids. The girl does ballet. The boy likes to read. They do well in school. They get along with other kids and behave for their mother. His wife takes care of the house and teaches piano lessons at home when she has students. She is a good woman. She lets his old buddy who lost his arm in the war stay with them for a while. The stump causes him pain. He says his arm itches even though it's not there anymore. His wife smiles a strained smile as if nothing happened the next morning after his buddy, screaming in pain from his missing limb, wakes them all up in the middle of the night. She's a good woman. He tries to forget that when he has one of his other buddies from the war straddling his hips, kissing a line up his jaw. He tells his buddy they should always meet at a motel room, anywhere else, but never at home. His wife doesn't need to know. She is a good woman. They grow old together. The kids grow up fine. He goes to a war

memorial, a fancy chunk of stone with names carved in it. He came home.

Another ending:

Ending with a battle is a manly way to end a war story. A weapons junkie who thinks of the atom bomb with awe rather than horror writes in detail of the men with their weaponry on the frontlines. The weapons junkie does not think of the boys coming of age during an aristocrat's war, boys who find themselves mowed down by machine guns. Machine guns think little of Roosevelt's words of the triumphs of war and hard-fought virtues. The wool sweater-wearing history buffs always have lots of information about their battles as if facts always elevate a tale.

Another ending:

Battle is chaos. Battle is heroism. Battle is muck, dirt, mud, and sand. Battle is a barrage of gunfire—so much gunfire. Diving out of the way when a grenade is thrown and ducking to the ground; the world is exploding. The world is enveloped in sound. Shouting, screaming, gunfire, crying, and ringing is indistinguishable. The smell is the worst. On the battlefield, death smells like stagnant water, rot, shit, and smoke. A cold death seems better than a warm one. In a heroic war story, it's cleaner. In a heroic war story, the rag-tag group never dies. They all get to go home.

There are several ways to end a war story.

Either way you end it, they all end the same.

# Case File: (T)ango (I)ndia (M)ike

Danielle Rodriguez

## Cast of Characters

Tim: 28. Lives in parents' basement on their farm. He is unemployed and has a weird obsession with aliens.

Carrie: 52. A farmer's wife who caters to her son like he is still a child.

Phil: 56. A farmer who desperately wants a son who will take over the family business.

*LIGHTS UP. A basement room with food wrappers and energy drink cans spread across the floor.*

CARRIE:

Hey, honey, I'm coming down.

*Carrie enters the room holding a tray of breakfast.*

TIM:

Damnit, Carrie! I told you last time that you needed to start knocking.

CARRIE:

Oh, I'm sorry, honey. I keep forgetting. I just brought you down some breakfast. We don't want to repeat what happened last week.

*Tim cuts off Carrie.*

TIM:

I told you not to bring that up again, Carrie.

CARRIE:

Oh, Honey, I wish you would just call me Mom. I don't like it when you call me by my real name.

TIM:

Just leave it there I still have work to do.

CARRIE:

Are you sure you want to eat down here? Don't you want to come upstairs and eat with your father and me? You've been working all night.

*Tim puts his feet on the desk.*

TIM:

You know Phil and I don't get along. He doesn't agree with my type of work.

CARRIE:

Honey, please. You know Dad and I just want the best for you. Come upstairs, please. You need some fresh air. Besides, I have to show you something.

TIM:

Fine.

*The two are greeted upstairs by a man in overalls*

PHIL:

Well, well, well, look who decided to come up from the basement.

TIM:

It's called a secret base. It's where I do my work. You should show it some respect.

PHIL:

Yeah, "work." I wish your work would help pay for some of the bills around here. Maybe buy a few groceries.

TIM:

This is exactly why I stay downstairs. No one ever appreciates all the work I put

into this house. Into this country.

PHIL:

Here we go again with this alien BS.

TIM:

Laugh all you want. But when they come, and oh they will, I'm going to be the only one able to communicate with them. And I'll let them take your sorry ass . . .

CARRIE:

Timothy Joseph, watch your mouth when you speak to your father.

TIM:

You guys always double team me.

*Tim begins to head for the basement when Carrie grabs his arm.*

CARRIE:

Please stay up here, Hon. I know you and your father bump heads, but he's going outside to work. Please sit and eat with me.

PHIL:

You let him get away with everything.

CARRIE:

Hush up! Go and check if those chickens laid any eggs.

*Phil walks off stage. DOOR SLAM.*

Oh, I almost forgot. Sweetie, come take a look. This is what I wanted you to see.

Carrie stares out the window.

CARRIE:

Now I don't really know what it means, but I'm assuming the kids in town spray painted it to mess with us. What are these symbols? Do you think they are demonic? Oh

lord, I hope not.

*Tim looks out the window and sees hieroglyphics on the front porch.*

TIM:

Holy shit!

CARRIE:

Timothy!

TIM:

Do you know what this means? Did this just get here last night? Why didn't you tell me sooner?

*Tim sprints off stage and returns with a book. He shuffles through the pages.*

They are here!

CARRIE:

Tim, you're scaring me. Who is here?

TIM:

*(Whispers)* Aliens.

CARRIE:

Honey, there is no such thing.

TIM:

Shh. Don't. They are probably listening to us right now.

CARRIE:

Tim, no one is listening to us.

TIM:

That's exactly what they want you to think. Do you feel nauseous? Pain anywhere on your body? They could have probed you.

CARRIE:

My word! No such thing happened to me.

*Tim begins to pace the floor.*

TIM:

Oh my God, have you checked on the cows?

CARRIE:

The cows? Why would I check the cows?

TIM:

Do you live under a rock, Carrie? They always take the cows.

*Tim paces the room.*

I hope they didn't take George. He's my favorite.

CARRIE:

Tim, Honey, no one took the cows. No one is listening. Maybe I should get your father.

TIM:

No! You can't go outside. That's how they get you. I know how to talk to them through the signals on my A.S.T.

CARRIE:

What is an A.S.T?

TIM:

Good question. Hold on.

*Tim sprints off stage and comes back.*

This. This is the A.S.T. Alien Space Talker.

CARRIE:

Honey, that's your sister's old baby monitor. I know you're into all these people in the sky and stuff, but I just wanted to show you because I thought you would know what it is. Also, I would like your help hosing it down.

TIM:

I know it looks like Melissa's baby

monitor, but I fixed the controls. The baby monitor is used as a disguise.

CARRIE:

As a disguise from the aliens?

TIM:

Of course not. The government. A.S.T. is something I've worked on for years. The government doesn't even have a tool like this. This is what I've been trying to tell you both. I am the key!

CARRIE:

The key? The key to what?

TIM:

The key to unite us with the aliens.

*Phil walks in with a bottle filled with green slime.*

PHIL:

Looks like those town kids left this stuff too.

TIM:

The aliens are here! It is my time! They left me that as a gift! I have been contacting them!

PHIL:

Boy, if you don't stop yelling in my house.

*Carrie begins to cry.*

TIM:

Listen, this is my work. This is what I have been doing all these years. I wanted to make sure there was peace between this world and theirs. As a gift, they left me this bottle to show me they are real. Those signs . . . They are here to take

me with them. I am the one with the most knowledge, and they respect me. I was born for this moment.

TIM:

Who knows, they might need a new leader?

PHIL:

You're an idiot.

*Carrie stands in the corner sobbing.*

CARRIE:

They are going to take away my baby.

PHIL:

Carrie, don't listen to him. He's crazy.

TIM:

Yes, Carrie I must go with them. This is my destiny, and when the mothership arrives I'll let them use Phil for testing.

*There's a KNOCK on front door.*

TIM:

They are here.

CARRIE:

Already? I haven't packed for you. Honey, tell them to wait. Let me pack your clothes. Oh, I should also make you snacks for the road.

PHIL:

Carrie, are you serious? You both are crazy!

TIM:

I knew they would come. But not this soon.

*KNOCK*

Mom, Dad there's no time for clothes.

They will have space gear waiting for me. But maybe you should grab that new box of Goldfish for me in the cabinet. I haven't

eaten yet.

*Carrie dashes off stage.*

PHIL:

Is it so hard for us to have a normal day  
in this damn house?

*Phil opens door.*

TOWN WOMAN:

Hi, sorry to bother y'all, but my boys  
have something to tell you.

BOYS:

*(In sync)* We are sorry for spray painting  
your property to scare your crazy son.

TOWN WOMAN:

Boys! I'm sorry. My kids are idiots.

PHIL:

I know the feeling.

TOWN WOMAN:

They will clean it up.

CARRIE:

Thank you. I'm going to go rest for a bit.

*Carrie drops the box of Goldfish and  
walks off*

*stage. Tim walks to the boys.*

TIM:

*(Whispers)* Are you them? Is this your  
disguise?

*The boys hide behind the town woman.*

PHIL:

Leave those boys alone. Go to your room.

Now!

*Tim grabs the box of Goldfish and  
walks off stage.*

I'm sorry. The hose is around back.

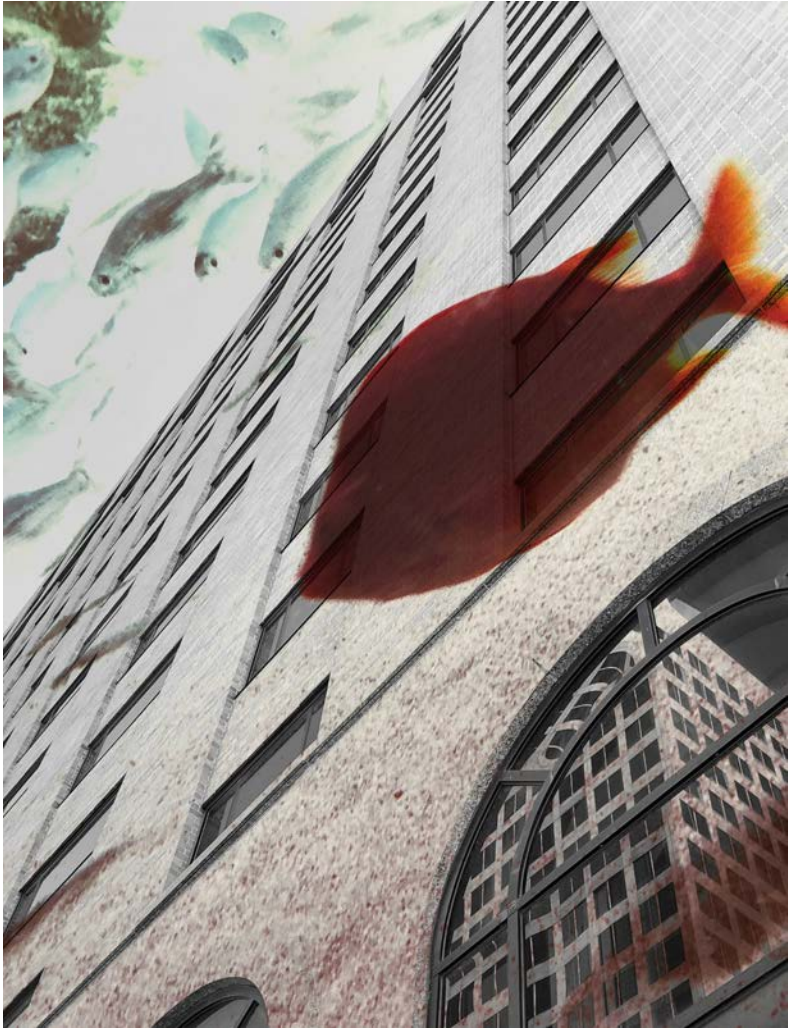
*Phil shuts the door. Lights fade.*

# Hindsight

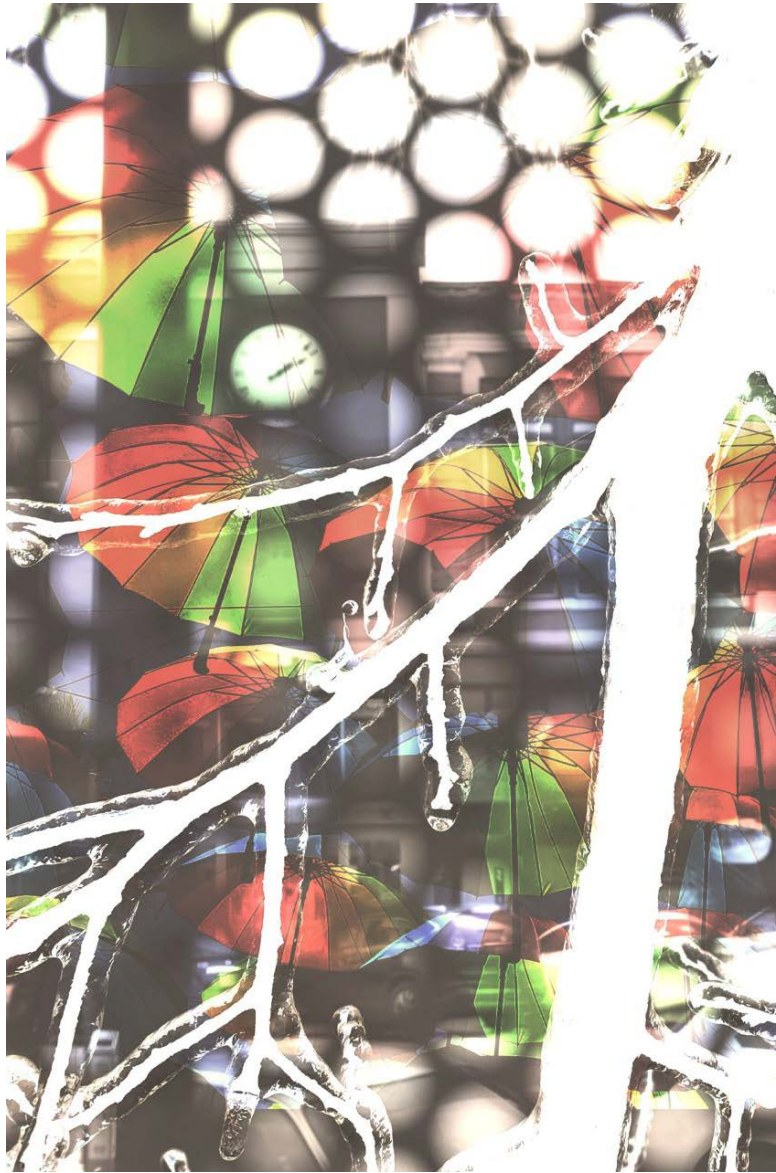
Madison Crist

*Hindsight*, a surrealist digital photography feature, explores how much an image can change when it goes from the camera lens to the editing room. By creating surrealist and experimental works, I learned to push the boundaries of creating art. I was fortunate to have Chase Thompson, a digital filmmaking professor at Stephens College, mentor and collaborate with me on this feature. Jointly we strived to not only cultivate a series of surreal photographs but to have the process mimic the image. Each photograph is a collage of photos I took over several years and in different locales: Arizona, Washington, and Missouri. No one photograph was designed to look like another because each piece reflects a situation that existed solely after it was developed. The initial piece we explored became this year's cover "Vision/Perception." After observing Chase's process, I applied what I learned to my own work.

While it is tempting to describe what each photograph conveys, the beauty is in the image's ambiguity. There is more than meets the eye and with little explanation, I hope it provokes different interpretations and levels of meaning. André Breton, the principal theorist of Surrealism, once said that "the imaginary is what tends to become real." *Hindsight* is meant to catch the eye, engage the mind, and rouse the imagination.



“Reverie,” 2020, digital photography



“Transient State,” 2020, digital photography



"Transposing Clouds," 2020, digital photography



“In the Midst of Motion,” 2020, digital photography



# An Interview with Shelly Romero

Natia Compton



*Shelly Romero is an assistant editor at Scholastic. She graduated from Stephens College with a bachelor's degree in English and attended the 2017 NYU Summer Publishing Institute. She is a member of Latinx in Publishing, People of Color in Publishing, and a junior mentor for Representation Matters Mentorship Program. She lives off of coffee, carbs, and pop culture.*

**Natia:** Tell me how you knew you wanted a career in publishing.

**Shelly:** I attended Stephens English/Creative Writing publishing trip my senior year and it truly cemented my decision to land a career in publishing. The trip was beneficial because I was able to learn more about different areas in publishing, not just editorial. Publishing a book is a bit of a miracle. It takes a lot of people from different departments to make a book happen. I didn't know what path I wanted to take back then, but I knew I wanted to be in New York after graduation.

**N:** Today you work for Scholastic as an assistant editor. How did you get that job?

**S:** I finished my degree in May 2017, had a month break, and then flew to New York to attend the publishing program at NYU. It's a 6-week intensive course on digital media and book publishing. At the same time, attendees apply for jobs and attend informationals. When I was in the program, I had a lot of interests: adult publishing, kids publishing, marketing, publicity and editorial. I wasn't sure what path I'd end up taking. I applied for over twenty-five jobs before I got the offer

from Scholastic. For Scholastic, I wrote a reader's report, which is a summary of a manuscript, how it fits into the marketplace, and why the publisher should buy it.

**N:** Describe a few of your daily responsibilities.

**S:** It changes day-to-day. Yes, reading agented submissions is a big part of what we do, but we are also going to a lot of meetings, handling administrative tasks, or reading manuscripts from our authors. I assist a senior editor and an executive editor, so most of my work is whatever they need for their own projects such as cover copywriting, interior art concepts for illustrated middle-grade and chapter books, metadata, and fact sheets. Editorial is very much an apprenticeship-type of career. I've been learning and building my skills as an editor thanks to my two bosses. I also got promoted in December 2019, so now I'm reading submissions to build my own list.

**N:** What kinds of books do you publish?

**S:** We're the largest publisher and distributor of children's books in the world, so Scholastic publishes books ranging from picture books to young adult novels. But my bosses and I mostly look for chapter book series, middle-grade, and YA. As I start to build my list, I'm looking at publishing diverse voices from marginalized communities, especially Latinx authors. In terms of genre, I would love to publish thrillers, paranormal/supernatural, rom-coms, and contemporary stories.

**N:** When you want to acquire a book, what is the process?

**S:** Acquiring an author is a lengthy process. First off, I read the submission, and if it is something I want to acquire, I work to

make a case for the book to our acquisitions team and discuss an offer I can bring to the agent. If everything goes well and both the agent and author say yes, contracts are signed, the deal is accepted, and you begin work with the author to get the book in great shape prior to publication.

**N:** What about all the work to get it into print?

**S:** It takes a village! After revisions are done, we submit manuscripts to our production department and from there, it goes to a copyeditor, a proofreader, and when needed, a sensitivity/authenticity reader. Manuscripts go through several copy editors and proofreaders and then are typeset. At this point it is exciting because it starts looking like a book. When all passes are approved, it is sent to the printer for proofs. We do one or two reviews of the proof before the final version is printed. This is why books take so long to produce. It's not like *Younger!* (though I do love that show).

**N:** After the book is finished, how do you get it into bookstores and reviewed?

**S:** That's all marketing and publicity. They're the pros. They know which outlets to pitch our books to, what awards to submit them to, which book bloggers and media companies to send our galley to. And of course, some of our on-the-ground people are our awesome sales reps who are handselling books to indie bookstores and large distributors such as Barnes & Noble and Amazon.

**N:** What trends do you see in middle-grade and YA fiction?

**S:** Fantasy is definitely one of the biggest genres right now. I'm seeing a lot of royal court dramas, epic fantasies, and fairytale

retellings. Horror and thrillers are also on the rise. Rom-coms are doing well. And while I'm a little biased, I'm seeing a lot of calls for the resurgence of YA paranormal, which I love.

**N:** What makes a manuscript stand out?

**S:** It can depend from project to project, but voice is important. If the voice feels fresh or stands out to me, that's usually a good indicator. When an author writes for a younger audience, it can be tough to nail that twelve or sixteen-year-old voice. Also, if the writing and story plays with tropes. I really enjoy love triangles or enemies-to-lovers, to name a few. I don't agree with that whole "stop using tropes" or the "tropes are dead" arguments. Until people from marginalized communities have a chance to pen their own stories with them, it's not dead.

**N:** Let's turn to illustrations. How do you get artists to incorporate your ideas?

**S:** When we're looking for illustrators for our books, we definitely sit down with our designers to figure out who would be a good fit for the book. Do we need an illustrator who is good with photo-realistic digital manipulation? Or one who is really good at line-work? It's all up to what each individual project requires. Once we have an illustrator locked down, we create interior art concepts that basically break down the different illustrations we want for each chapter.

Sometimes it can be a full page of art. Other times, it's spot art spread throughout the chapter. I really enjoy coming up with the art concepts. It lets me flex a different creative skill, and I love seeing what the artists come up with.

**N:** What makes working for Scholastic so wonderful?

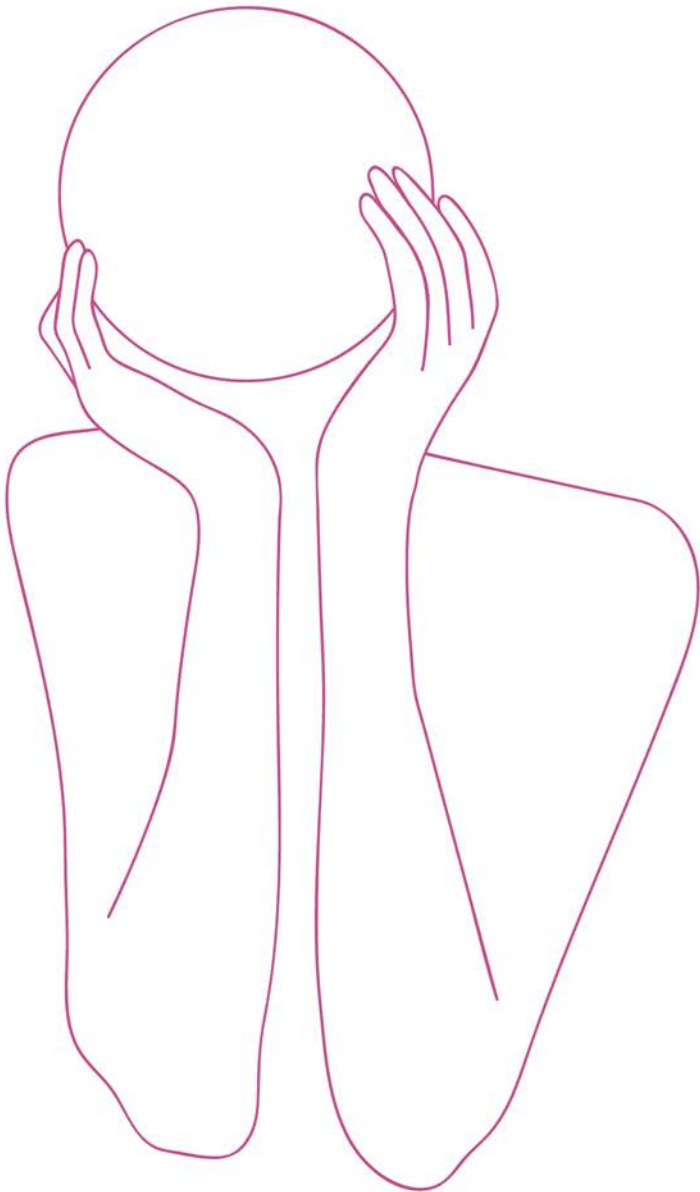
**S:** I get to work on the *Goosebumps* series, which was a big part of my life when I was growing up. When I interviewed and found out that one of my potential bosses was the *Goosebumps* editor, I was overwhelmed. R.L. Stine helped make me a spooky kid. When I first met him, I could barely talk, and I probably made a fool of myself. He is nice and funny, but I would say that my favorite thing is the people. I adore my colleagues. We all regularly hang out and do things outside of the office. I've been to concerts, shopping, and even Broadway shows with my friends.

**N:** It sounds as if you work a lot. What do you enjoy doing when you are not at Scholastic?

**S:** I do work a lot, but I try to keep a work-life balance. I am involved with a lot of organizations such as POC in Publishing, Latinx in Publishing, Representation Matters Mentorship Program, and I have served for two years as one of the Kid Lit Co-Chairs for the Bronx Book Festival. I'm also usually found at industry happy hours or book launches. A lot of my friends are authors, so I love to support them. Outside of publishing, I mostly love to go to concerts. I see a lot of movies at the Brooklyn Alamo Drafthouse, and when I'm able to, I see Broadway shows. In general, I try to see my friends outside of the office setting. I'm very active on Twitter, but nothing beats a Saturday brunch surrounded by friends.

**N:** What are your future goals?

**S:** I dream of one day having my own imprint. I'm very ambitious, and I'm hoping to stay in this industry for as long as I can and publish books that the next generations of bookworms will love.



# Lost and Found

Gabrielle Dooley

*A woman in front of the mirror looks for her identity.*

Nicole Brossard

## I

When I was five years old, Father, face the pink of hamburger meat and knotted with scar tissue from the war, ripped all the mirrors off our walls. The wallpaper ripped in the parlor and the glass shattered in the backyard. I squatted flat-footed, voices shouting in the distance, and stared at the ladybug reflected in the shards of glass. Stared at the bright green blades of grass and the clumps of dark earth all reflected in every fragment of broken mirror. I ran my finger along the hard vermilion back of the tiny bug, my finger reflected back to me twenty times again. *How many of me are there?*

A hand grabbed my arm, fingers biting into my skin, and hauled me to my feet. She dragged me back toward the house, away from myself. *Don't go near that again, Katherine. You will cut your feet. Do you want that? Do you want to bleed?*

I wanted to tell my mother yes, I would bleed if I could see the blood reflected in Technicolor.

## II

I started to miss my reflection, so on days that Mother was preoccupied with baby Elmer and the housework, and Father was working at the factory, I hid away at the bottom of her closet. I clutched her compact mirror in my hands. I did this for years, staring at my eyes—*yes, they were really my eyes, mine*—and picking out and naming the colors. They were the color of sand, of the golden tree trunk in the backyard, of dark green moss, and of the deep brown dirt I used to bury my naked feet in. I gazed hungrily at my face, desperately wanting to know every inch of it. I liked the light freckles covering my nose and apples of my cheeks and my dark eyelashes.

I watched my lips move as I talked to myself in the dim light. I formed the words: *Oh, how beautiful it all is. That is you, Kathy.*

“I gazed hungrily at my face, desperately wanting to know every inch of it.”

### III

I made a friend in the sixth grade. Her name was Dorothy Jones, and she lived two houses down from us. We met up on the sidewalk under the lamppost in front of my yellow home with too many windows, and we walked to school together every day. We talked about ourselves more than anything. The world around us didn't exist. She told me of the new scar she'd gotten trying to use her mother's razor to shave her legs, and I told her of my tenth mole, the one I'd found that morning while pulling on my stockings. It rested right on my inner thigh. She told me about the blood she found in her bed that morning, how her mom told her she was a woman now. I faltered as I told her about the inch my hair had seemed to grow overnight— *Why haven't I bled? Will I become a woman?*

Mother told me one day that I was to stay with the Joneses after school because she had to go into the city to run errands. I didn't want to. Dorothy's womanliness caused a rift between us, which seemed to grow larger each day. But Mother pierced me with a look that said, *don't you argue with me, Katherine Joan. Behave yourself.* So, I walked home with Dorothy to her lilac-colored house with the grand white porch, followed her up the steps and into her bedroom.

A bronze-framed mirror hung on her wall. It was taller than me, extending far above my head. It was the biggest mirror I'd ever seen. And I fell in love, not with the mirror but with what it reflected. I stood in front of that mirror for a long

long time, Dorothy standing beside me. *We could be sisters, you know. We look alike. The same nose and same skin color.* I wanted to tell her we looked nothing alike, but I didn't want to upset her. Her hair was pretty, golden waves stopping at her shoulders, but my hair was dark and smooth, spilling down my back like silk ribbons. Her eyes were a nice shade of blue, but mine were the color of the wild, full of deep greens, mahogany, and specks of gold. Her skin was pale and soft, but mine was a creamy, smooth white, almost glowing.

She was pretty, but my reflection revealed that I was beautiful.

#### IV

My father died when I was fifteen. When someone dies you're expected to grieve for a long time, but I did not. I was sad that he had suffered for a long time, hadn't dared to look at his own face, but I didn't cry for him. I didn't pause my life for my father because I barely knew him. Instead, all I thought about was our mirrorless house, mirrorless because of him. Maybe now that he was gone, my mother would replace the broken mirrors he'd thrown in the yard ten years before. I didn't ask right away though because my mother was destroyed by my father's death.

My brother Elmer, now seven, was even less affected than I. For the last years of his life, my father seemed to live in his mind, years before Elmer's conception. So, after he died, Elmer and I had continued our lives as though nothing happened while Mother drifted through the house like a ghost.

Eventually the color came back to her cheeks, the life back to her eyes, and she only cried when she saw a picture of him before the war with his black hair and smooth skin. A week before my sixteenth birthday, I finally asked Mother, *Can we get a mirror?*

## V

The day of my sixteenth birthday, I woke up to dark blood between my thighs. I stared for a long time at the crimson stain on my floral sheets. *I'm a woman. I'm finally a woman.* Grinning, I raced down the stairs in my nightgown, calling for my mother to look, just look!

*What is it, Katherine Joan. Stop your shouting.*

I ran to the parlor, my chest heaving and my breathing erratic to share the news about my becoming a woman. Mother raised her eyebrows at my flushed skin and asked what was wrong.

*I'm a woman now, Mother.* She gave a soft smile and continued mending Elmer's school pants.

*And on your birthday too. What a nice surprise. Now go bathe. Your grandmother is coming over for your birthday.*

I turned around to go back upstairs and bathe, but stopped short when I saw the mirror hanging on the rose wallpapered wall. It was every bit as elegant as the one in Dorothy's room, and my smile grew even brighter. I stepped closer, examining the flush of my cheeks, my dark hair mussed from sleep, and the red stain on my white nightgown.

*Don't stare at yourself too hard, you'll get lost in there.*

*No. I wasn't lost. I was found.*

## יְיָ, יְיָ (Oh God, My God)

Cassi Jonen

I beg of מְלוֹעַ, the World, my God.  
That's what I've named her  
since the Christian God left  
a sour taste in my mouth  
just as it has for many  
of my queer  
my trans  
siblings.

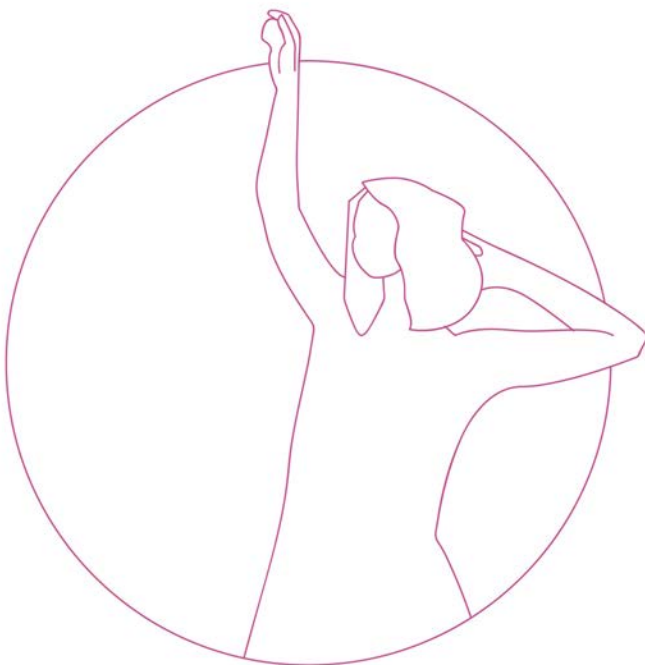
But religion has not betrayed me.  
In fact, it has given me strength,  
assuredness, and conviction.  
It brings to me a warmth  
that I never thought  
I would feel  
in life.

I imagined I would provoke the end  
of this life to reach the next  
and all would be revealed  
in a momentous dream;

that I would pass  
under her  
gaze.

Instead, I found Him in a dream.  
He fostered my sense of self.  
He reassured and bolstered,  
nourished and fed  
a belief in myself  
that I didn't know  
I could ever  
have.

My God has no one true identity:  
He flies on the wings of an owl,  
She weaves through the trees,  
They spin through the air,  
as parts of nature,  
and parts  
of me.



# I Couldn't Find God in the Bible Belt

Cassi Jonen

Jesus didn't walk the streets of Pensacola  
as he walked the Via Dolorosa  
or the dirt paths of small villages  
Jesus didn't walk the streets of Pensacola

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

the churches taught redemption  
but not the inherent goodness in humanity  
but not the natural holiness of being  
the churches taught redemption

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

his followers craved recognition  
they provided for others  
only to feel good about themselves  
his followers craved recognition

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

instead I found myself  
I discovered my queerness  
my transness made itself at home  
instead I found myself

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

God exists within me  
She was in my soul  
nestled in a corner of my heart  
God exists within me

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

leaving the South, I found sainthood  
my voice can be the word of God  
as long as I speak consciously  
leaving the South, I found sainthood

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

my queerness brought me peace  
self-assured, I now walk with Her  
with Her, I can be true  
my queerness brought me peace

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

going back, I am safe  
no longer persecuted for my lack of faith  
I can return to Pensacola streets  
going back, I am safe

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

She walks among us  
within us, he works miracles  
in the hearts of the selfless  
She walks among us

I couldn't find God in the Bible Belt

you never know when you are ready  
cursed to think you must be perfect  
too many never see that She is with  
you never know when you are ready

# Star Chart

Quinn Doll

read the cards again  
somewhere amongst the blind happiness and shared sin  
there is something about you  
dear future  
something misty

Death Reversed  
Lovers

the cards have called—  
you? me?

The Fool

three for loyalty

The Sun

now this

languid summer laughs

this is what I'm drawn to  
venomous moths to a flame that won't show their faces  
do you have a face?  
can't shake curiosity  
searching  
yearning to find  
what was hidden  
an omen of softly spoken shame  
insert stories told in butterfly kisses and sampled faith  
dear future,  
keep us all from closing in  
start at small sounds in somewhere-else places  
that we might  
together  
catch you, pin you  
that one of us might pry open your mouth  
look down your throat

see your shattered heart  
how did it break? do you remember?  
you'll notice you were starving  
    all along  
ever since it lodged in your throat  
    embedded in your belly  
    still  
        hold still  
    let us  
    all of us  
                pull you free  
the glints of shattered light  
    a ritual, a keepsake, a disguise for us  
I could show you,  
    dear future,  
how to ballast the weight of those shards  
    into the backbone of your soul  
and when the last pieces appear to have no substance left  
    test them, heed them, add to them your self  
then dear future  
    go and show someone  
how to move ahead

# Enable Dictation

Quinn Doll

Hello hello hello hello can you come over here can you hear me I'm over here can you hear me from over here how well do I have to enunciate can I speak from farther away do I have to speak very clearly what is there is other sound can you hear me can you hear me can you understand me my speaking clearly enough are you looking for the right word no that's not right don't look listen can you hear me can you hear me hello hello please don't share the wrong thing please understand please understand can you understand me can you hear the right word will you learn one thing will you learn what I am saying will you be able to learn how I speak will you be able to learn what I am saying hello hello hello hi are you there are you there how long can you listen how long until you stop listening are you stuck with me why do you stop listening when I go quiet why do you stop listening when I stop talking why do you stop listening when I talk why do you have the wrong thing when I don't talk loud enough why can't you understand why do you listen for every single word why can't you hear why can't you hear why can't you hear why can't you hear why can't you hear why can't you hear what I'm saying why do you only hear the word why do you only hear the word why do you only hear the word why do you stop listening when I stop talking why do you stop hearing me when I talk too much when I am too far away when I say too much when I talk too fast when I say the wrong thing when I don't enunciate why do you hear different things when I say the same thing over and over why aren't you listening why do you hear the wrong thing why do you hear the wrong date why can't you hear what I'm saying why are you changing Wednesday why are you changing what I'm saying why are you so behind why are you changing what I'm saying



## Twenty-Seven Guests at the Eastbrook Inn

Alyssa “Jinx” Hayes

Three days ago, guests started to complain. One, at first. Then two. Then all twenty-seven of them staying at the Eastbrook Inn.

The first few phone calls to the front desk reported that none of the faucets were working—not in the sink, not in the tub, and not in the shower. Even the toilet refused to refill after flushing. Every drop of water had up and left the building. It should have been an easy fix. Sure, having no water at all was bizarre, but if the staff couldn’t fix it themselves, they’d call a plumber.

But the plumber couldn’t help. Technically speaking, nothing was broken. Everything was in perfect working order. Nothing wrong with the pipes, no clogs, the water tanks filled, it all seemed fine. Well, other than the fact that water wouldn’t flow. The Inn was billed for what amounted to shrugs and grunts of confusion.

The staff assured their guests that everything was fine. The water would be back on shortly, but for now, they would treat everyone to a special breakfast buffet to make up for any inconvenience.

Things got much worse when the water came back. At first, the only complaint was that the water tastes “funny”. Just odd. Just wrong. Just so not-water. There were a few water pressure issues, but other than that . . .

One girl filled the bathtub with cloudy, steaming water. Unwisely stepping in, her toes found something small and hard. A tooth rolled across the sole of her foot, scraping against the porcelain floor of the tub. She recoiled and hurriedly yanked out the stopper, letting the tooth clink down the drain.

A few hours passed, and rust turned the water acrid and red. Then black and translucent like obsidian. And all of it was hot no matter which way the tap was turned.

Guests were advised to let the water be; the staff would send someone soon to clean out the pipes. Bottled water was provided in the lobby. People grumbled, but a hotel room is an investment. Not worth backing out now.

The pipes were perfectly clean, and none of the usual suspects were blamed for the disgusting taste: no dead animals in the water tanks, no dead animals clogging the pipes.

A day passed. The water tanks were full and clean. The showerhead sputtered and puked, spraying out black, stinking bile onto its unsuspecting victims. They hurried to turn off the shower, but the water kept coming out, coating them in grease. The smell of rot clung to their skin and hair. They tried to shake themselves off like dogs as they scrambled out of the shower, slipping on their own muck.

A thick, foul molasses dribbled from the faucets and collected in puddles of fetid

decay in the basins. The pipes

gurgled and bubbled and begged for release. People started locking their bathroom doors, shoving towels into the thin crack underneath it, trying to keep out the stench.

The Eastbrook Inn was overrun by wet filth. The woman working the front desk could barely answer one call before another rang shrilly in her ear.

The mother and her young son in room 12 were the first to leave after she found her toddler trying to shove his tiny fist down the bathtub drain. As she dragged him down the hall to the lobby, he wailed and tried to escape her grasp. He kept screaming and struggling in her arms as she marched out the door. A refund hadn't been enough to pacify her, and it certainly didn't pacify her son. If anything, it seemed like he hadn't wanted to leave.

“The pipes gurgled and bubbled and begged for release.”

Other, guests started to check out. Just one, at first. Then two. Then all twenty-seven of them at the Eastbrook Inn.

The water cleared up within a few days.

The halls stood empty. The rooms stood empty. Tourist season was over in the seaside town. Nobody pulled into the parking lot. The staff busied themselves dusting and arranging the lobby and rooms.

The bizarre water incident was forgotten. There had been nothing to investigate, nothing to test. It was a weird blemish on the reputation of the Inn. Something murmured about among the locals.

Christmas time. Tourists came down to see the lights and visit family. The time of year was quieter than the summer, but they had more guests than in the four months since the water incident.

1, 2, 3, 4, 27. Just the same. Plenty of vacancies, but it was enough to get them through the season. All was well, and happy holidays!

Then, the first complaints started to trickle in. One, at first. Then two. Then all twenty-seven of them at the Eastbrook Inn.

More funny-tasting water. More odd coloring. More water pressure issues. Flies buzzing about the faucets.

The owners were ready to tear out their hair. Frantic phone calls were made. Water bottles were provided in the lobby. And then it was decided, after much hand wringing, that there was to be one more check of everything before they would concede closing for the season. They would close until the pollutant could be discovered. They had never closed in December, but there was nothing else to be done.

The water tanks were not hard to access through a maintenance door on the top floor. Climb a ladder up to the roof, and then another ladder up to the main tank, which was padlocked to keep anything from getting in.

As the janitor climbed, hand over hand, he whistled, the cold turning his breath to fog. His gloved hands fumbled with the padlock. It clanged to the ground. He used his full weight to send the lid clattering back on its hinges.

He stopped whistling. A scream caught in his throat. What appeared in the tank was a solid mound of flesh packed as tightly as sardines. Water sloshed against the janitor's hands when he doubled over to vomit.

The bodies were bloated, nearly unrecognizable, the flesh greenish-black hanging loose and sloughing off. The naked corpses with entangled limbs were like awful, blind cave creatures, not meant to be seen. Mouths hung open, fishlike. A gaseous stench of rotting, sludgy organs was released from its prison in the water tank. From the sudden depressurization, a body let out steam from its guts into the cold air.

All of them face down. All of them with water in their lungs. All of them dead.

A little boy was identified first; his swollen, tiny hand detached and floating like a paper boat on the water.

Just him. Just one, at first. Then two. Then all twenty-seven of the summer guests at the Eastbrook Inn.

# They Live

Cindy Harbour

You weren't born alone.

There are the caterpillars.  
The caterpillars are lovers.  
They curl up in tight balls behind your ears;  
they live there.  
Sometimes, they uncurl and crawl  
slowly across your brow.  
You feel every inch by inch by inch as they crawl.  
They meet at the bridge of your nose;  
sometimes for a sweet kiss.  
Sometimes for a long slow touch,  
resting against one another,  
basking in each other's presence.  
They love one another,  
but your brain feels like they do  
inside their silk cocoons;  
your eyes like the small drops of dew on leaves.  
You worry they will pop; leaving only a puddle.  
The lovers do not know this.

They're not alone.

The long fat centipede hates the lovers.  
He lives between your shoulder blades.  
He is quick and sharp.  
He shoots up from his resting place  
to the top of your head.  
He circles your head like a crown.  
He paces, each step slow,  
as he fumes with discontent.  
You do not want to be royalty.  
Your crown is too tight.

He is not alone.

Small energetic beetles live in your arms.  
Their smaller, more energetic children  
grow in your hands.  
They skitter, shift, and crawl wherever they please  
up and down your arms, but never too far up.  
Like twinkly lights going off and on  
and off and on inside the meat.  
They never stop.  
They never rest:  
not ever.

They are not alone.

You don't know what lives in your legs.  
But It growls.  
It growls at you.  
It's always lived there.  
It's dull and aching as It rests  
but rumbles in Its sleep  
and growls at you.  
Sometimes, It plays with matches.  
Sometimes, It grabs ahold until you are stiff.

"Why?" you ask It.  
It growls. "Look, look what I can do."  
"I'm looking," you say.  
It growls.

You are not alone.  
And never will be.

# An Interview with Donna Kozloskie

Madison Crist



*Donna Kozloskie is a cultural critic living a digital freelance lifestyle: working coast-to-coast while rooted in the Midwest. In 2010 she toured the globe with a band and a movie which is now in the permanent collection of MoMA (NYC). More recently, her annual “Ten Best Films*

*Directed by Women” was published online at Filmmaker Magazine. She is currently a film programmer, writer, and creative consultant, helping to amplify the world around her through content curation. Kozloskie is also an instructor at the Missouri School of Journalism where she helps to guide the next generation of media-makers.*

**Madison Crist:** You wear a lot of hats. You are a musician, filmmaker, writer, film festival programmer, film projectionist, film reviewer and educator. How do these different mediums merge or influence each other? Do you have a favorite?

**Donna Kozloskie:** I don't have a preferred medium. I am not the type of person who thinks you can only be one thing. Knowing more about other forms is important.

**M:** What is your creative process when making a film, curating a program, or developing a project in general?

**D:** I read a lot, especially contemporary fiction. Writing is such a zero-cost way to express yourself. The ideas, concepts, structures and forms expressed in writing are usually the places where change happens first. Whether it is a change within the arts or bigger political or societal change. Writing informs the future.

**M:** Speaking of writers, who inspires your work

**D:** I'm always going to say, and I don't care if it is cliché, but Kurt Vonnegut. He is one of my favorites as well as George Saunders. They are humanists, satirists and realists so they see the world in its good and bad and can express it in funny and beautiful ways.

**M:** Going back to film programming, what led you to become a programmer?

**D:** It was almost by accident. I was touring with a film called *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then* and going to festivals and seeing films that had never been seen before. I began writing about it online and people reached out, asking me to critique or write about other films for them. It never occurred to me before that this was something I could do.

**M:** What is your process for curating a film program?

**D:** There is a lot that goes into it, but it is mostly research. You are looking to see what other festivals are doing and what other artists are making. There is also a lot of balance involved. You can't have a festival that is all one voice or that has six films about one topic. I like to find artists who have little support, whether financially or audience wise, and amplify them.

**M:** You frequently travel to film festivals for program research. Is there one that still lingers with you?

**D:** There was this tiny festival in Switzerland called Bildrausch. I asked them what the title means in English and they said it was "like image noise." This fest thought about film as an art-based medium that contains sounds and visuals. They made their space feel like a home by creating a film community that valued an educational experience more than a business one. There were people everywhere convening in this one little theatre. They had

a grill where you could make sausages at any time and a cooler of ice cream for whenever you wanted it. It was a place to share everything, and it was wonderful. I loved it.

**M:** Smaller festivals are often more focused on art and community like you mentioned, but bigger festivals such as Sundance are focused on promoting and distributing. What are some of the aspects of small festivals versus bigger festivals that you like?

**D:** I enjoy the bigger festivals because they're overwhelming and outrageous. I went to a party at Sundance that had a hot-cocoa alcohol bar that took up a whole wall. In a corner, men were sewing monograms onto handmade cosmetic bags while RuPaul was dancing on the dance floor. This is not reality. The people who buy into it being real, that's difficult. I don't like that part of the festival. But the spectacle is amazing! I like to attend the press and industry screenings all day. Smaller festivals again have more community and conversation as we talked about. There is less competition because you're not fighting for a prize or a distributor. You're there to share what you do and what you care about.

**M:** When thinking about the accessibility of film festivals, what strategies can festivals use to make themselves more accessible while maintaining the funding they need to function?

**D:** I have been thinking about this recently. I don't have an answer, but the one thing I keep thinking about are virtual festivals. There is this website called NoBudge, and they employ this model.

The current model [of film festivals] outside of this is not sustainable and something must take its place. Hopefully, it's something that doesn't have to be supported by sponsorship and capitalism.

**M:** Your cultural critique expands from your blog to various other

writing spaces. You have written for *Filmmaker Magazine*, *Hammer to Nail*, *Como Magazine* and *the Believer*. How did you begin writing for these places? Is the work freelance?

**D:** It's all freelance, but it's also completely random how it happened for me. Soon after starting the blog, the editor of *Filmmaker Magazine* Scott Macaulay and others started to reach out to me. He said they were doing an anniversary issue and wanted to publish a blog post of mine that matched the theme. That was the first time I ever worked with an editor, and he was incredible. I love that man. He published my first piece of writing, and paid me for it, which I didn't know was possible. I thought it was a dream rich kids had. With *Hammer to Nail*, I asked them if they needed writers, and they will almost always say yes. I have submitted to *the Believer* through Submittable. Are you familiar with Submittable? You should get in on that. All the *Harbinger* kids should! It's a platform where you can submit your work for publication.

**M:** Speaking of the blog, I read some of your work. About the Oberhausen Short Film Festival, you said, "There is no one cinematic language. Cinema is not a monoculture." What did you mean by that?

**D:** I have a friend who distinguishes between movies and film. He says movies are what you see in the theatre; cinema/film is the thing you theorize and talk about. Have you ever heard of the Auteur Theory? It means "author" of a film, the idea that a film is one person's realized vision. At Oberhausen, they are thinking about the traditions of film, but they are not rooted in the idea that the author of a film is one singular human being. At the fest, there were so many ideas being thrown around, and the rules went out the window. I remember watching a film where a [very realistic looking] plate was shattered into a million pieces and

then it flew away. I was like “we can do that!” Film can do anything it wants regardless of tradition or preconceived rules.

**M:** In connection with the idea of pushing boundaries, it is difficult to create a space where artists can share their work because we create an environment of perfectionism. In this respect, how do you define success?

**D:** When I made the *Gravity* movie, the director at the time was a contemporary artist, and he was very much of the school that if you're not selling your art, you're not an artist. I'm like screw that, that's not real. Everyone has their definition of success. For me, it's to not hurt people and try to help. It's like that Kurt Vonnegut line “we're all here to help each other get through this, whatever it is.”

**M:** What are some of your current projects?

**D:** I'm writing right now for two upcoming conferences. I am going to Cine-Excess in Birmingham, UK, to present on the millennial aesthetics of horror. I submitted an abstract to them, which I have never done. I don't have a master's degree or a doctorate, so I was not sure what was going to happen, but it got accepted. It is kind of fun. I am trying to see what patterns have happened in horror films over the past ten years. I also got accepted into the Transgressive Culture conference in Paris. I will present on animal slaughter in documentary films, which has existed since the first documentary. I'm interested in looking at why directors choose to film this and what it means for the culture they are filming in. There are a lot of issues to unpack. I was inspired by a film that refrained from showing the actual killing of the animal. They showed everything leading up to it, and I thought their decision to withhold the gore and symbolic nature of the act was a more respectful form of filmmaking. I'm working

on both papers on top of the five other jobs. I'm teaching, I'm an independent consultant for a writing website, I'm screening films for a series on PBS, I'm on a grant application committee, and I am a programmer for Oxford Film Festival.

**M:** Wow! How do you balance all of this? Do you set aside time for each job?

**D:** Yeah, I'm a big list maker. I have a very long and detailed list. I am an independent worker so I was the student who would do my final paper and hand it in the day before it was due. That discipline is what makes it possible to juggle all these different jobs. I haven't lost my mind yet.



Photo credits: Anthony Jinson and Don Shrubshell

# Eat Your Heart Out

Lauren Granich

I ate it again.  
Your heart, your mind, your body  
make up my favorite meal.  
The redness, the love pouring  
out of them makes it so addictive.  
I feel like I can't breathe if  
I haven't eaten it in the last few hours.

I ate it again.  
Your heart, your mind, your body.  
It tasted so good, too good  
for me to realize it was poisoned.  
Something or someone had poisoned it,  
your loving heart, mind, and body,  
and now I was facing the consequences.

I ate it again.  
I didn't want to believe  
your heart, your mind, your soul  
were toxic.  
They looked and tasted so good that

I didn't pay any attention  
to the way my breath was  
slowing every time I took a bite.

I ate it again.  
My heartbeat is slowing now.  
Your heart, mind, and body are  
taking my life away.  
Is this what you wanted when  
you tempted me with a bite?  
Did you wish to watch me wither away  
until my heart was ripe for the taking?

One last puff of air.  
That's all I get, after spending all  
of my time and focus on  
your delicious, addictive  
heart, mind, and body.

You've given it all to me, the redness,  
the love, and now you've ripped it  
away from me.  
My breath is gone.  
My life is gone.  
My heart is gone.  
Your heart is gone.  
I've eaten it again.

# Your Soul Was Precious at First

Lauren Granich

## I

It was precious at first. Made of gold and silver,  
I treasured it and wore it with pride.

I carried it every day until my muscles disappeared and I  
thought about it until it was the only thing that filled my mind.

Your soul was precious at first. It deceived me with its  
shininess, pulling me toward it until sharp claws were able to grip  
my shoulders. Gold and silver nails ripped into my skin, tearing  
pieces from me greedily. My skin bled and dripped onto the floor  
for years as the claws held me tight.

Your soul was gold and silver at first.

Now, it's transformed into a large black cloud wrapping  
around my throat to steal breath from my lungs. In the begin-  
ning, I couldn't breathe without it, but now it was using me to  
breathe. It was forcefully taking breath from me and not giving it  
back. Whenever I was around you, your soul immediately latched  
on to me and stole my breath and blood from me.

Your soul was with me for what felt like forever.  
Laughing together, playing and enjoying life, until you began  
taking away mine.

I wanted to live the rest of my life with your soul, and I guess  
you were giving me my wish. I wanted to live with your soul, and  
now I was going to die with it.

When I wished for your soul, I didn't know I was wishing  
for mine to die.

I don't want to die.

I don't want those gold and silver claws piercing my skin and  
not letting me leave.

I don't want your soul anymore.

It hurts to be around you now.

My soul has been chipped away until there was nothing left to give. There was nothing left of me. The sad part is, you're addictive.

I can't leave. I can't let you leave.

If I had more to give, I would give it to you, no questions asked.

I can't help myself.

It was precious at first. It was shiny. It was beautiful. It was silver and gold. It was poisonous. And I was addicted.

## II

Your soul left me years ago.

I chased after it as it disappeared, but catching it was impossible. I wanted your soul back. I couldn't remember what life was like without it, and I was scared.

Was it painful? It was probably a lot more painful than living with it, right? I feared your soul but I was way more scared of it leaving.

Scared and alone, I watched as the thick, black smoke left me stranded.

I was cold. Was it supposed to be cold?

I started to miss your soul the moment it left.

Why did it leave me?

Did I do something wrong?

I didn't mean for it to leave. I didn't want it to leave.

Did I do something wrong? I didn't mean for it to leave. I didn't want it to leave. I wanted your soul back.

I started to remember every little thing about your soul once it was gone. After a while, I couldn't even tell the black smoke was choking me.

I grew used to it.

Now that it was gone, I felt like I was starting at the beginning again.

I couldn't breathe.

The pain your soul brought with it was something that's stayed with me. My shoulders were no longer hurting because there were no claws digging into them. It was more painful to know something was missing.

Your soul was choking me and drawing blood from my shoulders,

But I missed it.

I missed the pain you caused me.

I missed the way your soul played with mine until the thick black smoke invaded my lungs And took my breath away. I missed your soul.

Because it was shiny, it was beautiful, it was silver and gold, it was poisonous, and I was addicted.

### III

I was done with your soul.

Finally, I had escaped from the clutches of the claws digging into my shoulders.

I could breathe again, with no black smoke filling my lungs.

I enjoyed my favorite things again.

You decided to come back.

Your soul decided to come back and ruin everything I'd worked hard for. I had friends. I was happy. I was becoming me.

Everything went back to the way it was.

It hurt just like the first time when the claws pierced the skin on my shoulder. The smoke filled my lungs, and it took a few weeks of coughing for me to get used to it again.

I didn't want this anymore,  
But any time I tried to escape, the claws dug in deeper,  
and harder, and it hurt more so I stopped trying.

This was me now.

I had accepted it.

My life was filled with pain and blood

Because your soul wouldn't just

Leave me alone.

I had become you.

It wasn't the other way around.

My traits were gone.

Black smoke emanated from my pores

I had claws of my own

That I was itching to dig into someone's skin.

It was shiny,

It was beautiful,

It was silver and gold,

It was poisonous,

And I was addicted.

#### IV

Your soul was precious at first.

I treasured it and wore it with pride.

I carried it every day until my muscles disappeared and I  
thought about it until it was the only thing that filled my mind.

Now, I know it's toxic.

I know it's taken away who I am. I'm not me anymore.

Your soul shouldn't have the power to take me away.

Your soul was precious at first. It deceived me with its  
shininess, pulling me toward it until sharp claws were able to grip  
my shoulders. Gold and silver nails ripped into my skin, tearing  
pieces from me greedily.

My skin bled and dripped onto the floor for years as the claws held me tight.

I can see now that those nails are not silver and gold.

The paint you had used to trick me chipped off every time they dug into my shoulder. They were red—blood red, the same color of the blood that trickled down my shoulder.

I didn't want to bleed anymore.

I didn't deserve to bleed anymore.

The large black cloud filtered away into the air until it disappeared. I whispered words of encouragement, love, and promise myself to make it go away. My lungs breathed in the new, fresh air greedily. And I never stopped repeating the words I'd said,

Because I will always be afraid it will come back.

The pain your soul was inflicting on me disappeared.

Disappeared is the wrong word.

Disappeared means your soul might have just temporarily left me,

But I knew where it went.

I forced your soul down

Into the depths of the earth

Because that was where it belonged.

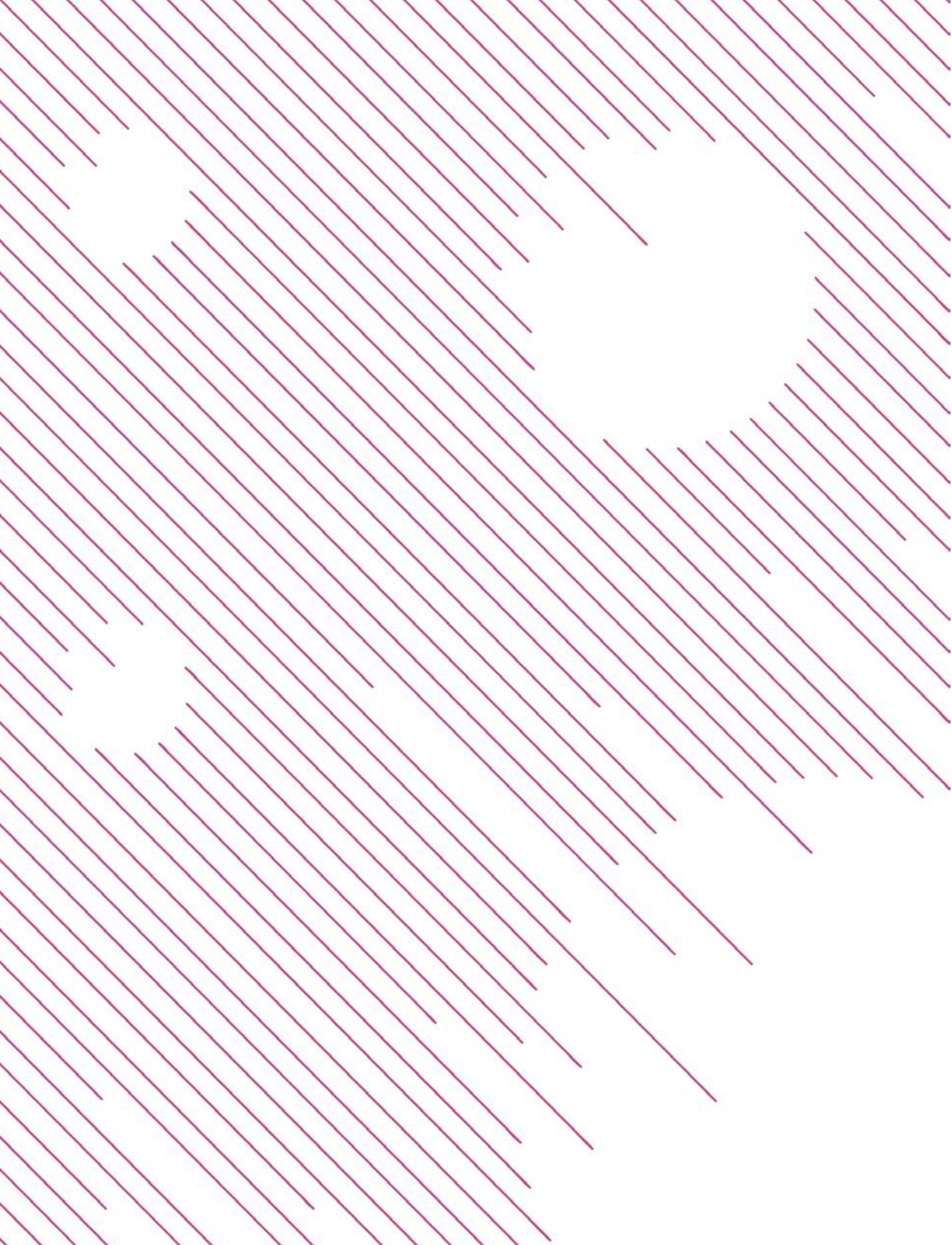
You were still alive and aware of what you had done to me. You made no apology, you showed no sorrow for what you did,

You blamed it all on your soul.

You blamed the death and destruction of my soul on yours, but in reality,

It had been you all along.

Your soul was precious at first.



# Resting Bitch Face

Natia Compton

When I was eight years old, I fractured my foot and had to hobble around on crutches. I can't say that I suffered, but it was annoying. Despite the washrags used as padding on the arm-rests, my underarms got sore. During recess, I sat on a swing, not moving much or lifting my feet from the concrete. I enjoyed the breeze until my teacher towered over me, and said, "Natia what's wrong? Don't you know that it takes more muscles to frown than to smile?"

It took me a moment to understand. I didn't think I was frowning. Nothing was upsetting me. I was just being cautious; after all, my foot was in a cast and my mobility was limited.

Though I didn't understand the difference between a frown and my relaxed face, I didn't want to be called out for my facial expression so I narrowed my eyes and gave my teacher my best "fuck you" look.

On the first day of my part-time job my sophomore year of high school, I wore a neatly pressed, button-up shirt with a bow tie and black non-slick shoes. I applied way too much makeup for a job bussing tables. I thought the night was going well until one of the bosses asked me if we could talk. I had no idea what to expect. Maybe it was something about my makeup.

"I know that I was yelling back there, but I didn't mean to upset you," she said.

"What do you mean? I'm not upset."

"Well I thought you were because of the way your face looked."

I took a moment to contemplate my response. I wanted to make the right impression. I had one shot at this.

"No, that's just my face all the time. I think the phrase is 'resting bitch face.'"

She clapped her hands, laughed, and said "Oh my god. That's what people tell me too!"

We bonded that day, and she became my favorite boss.

I still get told to smile. I don't understand why people think they have earned the right to comment on my natural facial expression. It's like demanding a "thank you"; it's not genuine. I'm not a bitch or a snob because I don't smile on command. I'm just relaxing. Asking me to smile constantly is asking for the impossible. You might as well ask for my hair to straighten or my breasts to double in size. Not going to happen.

**“Asking me to smile  
constantly is asking for  
the impossible**

There are so many ways to smile: a sly smile, a sexy smile, a “Sara smile.” When I'm ready, I'll show off mine, and it will be genuine.

# It Was Already Dead

Amber Lehmann

I was in high school, splitting my weeks between my divorced parents. One week at Dad's, then the next at Mom's. It was Dad's week, and I was heading to his house after spending most of my day with my grandparents. It was a twenty-minute drive in the dark and in Kansas where the warning "look out for deer" is both a saying and a curse.

If you mention the word deer, they seem to magically appear right in front of your car. Bambi and his mom scamper across the highway as you slam on your brakes barely missing their furry hindquarters. My family has a thing with deer. Nothing bad ever happens; maybe sideswiping one or having to wait for a herd to cross the interstate.

I am not as lucky. The first time I hit a deer, it was already dead.

Most people would think that's a good thing: "If it's dead, you don't have to worry about it jumping on your hood."

Well, no, you don't have to worry about that.

"Dead deer can't crash through your windshield."

Right again, but . . .

"It's kind of like a speed bump."

Yes, except you're hitting that speed bump at sixty miles an hour. Most cars are not made to roll over a massive carcass on the highway. So, when you hit that "speed bump," your car ramps it. And while you're flying through the air, time stands still and the only thought going through your mind is, "What the fuck just happened?" Your body, however, goes into action, making sure you don't end up killing yourself. Your hands grip the wheel, your foot hits the brake, and your head slams into the headrest so your neck doesn't snap.

Good thing it's late. No one was driving in the opposite lane. If they had been, you'd be dead.

And by you, I totally mean me. Because that's it. I could've died. What if my car had flipped? If someone had been speeding along in the left lane? If I jerked to the right and hit the semi that

was sitting on the side of the road?

Looking back on it now, I'm pretty sure I had the same look on my face that the deer had when the semi hit it—that “deer in the headlights” look.

After a couple of seconds, I recovered enough to put my car into park and turn on the flashers.

My nervous breakdown started slow. My hands began shaking. It was a struggle to push the button to release my seatbelt. I dug my nails into the contraption until it finally released me. I tried tucking my legs as close to my body to keep them away from the pedals. A shiver traveled up my body until I was buzzing, and my teeth chattered. I could usually stop my panic attacks before they happened, but my body wasn't complying.

I needed to call my dad—he'd save me—but I couldn't find my phone. It wasn't in the cup holder where I usually put it. Everything was in the wrong place. My backpack was in the front seat, my pens scattered on the floor, but my phone was nowhere to be seen. I leaned over the center console, the lid digging into my chest, and found my phone in the cubby of the passenger door.

Through my tears, I could barely see the phone screen as I tried swiping in my password. I tried six times before remembering I could just unlock it with my fingerprint. My call list was already up on the phone, and Dad was the last one I had called.

The conversation went something like this:

Dad: Hello? Helloooo? I thought you were coming home?

Me: (blubbering) I'm almost home.

Dad: What's wrong?

Me: I'm almost home.

Dad: Where are you?

Me: I'm almost home?

It went on like this until I told him to drive toward town, and he'd see my car in the ditch. We hung up, and I was left to my breakdown.

In breakdown mode my mind blows everything out of proportion. So when the truck driver from the parked semi across the highway knocked on my window, I nearly had a heart attack.

“Are you hurt?”

I stared at him.

“Ma’am, are you all right?”

I didn’t flinch at being called ma’am, and answered, “I guess?”

“Your body, however, goes into action, making sure you don’t end up killing yourself.”

I didn’t know if I was hurt or not. I could’ve had a knife in my arm and not feel it.

“Do you need me to call someone?”

“No. Dad is coming.”

The driver meandered back to his truck. I wondered why it took him so long to check on me. Perhaps he was in shock too.

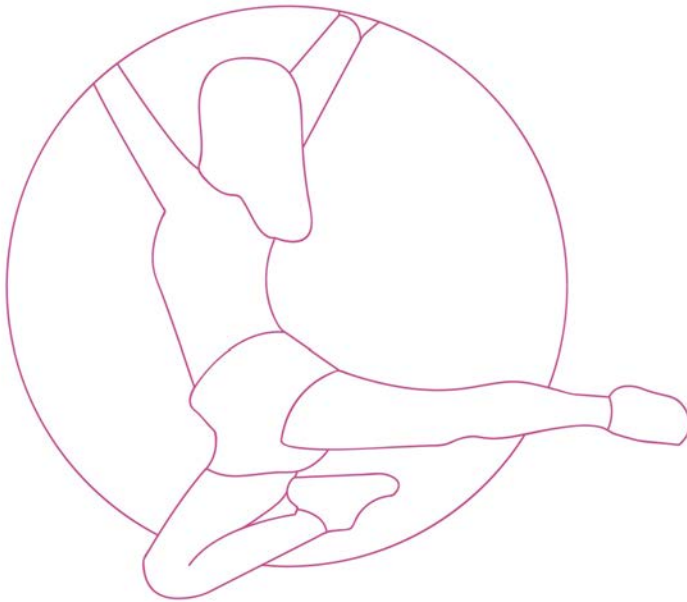
In a cruel twist of fate, the first car to come down the road after me drove right over the deer. *F-wump, f-wump* as the tires settled down on the road at different times. The car did not soar through the air as I had. It just left an even deader deer.

By the fourth car, my dad and stepmom pulled up in their truck and parked alongside my car in the tall grass. He jumped out and rushed to my door, opening it. I spilled out of my seat into his arms and held on for dear life. My stepmom rubbed my back like I was five instead of seventeen, but I honestly felt that young.

They helped me into the backseat of the truck and wrapped my dad’s sweatshirt over my shivering shoulders.

When a state trooper finally showed up to remove the deer off of the highway, he asked me for a statement. I couldn’t speak; I could barely breathe. The truck driver told him that he was the one who had hit the deer and then saw me hit it a few minutes later. The truck driver said that I was lucky that a car was not coming from the opposite direction.

From my dad's truck, my stepmom and I watched the trooper drag the deer by its back legs off the highway and into the ditch where the animal seemed to split in half. I watched with sick fascination, thinking, "Same, deer. Same."



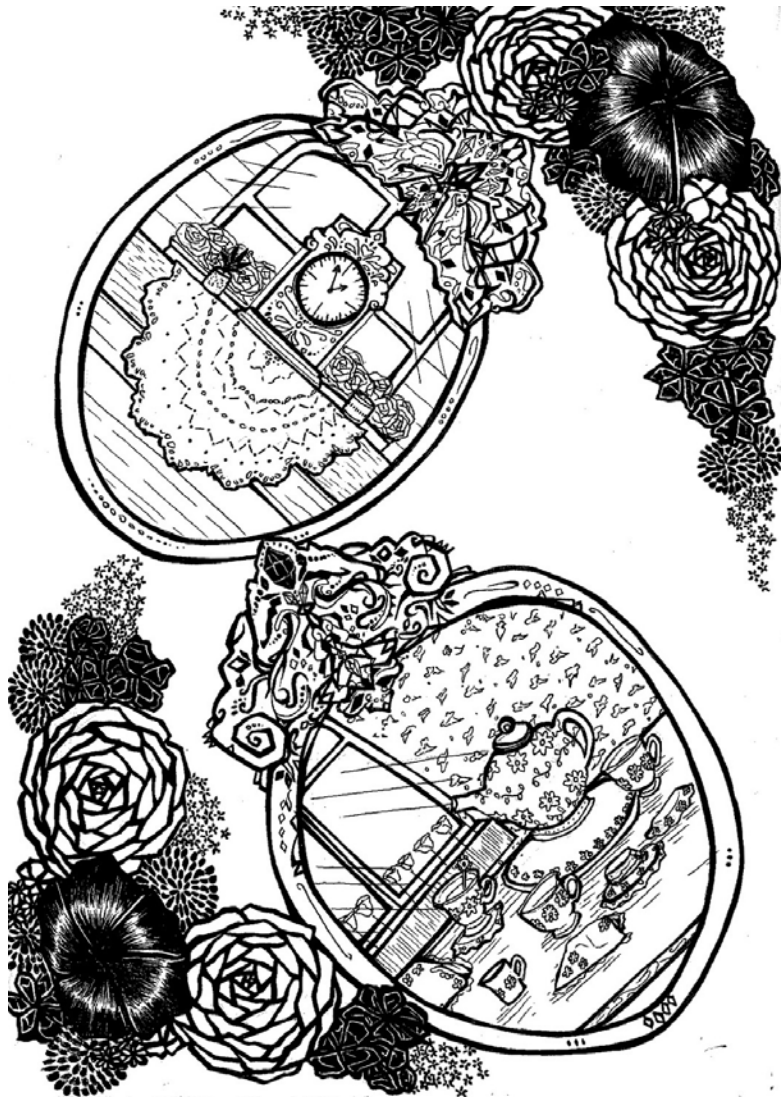
# Once Upon a Time

Chloe Dubisch

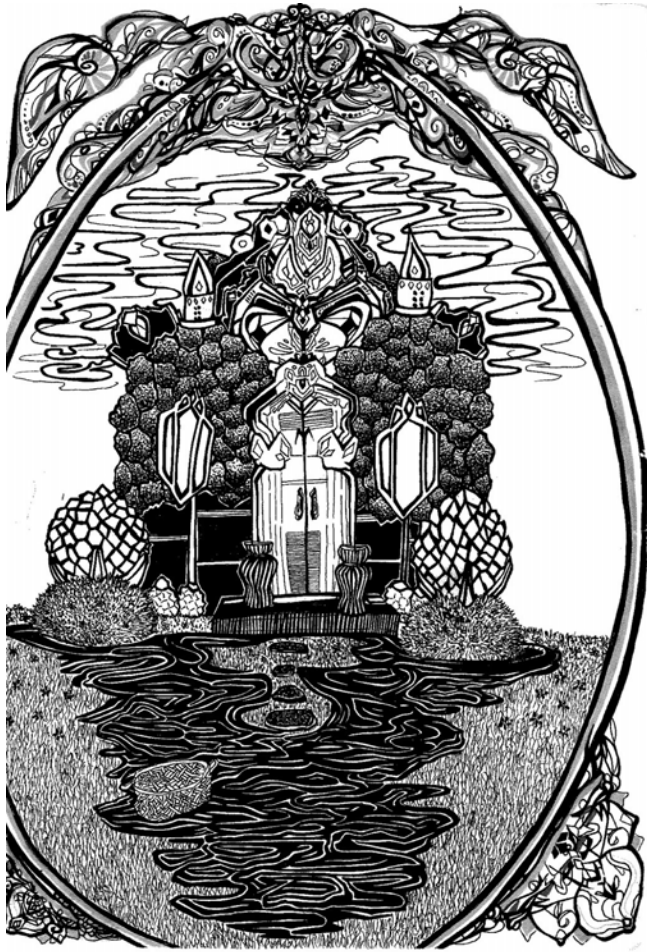
*Once Upon a Time* is a collection of pen-and-ink drawings that I created over the last three years while traveling through Morocco, Ireland, Scotland, and a number of European countries. They are from the sketchbook that I always carry with me. Each image is meant to inspire a sense of unreality in viewers, reminding them of either a fairytale or a bedtime story.



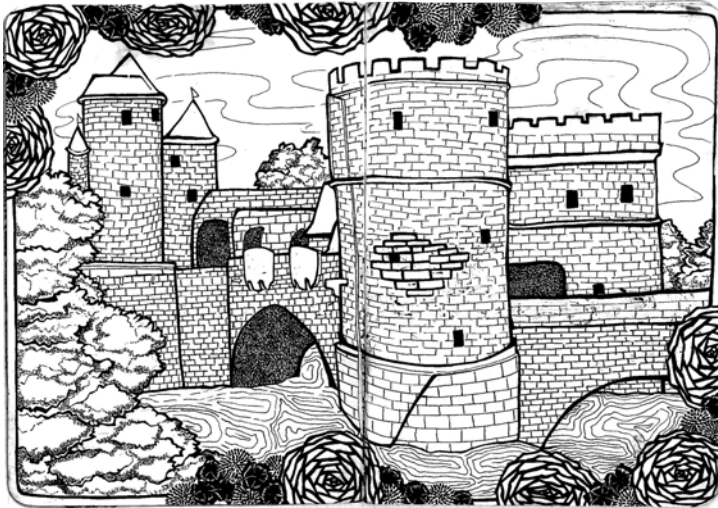
"Murder at the Ruin," 2020, Pen and Ink



"In the Queen's Chamber," 2020, Pen and Ink



“Castle in the Swamp,” 2020, Pen and Ink



“The Moat,” 2020, Pen and Ink

# Contributors' Notes



## Natia Compton

is a creative writing major and digital filmmaking minor who writes stories and screenplays. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and was an intern for *The Missouri Review*. Her work is published in *TeenInk* and the *Missouri Writers Guild*, and her play has been performed by Stephens New Script Showcase.



## Madison Crist

is a digital filmmaking major with minors in music and creative writing. Last year she was a part of *Harbinger's* staff and her poetry collection *Essence* was featured. This year she is honored to be co-editor. She is active on campus as a Stephens Scholar, president of Stephens Organization for Latin Students, and vice-president of Sigma Tau Delta.



## Quinn Doll

is a writer and artist from Kansas City, Missouri. They transferred to Stephens College fall 2019 and are pursuing a creative writing major and art minor and are an active member of Sigma Tau Delta. Their goal is to become disgustingly rich off their writing and retire at thirty to a goat farm in Ruby, Alaska. Their work has recently been accepted for publication in *Montana Mouthful*. This is their first publication in *Harbinger*.



## Gabrielle Dooley

is an English major. She has two previously published pieces, “Backbone” and “My Name Is,” in the 2018 and 2019 issues of *Harbinger*. “My Name Is” won the 2019 Pittman Prize for Best Fiction. She is president of Sigma Tau Delta, a member of Alpha Lambda Delta, and a volunteer in the Stephens archives.



## Chloe Dubisch

is a senior English major graduating in May 2020 and has been a *Harbinger* staff member for three semesters. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and will present her work at the national conference. She studied at the University of Glasgow her junior year. In the future she will pursue a post-graduate degree in English and publish several books of poetry.



## Julienne Graebner

is a 2019 graduate of Stephens College with a degree in English. As a student, she was the online content creator for *Stephens Life* and a member of Sigma Tau Delta. She currently works at The Penguin in downtown Columbia. This will be her first publication in *Harbinger*.



## Lauren Granich

is a sophomore English major, a Stephens Scholar and an avid reader and writer of romance novels with over one million online reads. When she is not writing, Lauren and her puggle Bailey relax together. After graduation, she will pursue a career in the publishing industry.



## Ana Green

is a junior creative writing major from Festus, Missouri. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. After graduating from Stephens College in May 2021, she plans on pursuing a second degree. She enjoys crafting, poetry, and challenging herself.



## Cindy Harbour

is a senior creative writing major and the secretary of Sigma Tau Delta. She writes historical fiction and plans to pursue a degree in history after graduation from Stephens College. This is her third *Harbinger* publication.



## Alyssa “Jinx” Hayes

is a freshman at Stephens College, a digital filmmaking major, and a lover of all things macabre. They are from St. Louis and have always been an avid writer. After graduating, they hope to contribute to the world of horror movies.



## Cassi Jonen

is senior creative writing major from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Not only has she been previously published in *Harbinger*, but she has also had several poems and a personal essay published by non-collegiate magazines. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, and after graduation, plans to continue her academic career studying playwriting.



## Eliza Larson

is a senior majoring in creative writing and a member of Sigma Tau Delta. A lover of flowers, animals, and comics, she spends her free time daydreaming and reading the newest chapter of her favorite online comics. This is her second publication in *Harbinger*.



## Amber Lehmann

is a junior creative writing major and Vice President of Astro Girls, an animation club. She has passion for fantasy and an interest in creative nonfiction. She also enjoys planning events and hanging out with friends. In the future, she hopes to combine her love of library work with a career in the literary arts.



## Danielle Rodriguez

is a junior creative writing major from Chicago, Illinois, who enjoys playwriting and photography. When she is not writing and studying, she spends her time playing with her amazing pug, Lily. After graduation she plans to continue her career in writing and become an author. She is also a skilled graphic designer.



First place winner in the 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018 Literary Arts Journal Category and second place winner in 2015.

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Carey Salerno  
Editor, *Alice James Books*

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Editor, *Typecast Publishing*

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Laura McHugh  
Author, *The Weight of Blood*, *Arrowood*, and *The Wolf Wants In*

“*Harbinger* provides readers with a balance of insight and entertainment, provocation and pleasure, audit and reward. Perhaps most powerful of all, the incisive social dialogue created by these young writers reinvigorates my hope in art’s ability to bring about change.”

Jill Orr  
Author, *The Good Byline*, *The Bad Break* and *The Ugly Truth*