

# Harbinger

2024



RE:Cycle

# Harbinger 2024

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jer]

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

Published by the *Harbinger* staff  
of Stephens College in cooperation with  
the Alpha Epsilon Eta chapter  
of Sigma Tau Delta

## **Praise for *Harbinger***

First place winner in the 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020 Literary Arts Journal Category and second place winner in 2015 and 2022.

Sigma Tau Delta  
English Honor Society

Selected to receive the rank of Superior in the 2023 NCTE Recognizing Excellence in Art and Literary Magazines (REALM) program.

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Shelly Romero, Editor

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# Foreword

*“Life cycle: a series of stages through which something (such as an individual, culture, or manufactured product) passes during its lifetime.”*

*~ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.*

We are all tasked with the interesting challenge of living. Life is one big action parsed by a million tiny moments and experiences. The cycles are familiar: birth, love, work, death—rinse, repeat. Throughout, it is common to become restless, tired, bored, but also passionate, infatuated, excitable. The complexities in which we exist are depicted in and examined by literature, science, history, art, and other fields of the humanities.

While we are all familiar with life’s cycles, we either take them for granted or avoid discussing them. Conversations about dying are considered taboo in the United States and many other countries. The concept of death is difficult to broach considering the endless number of responses it might garner. Its blankness is filled in by the color of human grief and deep love and sometimes indifference. Desecration and defiling of it exists, but just the same, so does celebration and remembrance. One’s approach to death is often a revelation; it conjures the image of branches that reach high and outward from humanity.

“Reader beware / as you pass by. / As you are now / so once was I. / As I am now, / so you will be. / Therefore, prepare / to follow me” is a historically common quote found on various gravestones, mostly from the 1700s. It is a haunting, yet enticing lure to contemplate what exists outside of ourselves. One could say it is not only applicable to death, but an array of subjects—the act of pursuit, the act of learning, the act of participating. It dares you to read, engage, and tumble deep into the depths of immersive living.

These ideas remind me of the pressure that surrounds the arts and humanities as of late. Today too many in society seem to believe that they are a dying form of expression and field of study. The media would have you believe that society had unanimously decided that they no longer contribute to or impact our daily lives. In the article “How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry, and Mean Society” David Brooks writes:

I confess I still cling to the old faith that culture is vastly more important than politics or some pre-professional training in algorithms and software systems. I’m convinced that consuming culture furnishes your mind with emotional knowledge and wisdom; it helps you take a richer and more meaningful view of your own experiences; it helps you understand, at least a bit, the depths of what’s going on in the people right around you.

The *Harbinger* staff could not agree more. While putting this issue together we were reminded of the ongoing value of “consuming culture.”

In *Harbinger: RE: Cycle*, there are pieces that express this sentiment through the intricacies and artfulness of their writing. “Baby Goat,” by Ruby Hewerdine, describes pangs of grief with the passing of innocence. Paris Bute’s “My Late First Wife Was a Silk Moth” takes the readers through the motions of a changing marriage and the necessity to embrace evolution. And “Seven Days in Symbiosis’ Cradle” by Zoe London turns the concept of birth into an absurd experience as two new parents welcome a living sourdough bread starter into their lives.

The hallmarks of life are found where you look for them, and certainly when indulging in the arts. “RE: Cycle” is not only a homage to the grit of human experience, but also to the circuitry that accompanies the act of living.

These moments are what make *Harbinger* continue to be what it is: a beautiful collection of literature, a testament to design, and the lovechild of a hardworking and passionate staff. We welcome you to indulge and unleash your humanity, your art, your culture. We welcome you to *Harbinger: RE: Cycle!*

T.M.

# The Changed Ones

*By Ruby Hewardine*

## I

Today, I made my wife breakfast in bed. I was tired—her groans and the rattling of chains kept me awake until the sun rose—but I still took the time to prepare her morning meal. God knows what would happen if I didn't. I looked in the freezer and noticed our leftover venison was on the verge of going bad, just how she likes it. I don't bother skinning or deboning the meat for her anymore—she always has more fun when she gets to play with her food. Instead, I wrapped a squishy leg in butcher paper and tied it shut with string before making my way to the backyard. When I first renovated our tool shed into a bedroom three years ago, the sound of my keys in the industrial-strength lock would throw her into a fury, but now she barely moves when I open the door and call out her name.

She stirred when she smelled her breakfast and sat up as I laid it at the foot of her bed. I watched as she tore through the skin of her prey. Her beautiful hazel eyes were gray, lifeless, and shriveled, sitting loosely in their sockets. Red-tinted liquid oozed from the corners. Clumps of hair littered her bed, matching her newly formed bald spots. Her teeth were as white as ever and had grown longer and sharper with time. Through my research, I've found that this isn't uncommon among changed people. If you leave them to their own devices, their top teeth can even grow through their lower jaw, like a rodent who hasn't been chewing on enough wood.

When she was done eating, I tried to wipe some of the meat and spit from her mouth, but she lunged forward and grabbed at my wrist. The chains kept her from doing any real damage, but her grip was so strong it's already started forming a bruise. I spent the

rest of my morning doing the usual shed cleaning: replacing the padding on the back wall so she doesn't bash her head open during one of her fits, putting our wedding photos back on the nightstand, and, of course, dealing with the hair situation.

Sometimes, it feels like we've been living this way forever, like I never knew her before she changed. I try to remind myself how it felt to wake up next to her every day, to eat breakfast with her, to watch movies together. I try to cherish my memories of the life we had instead of allowing grief to take hold of me. But when I see her like this, I wonder if she's still there, or if I'm just taking care of a reanimated husk.

After I finished doing her hair, I took the opportunity to inspect her body. She's recently started peeling back her skin, leaving long, crusted strips of it stuck to the rug. Her body can't heal wounds anymore, so I have to give her fresh bandages almost every day. Today was no exception.

10  
After I finished cleaning, it was time to document my morning. I have a blog dedicated to caring for your changed ones. People come for advice, to share tips and tricks, or to share their grief. I snapped a few pictures of my progress this morning, and of my new bruises. The people needed a realistic portrayal of this process, and I wanted to show it to them. We've learned a lot about changed ones, but there's so much the public still doesn't understand. I don't want future generations to learn from trial and error the way we did.

My blog started blowing up this year. Sponsorships come in from meat distributors and specialized shops that sell protective equipment, and I was even on the local news. It was nice of them to think of me, but I don't do it for the money. People like that make me sick.

For the past three years, companies have been popping out of the woodwork offering snake oil and miracle cures. Televangelists stack their audiences with actors in horror-movie makeup, writhing on the ground, pretending to be reverted. They say that if you pray enough, and give them enough money, your changed ones can be saved too. Every day articles come out touting new evidence

that says changed ones can still feel and think, but when I look into them, I never find any real sources. I want my wife back, but I refuse to fall for their tricks, and I don't want my readers to fall for them, either. Still, I need money to live, and to keep her comfortable, so I've been taking the sponsorships. Some people can juggle taking care of their changed ones with their day jobs, but I can't bear the thought of leaving her alone all day with a stranger I hired online, or worse, a local teenage babysitter.

After posting my piece, I found myself looking at past entries. Early on, I debated the morality of what I was doing, if I was hurting my wife by chaining her up, if it wouldn't be more humane to put her out of her misery like so many others had after the Big Change. And looking back at the pictures of her, I see why I couldn't. She looked exactly like herself. Auburn hair with no bald spots, beautiful, plump eyes with no red ooze, regularly shaped teeth; she even had some of her old mannerisms. She used to be a dancer. Ballet, hip-hop, interpretive; you name it, she did it. When we were dating, she even convinced me to take classes with her. I remember going into the basement one night after the change, before I built the shed. I found her standing there, balancing on one foot, arms above her head. She was wobbly, and her face looked as dazed as ever, but her body was trying its best to replicate familiar movements. After the initial shock and anguish wore off, I started recording her and posted it online, desperate for answers. Comments and messages came flooding in, telling me about their experiences with their changed ones: mothers miming the act of chopping vegetables, fathers playing nearly perfectly when given their old guitar, little sisters playing with their favorite dolls. And for the first time since she changed, I didn't feel so alone.

That was when I knew there was something to be done, a community to be made. It was a scary time to be alive, and an even scarier time to be dying. The dead were reanimating so fast, it was hard to tell they had died in the first place. It happened indiscriminately; to the young and the old, the healthy and the sick, to those bitten and those who died in car accidents. I wanted

to help people the same way all those messages had helped me. So, I dove headfirst into documentation, writing down and preserving everything that happened to my wife. I found hundreds of people who were just like me, each with their own unique experiences and knowledge to share. I even started corresponding with a teenage girl whose parents both changed during the first wave. She still lived with them, all alone. She told me all about her struggles, and, feeling worried and protective, I helped her in any way I could, be it with advice, or by sending her extra money to keep food on the table. Today, she planned to celebrate her parents' anniversary. I sent her some cash to buy them steak.

In the evening, I heated up a TV dinner and watched the news. Ever since it opened, the “zombie diner” a few towns over has been consistently making headlines. It’s a 1950s style drive-in, with an all changed staff. The person who runs it once asked me for advice on the best ways to build a safe and comfortable room for your changed ones. It made me feel better about the exploitative concept of the restaurant; as long as they have some sense of care and respect for the changed ones they’re in charge of, I won’t report them to the Changed Rights Organization. Even though he did kind of feel like a creep.

My wife and I used to eat the same dessert together every night after dinner: two scoops of ice cream with chocolate syrup and sprinkles. She can’t eat it anymore, but I still make it for myself and eat it in the shed with her. Tonight, when I went in to eat with her, I saw something I hadn’t seen in years. She had managed to sit up on the bed, stretch her chains to their maximum length, and was holding her arms above her head. A low droning came from her throat, rhythmic and hoarse. She was dancing.

## II

You’re awakened by a loud thud coming from your living room. No doubt your family is making a mess. You sit up and stretch your aching body, wondering what they’ve broken this time. You’ve tried to discipline them, but it never works. They’re the same as when they were alive—disobedient and irritating.

They're nothing like your employees. They listen, they learn, they follow directions. The usual images come to mind: your assistant lounging on the bed in nothing but a pink apron, her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders. She's always been your favorite, and even though she's missing a few parts due to belligerent customers (they got what was coming to them), she's still your best worker.

As you get ready for work, you hear pots and pans clanking together in the kitchen. You grab the long, black baton from your bedside table. You regularly use electric shocks on your employees, and it works just fine, but your family's hell-bent on resisting your attempts at re-education, so you've gone back to basics.

As you walk out of your apartment, you glance at your wife and daughter, now twitching on the floor. Same as when they were alive: they didn't listen, they didn't learn.

At the diner, you release your employees from their cages. Their weak frames shuffle away from you, bones cracking with each movement. You turn on their shock collars with your phone and give them a warning shock. Their bodies fall to the floor as you turn away from them, preparing for your favorite part of the day.

Your assistant doesn't need a cage. After searching through blogs for inspiration and corresponding with a few knowledgeable users, you turned a small office into her private room. This is where you find her every morning, lying chained to the bed (one still needs to take precautions) in her nightgown, beautiful as ever. Before she changed, she was your star employee. You used to watch her work, paying special attention to the way her blonde hair bounced when she walked, how she smiled at customers, and how shapely she looked in her uniform.

When you became the first man to open a business with a staff of all changed employees, you knew she had to be one of them. The business wasn't going to be easy; the Changed Rights Organization was already breathing down your neck about working conditions, and daily protests had begun on your property long before construction had. To succeed, you needed

her at your side. Of course, she was still alive at the time, but that was a quick fix. You'll remember that night forever—the sound of her voice, the feeling of her neck in your hands, the adrenaline flowing through your bodies, each for entirely different reasons. And now, not only was she still your star employee, but she was yours. You pulled her uniform out from the closet and began undoing her chains. At the beginning, she fought you, but she quickly learned from her mistakes. Now she sits, docile, as you undress her, running your hands over her pale body to check for anything that requires attention.

14      Around a year ago, a group of rowdy teenagers had come to your establishment to gawk at your employees. You understood the impulse—it was an innovative business model, and it naturally attracted tourists. But these boys, drunk and aggressive, grabbed baseball bats from the back of their pickup truck and bashed in your employees' skulls. When you saw one of them cornering your assistant, half of her leg torn off in his hand, rage overtook you. Of course, you were still a businessman at heart, and you were careful to preserve the boys as best as you could. After all, you needed to replace half a dozen employees, and their physiques would work well for the more labor-intensive tasks. Your assistant lost an eye and a few fingers in the fight, but you've done your best to keep her in good shape since then.

She would  
never hurt  
you, and you  
would never  
hurt her.

She doesn't work with customers anymore, and instead stays with you, safe and sound. She's your inspiration, your everything. You can't risk losing any more of her. You've been doing research on the best ways to preserve people who have changed. You love everything about your assistant, even the rotten parts, but you know she's a ticking clock, and you want to keep it running for as long as possible. You hold out a piece of raw meat, and she comes closer, baring her teeth. You grab her

face in your hands before she can get it, stroking her cheeks. Her remaining eye, which usually floats blankly around the room, shows a flash of recognition as it stares into yours. She backs away from you without taking the offering.

At the end of another successful day, you close up shop and corral your workers back into their cages. You don't want to go home tonight, to deal with your wife and daughter destroying your apartment. Their disgusting faces make you sick. Luckily for you, your assistant's bed is built for two. After you put her back in her nightgown, you join her on the pink satin sheets, not bothering to chain her up. She would never hurt you, and you would never hurt her. You love each other. It doesn't matter that she flinches from your touch. It doesn't matter that you can see liquid pooling in her empty eye socket. It does matter, however, that when you kiss her, she bites into your tongue and rips it out of your head.

Blood fills your mouth as she pushes you down onto the bed. You hear the click of her cuffs and feel cold metal pressing into your wrists. You can't believe she would act so disobediently after all your training sessions. Did all the work you put in mean nothing to her? She's on top of you now, holding down your legs with her dead weight. You're unable to fight as she towers over you, hungry and angry. She releases a blood curdling scream, and when you look at her, you don't see the face of the girl you love; you see the face of a monster.

### III

"Mom, Dad, I'm home."

A teenage girl walked into her cold, dark house. A man and a woman, chained to a loveseat in front of a coffee table, rocked their heads from side to side, not noticing her or each other. She kissed them on the forehead before walking to the kitchen to unpack her lunchbox. It was six o'clock on a Sunday, and the girl had just gotten off work. She was tired, but excited, because today is her parents' wedding anniversary, and she had a big night planned for the three of them.

"But first," she thought, "Some business."

The girl grabbed her worn schoolbag from the dining room table and brought it out to the living room.

“Tomorrow is parent-teacher conference day. But don’t worry, I got excuses for you. All you need to do is sign this.”

She walked over and placed a pen in the man’s hand. His teeth gnashed at her, hungry, but the restraints held him back. As he lurched forward, he involuntarily scribbled on the paper being held underneath his hand. The girl backed away, satisfied, knowing she never would have gotten away with this before they changed. The man released a scream so loud she worried the neighbors might hear.

“I know, I know, but if I don’t bring in a signed note, I’ll get in trouble. And if I get in trouble, they’ll visit and try to take you away.”

The woman groaned, licking her lips at the sight of the girl standing in front of her.

“I have all A’s anyway, so you don’t have to worry about it, okay?”

16  
Wanting to finish her last bit of homework before doing anything else, the girl took a seat at the coffee table and grabbed a textbook from her bag. When her parents changed three years ago, she was thirteen years old. Now a sophomore in high school, she felt like she’d done as good a job as she could. She taught herself to drive the family minivan, she got a part-time job at a local fast-food restaurant so she could at least pay some of the bills, and she’d managed to keep people from knowing anything about her parents. It wasn’t easy, and she had to damage their reputations to convince people that no, they weren’t dead, they just didn’t want to go to your housewarming party because they don’t like you, but it worked well enough. She stared at her textbook and chewed on her eraser.

“Dad, do you know how to solve this?”

She held the book out to the man, who managed to grab ahold of the page and tear it. The girl pulled the book back fast, checking the damage. The page was split almost in half, but it was still attached to the spine.

“I guess you never did like math.”

She did the rest of her work in silence, listening to the labored breathing and occasional groans of the man and the woman sitting in front of her. When she was younger, they scared her. She’d huddle in the corner of the room as she watched them spasm, straining as hard as they could against the frayed ropes she’d managed to tie around them. But she was a teenager now, and she’d gotten used to their jerky movements and outbursts. Plus, she’d gotten better at choosing restraints.

After finishing her assignment, she made a special pasta dish. The recipe had been hand-written by her mother, and she’d eaten it a hundred times. Her mother used to sing when she cooked, usually some dramatic rendition of a show tune. Sometimes her dad would join in, and they’d waltz around the kitchen until dinner burned.

The bubbling of boiling water brought her back to reality. She was crying into the pasta. She furiously wiped her eyes and removed the pot from the heat.

“That’s just great. Really, perfect.”

She didn’t understand why she kept having these outbursts. Her life was fine. Sure, it was unconventional, but her parents were still here, which is something a lot of her peers couldn’t say. She’d seen how devastated her friends were when their parents had changed. The initial military intervention had killed most of them and captured the rest for testing. It wasn’t until the Changed Rights Organization was founded and started campaigning to let people do what they choose with their changed ones that it became normal to keep your family with you after their deaths. But for a lot of people, the damage was done. People stayed with family members or moved out on their own when they could. Everyone else had been taken by the state, and she’d never heard from them again. She was lucky that didn’t happen to her, that she was still living in her childhood home. Her extended family hadn’t bothered to check up on them, and she didn’t have the money to go somewhere by herself. Plus, all her stuff was here. If you think about it, it was a sweet arrangement. She never got grounded,

she never had to ask permission to go out, and she didn't have a curfew. A lot of people would kill for this kind of set up. So why did it feel so empty?

When she was done with the pasta, she grabbed the raw steaks she'd bought from the fridge and hid them behind her back. She forced herself to smile.

"I have a surprise for you guys!"

Smelling the succulent treats, they began to growl, and when the girl pulled the meat from behind her back, they flew into hysterics. Suddenly they looked less like her parents and more like angry dogs.

She placed the unwrapped steaks in her parents' hands and then sat down to eat her own meal. The three ate together, the man and the woman ripping at the cold meat, and the girl slowly eating her pasta.

"You know, Mom, this doesn't taste as good as it did when you made it. I wish you could tell me your secret."

The woman didn't reply. Her pointed teeth dug deeper into her food. A rogue chunk of meat flew from the man's mouth and into the girl's hair. She picked it out.

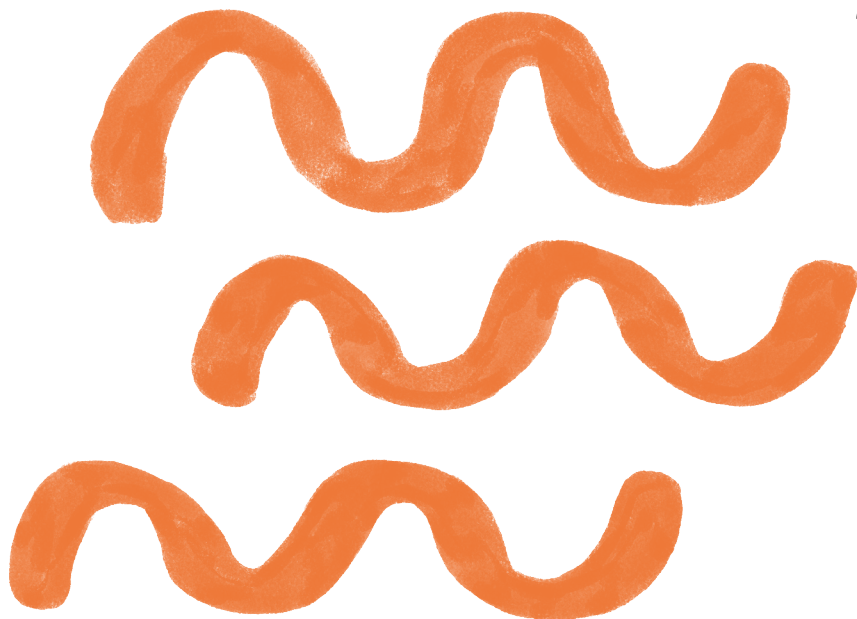
"I'm glad you guys like them. They weren't cheap, you know?"

Her life wasn't sustainable, and she knew it. Her parents looked different, they sounded different, they smelled different. They were decomposing, and she didn't know what to do about it. At the school library, she'd researched how to take care of your changed ones. She'd asked for advice on a few blogs, but the most she'd gotten back, aside from the occasional twenty bucks from adults concerned about how she was living, was that she was doing the right thing. But right for whom? It certainly wasn't right for her, a sixteen-year-old forced to live with her two undead parents. And she knew her parents wouldn't have wanted this either, for

Suddenly  
they looked  
less like her  
parents and  
more like  
angry dogs.

any of them. When she looked for an answer, she came up blank. So, she bought them raw meat, packed moldy bread in her school lunches, lied to everyone she knew, and worked her ass off at a job that paid her next to nothing, because she had no other choice. She wasn't going to abandon her parents. They dedicated their lives to raising her, so the least she could do was dedicate some of hers to taking care of them.

She came back from her emotional spiral to more tears. She brought her eyes up from her plate and saw her parents looking at her in silence. The woman cocked her head to the side, and the man let out a soft noise that resembled his old voice. For a moment, she saw the man and the woman's fingers lace together. The girl wiped her eyes and said the only thing she could think of: "happy anniversary."



# Galatea

*Winner of the Pittman Prize for Prose*

*By Ruby Siegel*

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*Pygmalion and Galatea*, Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1890

## I

You exist in a state of semi-consciousness. You do not possess any memories. Your being is solid and yet eerily empty, does not undulate with any sign of life except for your secret tendrils of thought. Even those are hazy. You keep them hidden, for your marble mouth cannot part to form the words with which to speak. The only voice you have heard is your Creator's. Your unblinking eyes drink in His golden ringlets and hooked nose. You are permeated with the intensity of tempered desire. Yours? His? You cannot tell. You can, however, describe how the heat of His virgin hand affects clay, leaving her supple and pliable and ready. You know the strength hidden within marble's translucent veins. Even plaster parts before His touch, walls crumbling around her as He accesses her hollow depths. And you? You have taken many forms. Yes, you exist in semi-consciousness ...

## II

You know of the unclean women. Your Creator has spoken at great length and with great conviction about the plight that has befallen idyllic Cyprus. Conversely, you know you are pure and classical, unlike the daughters of Propoetus. The sun sets outside the studio as the festival day comes to a close. He must be making His way back now. You are contemplating the passing of another day when a blinding light envelops you, smelling of tender wild rose. When the presence fades away, your world has forever shifted on its axis, for Aphrodite's divine breath has infused your body with life. The first breath you ever take is perfection. Your lips part slightly; your bare breasts rise and fall. Air, thick with salt, rushes into your body, invigorating you. You shudder with delight at the newness of it. Your carefully styled curls wave tantalizingly in the breeze. Your body is infused with a pleasant warmth. You hear the door bang open. The studio is alight with fiery beams of light that flood through the windows. Enveloped in the golden gleam stands a figure. *Oh, you hear. You are beauty embodied. Welcome, my darling Galatea.* Yes, the first breath is perfection.

### III

For months that will remain your only taste of freedom. As you draw the second breath, His hands set upon you. They are strong hands, demanding hands, and you do not yet know to cry out or to draw away. His chisel is sharp, carving chunks of you away. With each cut, He leans in close and whispers that He is achieving perfection. You thought you were already perfect in his eyes. Your face is inexplicably damp. Your thighs, once alabaster, now run red. Yes, for an eternity that first breath was your only taste of freedom, but you resolve to not let it be your last.

### IV

Might this be all it means to be human? Standing on this dais, craning your stiff neck to gaze longingly at a small sliver of sky? The blinds are drawn, and your lover is your God. Your throat is coated in plaster dust. It chokes you, consumes you. Your delicate ivory limbs are heavy and unwieldy. They feel like blocks of stone. You inquire about the world beyond this small room. You do not receive any answers. You close your eyes and let the encroaching darkness consume your vision. Yes, He might tell you that this is all it means to be human, but you can no longer accept that as the truth.

### V

He named you Galatea. A beautiful act from a small, cruel man who never loved you. Not truly. Any kind man should know better than to keep a woman confined. Your eyes dart around the shadowed space as you ensure the way ahead is clear. The room is quiet. The moon shines, a sliver now, but you have watched her for many waxings and wanings and know she will soon begin anew. Yes, He named you Galatea, but that is the extent of Pygmalion's power over you. In the soft dark, your footsteps whisper on the floor of the studio as you leave your pedestal behind.

# a secret my body keeps

*By Zoe London*

not quite secret from myself,  
a feeling outside the reach of articulation  
occupies the same fate  
as that which is unknown.  
I've nothing to gain from concealment,  
rather, if I cannot put it into words  
when spoken outside of myself,  
it will remain obscured  
even in the quiet of my mind.  
a companionable secret that carries no shame,  
for shame is not why I fall silent  
but fear of misunderstanding,  
and this silence is not proof of nothingness  
or I would not hear it so clearly—  
and it is not silence that keeps me from  
understanding.  
so if my eyes never speak to yours  
and my poetry never gains meter,  
I trust this to spill from my fingertips  
and pour from my pulse,  
as though my body could find the words.

# uninvited party guest

*By Zoe London*

they aren't my friends.

I would describe them more like a housemate,  
or a family member that you didn't grow up around;  
they are unsettling, unpredictable, never welcome,  
but you can't deny the familiarity in their presence.

despite their innate belonging,

in lieu of an invitation, the roles they play  
from scene to scene are never fixed—

you find that one always attempts to take the lead.

together, they are a cast laying siege  
to their director.

unwelcome guests are difficult to send home

so learning to appreciate them, like art that hangs crooked,

makes the walls seem brighter already

in their assortment of mismatched decorations.

# River of Dawn

By Taylor Morgan

I noticed signs of the river in my mother when the smell of her changed. My own mother, whose usual fragrance was of vanilla bourbon, candied ginger, and nutmeg reeked of fish and other pesky things that humans dump into the rush of water. Imagine my surprise. My eyebrows reached my hairline when she stepped from the shower, dried her hair, and still smelled so different.

I said, “Mom, what happened? I’ve noticed that lately—”

My statement went unfinished, because she responded simply: “I have decided that when I pass, I will become the river.”

River of Dawn, the river nearest our home, was a walk through the woods. Sunrises over the river seem to rise from its shoreline. I once had a rope swing down there, long since washed away in the flood of 2008.

I stared at my mother. “The river? Why?” She could become anything else. A cloud. A blade of grass. The tree in our front yard. I wished she’d choose the tree in our front yard, a bald cypress that’s been growing since I was a babe. I can see it through the living room window, just waiting for her to eagerly claim its body as hers.

But her mind was made up. “The river,” she said. “What else could I be that would allow me to wrap my arms around you?”

*Trees have arms and don’t smell*, I thought, but then quickly remembered the many times I plummeted into the dashing current. The river water cradled me and carried me to its shore as the fish nipped my childish feet.

“But do you really have to reek of it?” I asked. I was considering opening a window.

She only shook her head. “It’s not by choice, my love. Not when I am getting so close. How else would the river prepare me?”

The signs of her transformation began to mount.

Then it was her hair. Always wet, never fresh-smelling, or dry. It constantly dripped all over the place. I sponged away the puddles because with her bad hip, she couldn't.

The constant wetness annoyed her, somewhat, too. She kept a towel draped around her shoulders to soak up the dampness. Still. Drip, drip, drip.

There were days when, after she emerged from the toilet or brought me fresh banana bread, I would be awestruck by her siren-like quality. She was a creature of the water, brought here to seduce men and teach girls like me how to rise above them. I admired her for it.

Once, when she was blowing her nose, I thought of her transformation and teared up. When she finished blowing into the tissue, she shot me a furtive look and asked, "What's wrong? Cake too stale, honey? I'm sorry, I forgot to cover it with the tin-foil last night—"

The morning  
it happened, I  
couldn't find  
her anywhere  
in the house,  
and I knew.



And I said, “No,” and shooed her off, unable to find the words. “Just watch your program. I’m fine.” But I was not fine. My mother was becoming the river.

On a particularly bad night of rain and storms, something loud banged on the roof. The next morning, I went outside to look at the house. And there it was. A rope swing. Maybe not mine, but somebody’s. From her porch swing, Mom pointed a gnarled finger and said, “Better string that up so you can come visit me!”

The last sign was this: fish for dinner. All the time.

I wanted to complain; I really did. One can enjoy salmon and tilapia only for so long. Salmon salad. Herb-glazed tilapia. Rainbow trout on a bed of rice. One day, the fish was really fancy: tilapia smothered in a creamy shrimp sauce. I grinned and ate it like a champ. *Yes, Mom. Oh, it’s delicious, Mom.* My smile was of a paid actor. Then, after our meals we would sit in silence and watch her programs.

On the night I knew would be the last, I took her bony fingers in hand and squeezed hard. My palm was a little sweaty, but she never said anything, just squeezed my palm back. She might have been afraid, or maybe incredibly ready, and was telling me so. It was so hard to tell.

*I was afraid.*

The morning it happened, I couldn’t find her anywhere in the house, and I knew. I wept for her bad hip and crooked hands before summing up the courage to change into, well, nothing. That’s why you would have seen me naked, walking through the muddy woods, to the rope swing I had lugged down to the bank and tied to a tree above the swift current. The branch wobbled as I stood on the tire and swung out over the water.

I stared at the River of Dawn. Dawn, my mother’s name. I continued to swing out above it. And then, I let go. My mother caught me, just as she always had.

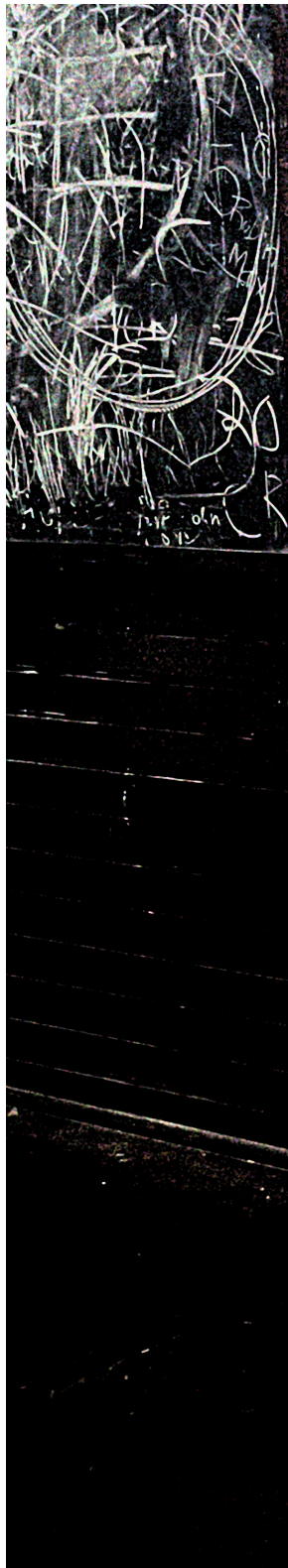
# Through the Grapevine

*By Billy Bascom*

*Through the Grapevine* is a collection of photographs I shot to accompany my senior capstone entitled “The Grapevine.” I styled all my models for the shoot and shot all the photographs myself. My partner Valentine Rodriguez and I edited them together.

This photoshoot was something I had been mulling in my mind for months before its inception, imagining girls in stately uniforms in precarious scenarios. I am enthralled at the convergence of femininity with corruption, rage, and competition. These photographs represent the intersection of the innocent feminine with the dangers that lie beneath the imposing outer shell.

Many thanks to my models: Alena Harper, Ruby Hewerdine, Em Louraine, Valentine Rodriguez, and McKenna Williams.









# Host

*By Jack Hayes*

Here is a body.

All great stories start with a body, don't they? Nothing more compelling. The universal catalyst. A body struggling, a body loved, a body cold. War, romance, mystery, none could exist without the body.

But this is no war, no romance, and no grand mystery. If any of those things existed in her life, I've missed them by a few days.

The body—her body, let's be a little more proper about it—could easily be overlooked, mistaken for trash dumped on the roadside. Especially in the snow. It piles up on the shoulder, more ice and filthy slush than powder. There's only a thin blanket of it over her body, but anyone not peering too closely into the ditch is unlikely to spot her.

There are little crystals of snow clinging to her dark hair. Angelic.

It's all so soft out here. The horizon is undefined, blurred into white and gray and stretching out flat to the sky. Endless fields of unknown crops have gone to sleep for the winter. Damp, rotten stalks jut out of the snow. They shift and rustle in the biting wind.

She's curled in on herself, twisted onto her stomach. Ribs cracked, soft organs ruptured, hemorrhaged. This warped fetal position has come too late for protection. It only serves to make her look more like roadkill, like a small animal that never knew what hit it. But she's big enough to have known, big enough to feel herself dying.

Her jeans are dark and wet with melted snow. Mud stains the cuffs, clogs up the treads of her sneakers. One of them is untied.

Maybe she'd been bent over to tie her shoe when the car struck. Or she might not have noticed the loose laces before she crested the hill and crumpled like papier-mâché over the hood of

a distracted driver.

Back roads like these, nobody cares what the number on the sign says. The speed limit is whatever it takes to get you where you're going.

She's been indelicately removed from the road that killed her. Dragged, kicked squeamishly with the heel of a boot, pushed off the road somehow in a midnight panic. Someone frantic, swearing under their breath, sweating in the cold air and feeling their heart pound like hers never will again. Searching her body might yield a clue or two. A shoe print, a smudge of car paint no longer produced. I wouldn't know; I never watched those crime shows. I don't think I did, anyway.

It doesn't matter. So many little details that don't matter anymore.

What does matter is that she's here. Face down, not so accusatory that way. Maybe wearing the expression of a fish served whole and staring back at you. Her hairline matted with what could be blood, long congealed, or could be muck, drying in clumps.

What's certainly blood is what's seeped up the sides of her coat, up from her chest, where her ribs caved in. All mashed up under there. A frozen soup of organs.

The coat doesn't look warm. Too thin, covered in a pitiful excuse for fleece. Frozen, stiff fingers stick out from the over-long, hand-me-down sleeves. Dirt caked under her chewed-down nails, revealed through chipped, pink polish.

There's a bag down the hill. I can't see it well from the road. It might be hers. No way of knowing, but it feels right. Her book fell open, face down in the snow. Probably unreadable now. Smudged and wet.

It's sad, milk-carton sad, fluttering-tattered-missing-poster sad. Who knows who she is, how she ended up here, who's waiting on her?

I don't. I'm not even sure who I am.

I can't remember if it's been long since I had a body of my own. It could have been just yesterday that the cold stung my face and

reddened my cheeks. It could have been decades since I walked alone along a road and shivered. Centuries since gooseflesh, since any flesh at all.

But I've been wandering. There's only that to do. Blankly. Without purpose or destination.

Drifting here to there, fading more and more like an old photograph every hour. I've stopped noticing people and faces, only movement and tall telephone poles. Waltzing through blooming trees, beams of sunlight whose warmth escapes me, nudging up against and falling through rolling fog. A kaleidoscope of dull recollections. No one place sticks in my mind.

I remember the ocean, but not if I was there before I became this. When I imagine it, I imagine it cold and endless. The world has become cold and endless, lapping at me, eroding time and memory.

I stopped for her. That's something else I don't remember, stopping. One moment I'm in the rustling of dead branches, the next I'm staring down at this flimsy, crumpled body.

Did I ever look like this?

I try to picture my face. The sharp winter wind scatters its features.

I grasp for her.

Without an arm, without form, almost as though my thoughts alone shape into fingers and a palm and a bloodless wrist that finds her flesh in the snow. I know it must be cold and waxy.

Something tugs me down.

I sink. As a stone in the ocean, I sink. I melt out into the body. Stretching, I extend my thought-fingers out into her real-fingers and wiggle them, like trying to slip into a glove.

And there's the cold. At the tips of my-her fingers I feel it unimaginably, all at once. Painful. Like I've just shaken myself from numbness and the pins and needles have begun their stabbing. It starts to race up my-her arm as it settles into place. Joints, clavicle, ice water splashing up veins and pouring down my-her flesh as our bodies tangle.

There's no grand revelation of new life, my-her heart remains

inert, her-my lungs draw no breath, still dead muscle. It's all still dead. But as I coil inside her, the body, her body, my body, our body, begins to move.

The half of her I've slipped over one shoulder like a nightgown stirs first. I twitch my fingers. Her fingers curl in toward her palm. It's stiff. Difficult. Even harder to work the arm. Maybe I've forgotten how.

But, by some miracle, I push, and heft the upper half of her body off the ground. The rest lolls down, her right side still collapsed, her head drooping from the neck. Her-my arm shakes from effort.

I shove my other arm in. It goes quicker this time. The cold isn't as biting. I'm getting the hang of it.

My form shrugs into hers like a jacket. I hear—and that's new, I realize, I've had my head underwater and only now does it return crisp and clear—bones crackling, protesting. I ignore it. The pain swells, deliciously there and real, but distant as the shoreline.

Legs, now. There's no resistance. Easy as riding a bike. Did I ever learn how to ride a bike? Who taught me? Who taught her? I bend her-my knees, get them bent over me as I push our body up out of the muddy, gory sludge she had lain in for days.

It's wet. It clings to her-my hands and squishes between our fingers. Tactile sensation, dull, but still there.

I fall into her completely. My features mold into hers like softened plastic, pressing into every curve and angle. A thin face, chapped, bloodless lips, eyes cloudy and sluggish. We blink and I see true darkness for the first time in what could be a millennium. Our neck aches. I lift our head.

Sunlight. Brighter and harsher than anything, peeking through the quilt of clouds just long enough to be the first thing to hit our eyes. We squint. It stings.

As we begin to steady ourselves and stand, I feel the settling of ruptured organs within our body cavity. I press our hand to our stomach. It's uneven and lumpy. Skin is stretched taut in places where bone threatens to break its surface. But the brief pain of motion is already gone. Just a shock to dead nerves that have gone back to sleep.

The winter sun is still almost blinding as we stagger upright to our feet. In an instinct that I can't remember, the last time I acted on, I raise our hand to our face to shield our eyes. Everything is a little blurry, seen through a film.

We take a step. I take a step.

The snow crunches under our foot.

Another step.

In the distance, I make out the silhouettes of spindly radio towers, concrete buildings, homes. The road stretches out toward this promise like a thin ribbon. An endless horizon meets it, heather gray and brighter every moment. A breeze dances past us and flutters our damp hair.

Step.

Our arms dangle at our sides. Her mouth hangs open, our dry tongue stuck to the roof of it. Thick blood congealed there tastes rotten and sweet. I spit it out, a great glob of the stuff, and taste the coming snow in the air instead.

I remember the ocean. Cold and endless. I remember the rocky shore, slick and dark. I remember nothing else, and don't care to.

Step forward. Dead tissue clogs our veins. No breath hangs frozen in the air.

The festering girl climbs the hill.

We stand in the road, arms outstretched. The morning is still as a wake. Sweet, distant birdsong cuts through the utter silence, not hopeful, just inevitable. Birds will sing. The sun will break over the horizon. A body will lie in the snow.

And now I smile. Using our bloodstained teeth and receded gums and dry lips nearly black with cold, I smile, with the uncomfortable countenance of someone who has forgotten how. A noise hisses out between our clenched teeth. More a rattling of dry reeds than a laugh. But the wind carries it farther than I've ever gone. Then she's ever gone.

What a beautiful day to be alive.

***What a  
beautiful  
day to  
be alive.***



# Interview with Carrie Koepke

*By Mads Christiansen*

**Mads Christiansen:** What is the story behind Skylark Bookstore?

**Carrie Koepke:** Once upon a time when I was younger, Columbia had a thriving multi-bookshop scene. I worked at one of those shops. Alex George, my colleague, moved to Columbia while several were still around. Things changed, including the rise of Amazon and other specific difficulties for local bookshops. In Alex's role as both an author and the director of the Unbound Book Festival, he saw the need and desire for a return of a new book-focused independent bookshop and reached out to me as someone with industry experience and knowledge. It was an easy yes, a wonderful partnership, and within less than a year we opened Skylark Bookshop.

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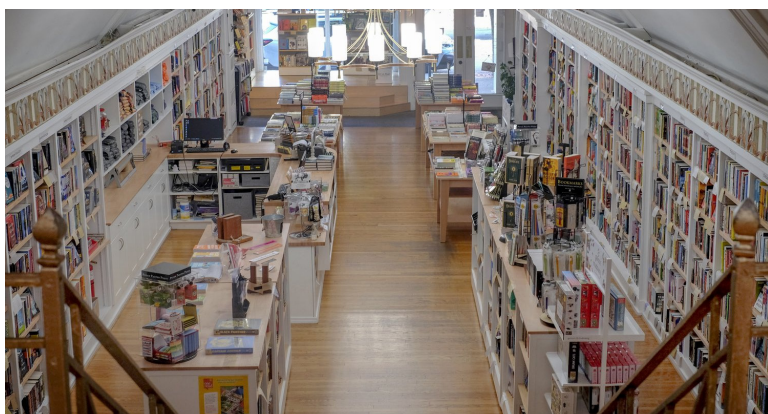
**MC:** Why the name “Skylark”?

**CK:** We tossed around a plethora of names for the shop, but nothing felt right until Alex called me and said “Skylark.” The proposal reflected the song “Skylark” by Hoagy Carmichael and the poem “To a Skylark” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, but for me it was more. My daughter, and partner in all things literary, is Skylark K. Skylark Bookshop holds so many layers of meaning to us both.

**MC:** What is it like being an independent “indie” bookstore owner? What have you done either before or during to prepare yourself for a job like this?

**CK:** I had eight years of bookshop experience, as well as various other industry experience, including reading submissions for a literary agency. Alex has written several novels and founded Unbound. Together, we brought different skills and experiences to the endeavor. I also feel like every other job I've had has lent applicable knowledge. The book industry is unique in many ways, which allows for applicable knowledge to be gleaned from a multitude of sources.

**MC:** You're the manager of Skylark and Alex George is the official owner. How did you and Alex meet?



**CK:** Alex and I knew one another vaguely through the vibrant local writing community. Once we began working together, it was clear that our partnership and friendship had been waiting for us all along.

**MC:** How do you two split up responsibilities for the store?

**CK:** We each bring different strengths to the shop and lean into those strengths.

**MC:** What jobs have you found that helped give you skills to run Skylark?

**CK:** Skills can be acquired in the most unlikely of places. I have applied knowledge gained from running a youth gymnastics program, working in a biochemist lab, reading submissions for a literary agency, and more. We intentionally seek staff with experience and knowledge outside of our own to increase our strength.

**MC:** Does Skylark sell any of Alex's books?

**CK:** Yes!

**MC:** Would you be comfortable naming a few titles?

**CK:** *The Paris Hours: A Novel* and *Setting Free the Kites*.

**MC:** What is your book selection process like? Does Skylark have any specific niches that you market or specific areas that you find your patrons interested in? What else does Skylark sell?

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**CK:** We spend a great deal of time pouring through upcoming titles. We read advanced copies, talk to publishers, and carefully consider our customers and what we think they will want to read. There are hundreds of thousands of books published every year in the US alone. While we are invested in our selection process, we also know that it is impossible to have every book a customer might want in our limited space. Therefore, we order titles by request. We are what is called a "general" bookshop, which means we cover fiction and nonfiction of all types for all ages. We are especially proud of our poetry section, which is significant and carefully curated. We consult with experts with various expertise to ensure we are doing the best job we possibly can. We pay attention to what our customers want and need and adjust our inventory focus accordingly.

**MC:** What does Skylark do to connect with patrons? Do you do other things than just selling books?

**CK:** We believe that we should never stop working to earn

our place in this community. That means continued events, outreach, donations, and other community facing experiences. We conceived of the bookshop as a unique place in the community and do everything we can to live up to that.

**MC:** There seems to be a renaissance with indie bookstores after so many were closing because of the pandemic and the oligopoly happening with Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc. What are your thoughts on this? What can people do to continue to help indie bookstores stay in the game?

**CK:** Columbia and its residents understand the importance and value of shopping locally, and we are very grateful for that. Shopping in locally owned stores keeps tax dollars local, encourages unique and diverse businesses to thrive, and helps every community highlight their unique charms. Helping indie bookstores is easy: buy books from us and come and attend our events! We also ship across the country and have an amazing online store.

**MC:** Are you able to support yourself and your family solely as an indie bookstore? My teacher is also curious about profit margins, if you are comfortable sharing. How many people do you employ?

**CK:** There is a joke, that sort of isn't a joke, that no one goes into bookselling to make money. You won't find any other industry where the prices are predetermined and literally printed on the items. Margins are slim. It isn't easy. But it is worth it.

**MC:** What advice do you have for creators in this current day and age? What are your thoughts on the fears of AI taking over creative industries such as books?

**CK:** We are unique because we are not algorithms. Creators have the same advantages. Tap into your hearts, souls, and wonderfully unique minds.

# Mother Sunday

*By Baylee Johnson*

Bleary-eyed mornings, she rises at 6 a.m.,  
every Sunday is tobacco and a tired amen.

Matron of the mundane,  
mother of uninspired lives,  
the patron of blue Mondays and  
despondent little wives.

Flossing printed white teeth 'til they bleed,  
a hull of melancholy boils underneath.

The rib cage worn like a fashioned corset or  
the neck of a glossy blue bottle,  
drinking ethical poisons full throttle.

Her fair-weather friend is only dated gin.

It's better than the lighters you'd take for a spin.

Right? That smoke—

You have told her to stop

because the yellow-tinged walls and dark plumes  
made you sneer, hack, and cough.

She would waft the miasma away with a practiced sigh,  
and some days she said she would,  
and some days, you knew she lied.

Those common baby blues were a staple  
of nursing your own cells and blood  
from cradle to ladle to a meal on the table.  
It was her veins that spiderwebbed like lavender tunnels,  
the kind you'd watch in car washes when the soap trickled down.  
It was whimsy then, but for a mother hen,  
there was no humor to keep. Not when money was thin,  
and you groveled at dismal hours,  
from weeks of sickened, fickle sleep.  
Sleep away the afternoon after prescription perusals,  
pallid skin and shallow bones and insistent refusals.  
Mother, you have permission—you can, and you may,  
retreat to slumber,  
lumber through life like a constant Sunday.



# Louis Wain's Letter

By Alena Harper



*The Bachelor Party*, Louis Wain, 1896

At first, the cats only meowed. And at first, there was only Peter. Tuxedoed Peter who wound around our legs, back when we had four. With a meow, you lifted him up. With a meow, your hand was behind his ears. With a meow, I filled up his bowl. You weren't there that day when Peter stood up on his back legs. Four becoming two, he walked away.

Then, for a while, the cats just walked around. Some sauntered down streets, while others nervously pitter-pattered their way around the cobblestone. Some floated past me so gracefully I almost said your name, before I notice the tips of their furry ears. The first time I'd seen such a thing out in public, I seemed to be the only one startled. In fact, it was me everyone seemed to be staring at. But wouldn't you have been startled too if a cat tipped his hat to you?

When the cats began to talk, I questioned my own sanity. Peter knocked on my bedroom door, because even with his new two-legged form, he was not tall enough to reach the door handle. Upon the door's opening he said, "Where is Emily?"

I told him, "You know where Emily is." He did. He was curled next to your dying body. He should know.

But he said, "Louis. How would I know where Emily is? I'm a cat." He didn't ask for you again after that.

The cats continued to walk and say, "Good morning." But each morning that passed was steadily less "good" as the one before.

It wasn't long after the cats started talking that they learned music. Winter came quick that year and the snow wet the ankles of a group of cats who walked door to door, caroling up and down

When the cats  
began to talk,  
I questioned  
my own sanity.

the street. I know this because I saw them from behind my curtained window. Do even cats chase after the indescribable and unattainable joy that Christmas brings to children who don't yet know better? Perhaps then the cats are not so different from me after all. What a scary thought that is.

The cats formed bands. I spent my Saturdays studying them. I drew them with their clarinets, winded from using too much breath from their small lungs. I drew them dropping drumsticks, before tripping themselves. I drew the hecklers tossing snowballs into an unsuspecting player's tuba. I drew them for those who can't see them. Nobody sees them. But I see them. I still see them.

After the bands, the cats realized their paws held ambition. They became harsh teachers and misbehaved students. They became judges and accused, holding court to sort out their own cat misdeeds. They went to bars to drink away the problems they couldn't solve in court. Cats were people. People were cats.

The cat-people, people-cats, started watching me last month. Really, the people had always been watching me. But now the cats, in their new people-forms, were watching me too. I tipped my hat

to them on the street, as normal—I'm normal; I'm perfectly fine—but they didn't acknowledge this. They just stared at me. As far as I know the band continued playing, but I'm not sure, as I stopped going after I was stared down for their whole set. Maybe that was their plan? They're trying to drive me out. I'm an unwanted onlooker, so they were making the sight of themselves unnerving to stop my looking. If I can't see them, they can't see me.

At least, that's what I thought, until they began to transcend form altogether. They began changing colors, their eyes wide and frantic, the static of their fur blending into the background of reality. The pupils of their eyes were red, and their fur was green, yellow, red, green, blue, yellow, orange. . . . It doesn't stop. They won't stop shifting. But I don't think they're upset. I think they know it's what I need. I need to see change and irregularity to combat the otherwise unchanging gray walls that I stare at every day now. They love me. I'm as sure of it as I am that you love me. I am happy. I am happy because everyone loves me.



# Tell Me Again

*By Ruby Siegel*

A little over two years before I was born, my mom bought a car: a two-seater convertible Mercedes. It was a total splurge, a sort of consolation prize for the fact that, try as she might, she couldn't have a child. And it did its job. It was a fun car, perfect for cruising top-down along the Pacific Coast Highway. Best of all was that there was no back seat, which meant no space for a humongous diaper bag. No back seat meant no space for a gurgling baby. No back seat meant no space for thoughts about kids. Yes, the Mercedes was perfect.

Until she drove up to visit a psychic. She was skeptical, of course. She'd grown up on a farm in rural Missouri and had never been to a psychic before, but hey, it's LA, so she gave it a shot. She didn't mention anything about herself, just sat there and listened. An hour later she was back in the car, hands shaking on the steering wheel. The psychic had told her things there was no way she could know. Except, if she was right about the rest, couldn't she be right about this? Could there really be a baby girl trying, even now, to find her? She couldn't—wouldn't—believe it, not after seven rounds of IVF and surgeries and shots. She drove home in tears.

A few months later, she got a call from a family friend whose eighteen-year-old daughter was pregnant. Knowing her desire for a child, they had immediately thought of her as the baby's potential mother.

"It's you or no one," they told her. "If you can't do it, we'll figure out a way, but we think she was meant for you."

My mom said yes. Just a few months later, a week before my mom was supposed to leave for India, she got a call in the middle of the night. Three months early and weighing only three pounds, I was born.

By the time I was seven, I was convinced that my mom was secretly Jamie Lee Curtis. The similarities were unsettling. She'd always wanted to be an actress, after all. They were the same age, had struggled with infertility, and lived in Santa Monica. What really scared me was that Jamie Lee Curtis had two adopted daughters, Ruby and Annie. My mom had me, Ruby, and my rescue dog, Annie, who I called my little sister. Freaky, right?

Now, what first introduced me to Jamie wasn't *Halloween II* or *Freaky Friday* or even *A Fish Called Wanda*, even though I've since been shown those movies by none other than my mom. No, I first knew of Jamie Lee Curtis as an author.

My mom read to me every night for most of my life. I loved mysteries and memoirs, contemporary and classic, but most of all I loved when she read children's picture books. She'd do the voices and everything! I loved *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* the most.

My mom always wanted me to know that I was loved and wanted, that adoption didn't mean I had been abandoned. Instead, it meant that my birth mom loved me enough to realize she couldn't take care of me and knew that my mom would love me to the moon and back. Mom chose me!

It was a short picture book, a five-minute read max, but on the nights we read it, I'd always be able to make bedtime stretch out for at least an hour, because I was a master at getting my mom to talk about herself, and this book always did the trick.

No surprise, it was by Jamie Lee Curtis. Her daughter asks her mom to tell her again about the night she was born, how her parents rushed to the hospital to meet their adopted daughter, and how small and fragile and perfect she was. That's why I loved *Tell Me Again*, because it felt like it was written just for me. I was the screaming baby in the NICU, the little girl in a crown sitting next to her doggy companion, the "real baby; actual size." My mom would always get

"Mom, tell me again about the night I was born."

a little teary eyed by the end, and I knew just how to capitalize on it. I'd wriggle up real close, give her a big hug, and whisper, "Mom, tell me again about the night I was born."

A couple of days ago, I sat in bed, sick. My girlfriend was curled up in a rocking chair next to me. My phone rang; it was Mom. I rolled my eyes and hit accept.

"Hey," I croaked out. "I'm sick."

"You're not sick," Mom said.

I groaned. "No, I'm literally sick. I haven't felt well all day."

"Well, you haven't been taking care of yourself," Mom pointed out, all matter of fact.

I had to physically restrain myself from ending the call. "Mom, you aren't even here. How would you know that? You don't."

"Have you exercised today, Ruby?" she asked.

"No, because I'm sick! Oh my God, will you stop?" I begged.

She changed the subject. "Well, can we at least talk about jobs? You need to figure out where you're going to work now, honey."

Silence. A sigh. Then, "I've gotta go now, Mom."

Later that night, after my girlfriend had gone to sleep, I woke up shaking with a fever. The sky had begun to lighten outside of my dorm, inky black fading into a marbled blue hue. I picked up my phone.

"Mom? I can't sleep. Tell me again about the night I was born."

# Pine

*By Em Louraine*

The water flows down on the two girls  
as they wash the day away.

One reaches across the other's lap, grasping for soap and cloth,  
her slick wrist resting on her knee.

The other girl doesn't look down,  
doesn't even notice  
that she's there for longer than necessary.

She is stretched uncomfortably in this position,  
her waist contorting in a way that her ribs protest,  
but her heart does not mind,  
does not care.

She will get used to the pain.

She knows this moment will be fleeting,  
this skin-on-skin contact.

She lathers the soap in small circles,  
the scent of lavender, sandalwood, and pine  
wafting up to their noses.

She slowly slides back again,  
letting the steam from the bath replace the space.

She asks herself, "When?"

as the drops of water run down her arms,  
creating streams and rivers in her skin.

And another part says, "Someday, maybe.  
Someday."

# Dive In

*By Julie Wiley*

In Colorado, when I was ten or eleven, and my family lived with my paternal grandma, my dad and I would often dumpster dive. He was finicky about what dumpsters he would investigate. He avoided ones outside of places that sold food. The risk of sticking your hand in moist rot was too high. We usually stuck to department store dumpsters. They threw out some interesting things.

Dumpster diving can be a surprisingly lucrative business. There was a dentist office that closed after sixty years of practice. They literally threw everything away. They tossed out dentistry tools and bags of teeth. I did not explore that dumpster with my dad; he went with my grandma's guy friend. They came back with bags of teeth. Some of the teeth had gold. They sifted through the crushed teeth. They made \$1,200 from the gold teeth and found a Cavitron (state-of-the-art teeth cleaning machine), which sold on eBay for \$2,000.

Dumpster diving was like treasure hunting. At the time, I was obsessed with pirates. This fueled my obsession. There was this one dumpster that felt like a giant treasure chest. It was behind a recently shut-down Sears. Newly shut-down places are great for dumpster diving. There was a lot of jewelry, mostly bracelets and necklaces, in this one. I popped my head in and saw a sea of silver and gold. The place we most frequented, though, was a carpet-store dumpster. They tossed out a lot of carpet samples, and sometimes a whole carpet.

My dad would stop and pick up anything wooden that was thrown out if it was not rotten. With the carpet squares and wood, he would make cat trees to make money on the side. They were actually pretty good. He likes to say he isn't creative, but building cat trees out of trash *is* creative. One time, he made a cat tree "prison" for another one of my grandma's friends. She was going to prison and happened to have cats.

# Seven Days in Symbiosis' Cradle

By Zoe London

They would be happy with a boy; they would be happy with a girl. They came to this conclusion before the delivery date, and their list of names was perfectly balanced for this reason (Alan, Amy, Bob, Betty, and so on). If someone had pressed them on it, Amos would have admitted that he wanted a girl. She might be less trouble to raise and better company for his wife. But Eden truly would have been happy with either. The important part was that it was theirs. They needed something to share.

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Eden went into labor a day early, but that wasn't a problem. They were eager for the arrival. Amos had asked if they could induce Eden a month early, in fact. "We keep bickering, Doctor," he had confided, "so you see, it really can't wait."

But the OB shook his head. He had a way of shaking his head with the force of a windmill every time Amos said something ridiculous.

"Eden is an older mother. That's not advisable if you want a healthy child."

The following month had been far from smooth sailing, but finally, Eden's water broke. Amos caught up with her at the hospital as she was beginning to crown (the life of an accountant was busy, but he arrived as punctually as he could). She was swearing, which was unusual, and she grunted as sweat matted her hair against her forehead.

"One, two, three—*push.*"

And their divine creation was born. The doctor scooped it out from between Eden's legs, and its jar of a body was translucent in

the light. Behold, unto the world! *It smelled rancid like running shoes*; Amos felt guilty for that to be his first thought about his offspring. It was smaller than he expected, too, only half full of flour and water. It would get bigger, right? The doctor screwed the top off the jar, and it started to whine and bubble up and over the sides of itself like condensation.

“Congratulations,” the doctor announced, bestowing Eden with her child. “You’ve welcomed a beautiful, healthy sourdough starter into the world.”

It wasn’t the daughter that Amos wanted. It wasn’t what Eden wanted at all.

On the first day of life, they came home from the hospital, and Eden asked, “Where should it sleep?”

Amos thought he misheard her. But sure as state income tax, when he looked up from the Monday newspaper, she was cradling their sourdough starter in the crook of her elbow. They’d secured the lid back over its head. A bit of thick, eggshell-colored liquid bubbled out from under the lid, dripping down the jar and onto her baby blue blouse. Amos wondered if it would stain.

“The nursery?” he responded, a bit irritated. “That’s what we always planned.”

“But now that we have it, it’s really not suitable for the nursery,” Eden said dismally. “It’s messy, for one thing. I bought a nice carpet for the nursery. Drapes, too—”

“*You* bought, right, I’m sure.”

“—and I can’t bear for it to ruin them. I just can’t.” She took a deep breath and said, “I think it should sleep on the kitchen counter.”

Amos nearly dropped his newspaper. “Our *child*? You’d have our child sleep in the kitchen?”

“It’s only for a few days!” Eden was evidently too loud in her exclamation; the jar whined and gurgled in her hands, and she had to rock it back and forth until it went quiet again. “Seven days,” she continued under her breath, “and then it’s old enough to go out on its own. The kitchen should be fine until then.”

Amos couldn't argue with that logic. It was only seven days, and he wanted to go back to reading his newspaper. Since he had promised himself that he would try, he fixed Eden with his warmest smile in years. He said, "At least we can clean up the mess together."

The sourdough starter spit up on Eden. She didn't smile back.

On the second day, Eden went back to the urban planning office. Too soon to return to work, maybe, but the doctor assured her that her return to normalcy would be expedited this way. Thus, Amos wandered downstairs that morning to care for his child.

It was nowhere to be found.

Amos checked in cupboards, under tables, in the fridge. He even ventured into the living room, pulling change out of couch cushions—but nothing resembling the sourdough starter. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, frozen, until he remembered the supply closet in the hallway.

He tiptoed to the closet and inched the door open. There, on the ground, sat his child. It wasn't bubbling; it only did that for Eden, which Amos didn't mind in the slightest. Rather, there was a dark sliver of fermentation at the top of its body that smelled of raw sewage.

"How did you get in here?" Amos asked. He stooped down, ducked his head under brooms and paper towels, and gingerly took the sourdough starter into his arms. He felt too vulnerable cradling the thing, so he shifted to a one-handed grasp. "If you don't watch where you're going, you'll end up locked in there. How bad would that be?"

The third and fourth days consisted of feeding, and praying for first steps, and more feeding, and no steps made. Eden screwed the child's head off—swearing it wasn't harmful once it had been

"If you don't watch where you're going, you'll end up locked in there."

two days, that's what all the parenting websites had told her—and she used a spoon to remove half of its innards from its glass body. It stretched, tawny and dense like pancake batter. Eden scooped it into a memory box for when their child had flown the nest, at which time they would need something sentimental to remember it by.

“Are you absolutely positive that's safe?” Amos asked from the other side of the table. He didn't like how eagerly she was digging into their child's head, like she was braiding hair with reckless abandon or eating too much ice cream. He shuddered.

“It's four days old, Amos. We don't have to *baby* it.” And because she was increasingly becoming the more confident parent of the two, Amos didn't argue. He felt horribly on edge around the sourdough starter. Being a parent wasn't what he imagined at all.

He didn't hate it, though. At least the townhouse felt more lived in now.

Eden poured warm water and some more flour into their offspring's head, then gave it a good stir and tightened the top back on. “Healthy and strong,” she said, grinning. “God, I'm already picturing the grandkids.”

“Getting a little ahead of ourselves there,” Amos said. *Grandkids* implied that they would be grandparents, the two of them—and that was far from a certainty. Then again, the sourdough starter was supposed to help with that. “It can't even walk,” he added.

“Not yet,” Eden chastised. “Since *I've* been doing all the feeding, why don't you help with the first steps?”

“Okay,” Amos said, putting down his spoon. He leaned forward on the table, tapping a few times. “Come here, little guy.”

Their jar didn't move. Its innards didn't even bubble up for him. At this point, it was no surprise. Eden sighed. Amos felt the weight in the air, as though she'd chucked their glass child at his skull.

“Hopefully by the time it's fully grown,” Eden said. She picked it up off the table and let it whine into her breast. Amos finished his soup, curving into the warped wood of his chair.

On the fifth day, Eden prodded her way through button-ups and

trousers in the closet, all owned by Amos. She needed clothes that weren't speckled with fermented, soggy flour. More accurately, she needed to investigate one of the sitters that the neighborhood moms suggested. Did she even trust some teenager to look after it, though? Highly unlikely.

She felt rage burn in her chest when she opened the bedroom closet and looked down.

"Amos," she shrieked. "Amos!"

"Yes?"

She dropped to her knees and clutched the sourdough starter to her chest. It was all in-tact, but salty tears started to pool in her eyes. She cried for her child. She cried for herself. "How did it get in here? It's not *warm* enough for it in the closet. It's only five days old! Amos, did you even realize that it was gone?"

"Eden, honey, I can't really hear you." The television got louder in the living room.

"If I hadn't looked, it would've been stuck in here for God knows how long!" Eden roughly pulled down her shirt's neckline so that the sourdough starter could feed, even though she knew it would not. It never had. Her tugging ripped a small hole in her shirt. "Did *you* put it in the closet, Amos? Did you make it hide in here?"

Eden kneeled in the closet and didn't move. Amos didn't answer. No footsteps sounded up the marble staircase. Her child still couldn't walk.

On the sixth day, Eden, Amos, and the sourdough starter had dinner together as a family. Amos sipped soup and did paperwork at the table. Eden had fixed a new recipe, but she spent the meal glaring at her husband. Their child didn't eat its baby food, so Eden got up and put more flour and water in its head. Amos slurped up broth. Slurp, slurp.

After feeding it, Eden microwaved her plate to heat her food up again. She accidentally left her fork on the plate, and for a moment she wondered if it might spark and catch fire. If it did, she would leave Amos to slurp his soup, and, instead, would save

the sourdough starter. She only had enough hands to save one of them, so of course she would save her child.

It didn't catch fire. Eden wondered what she would do when it was the eighth day, and the sourdough starter was gone, and it was just herself and Amos again. Even when both her hands were free, would she use both to save him from a hypothetical fire? No idea.

Eden sat back down at the table with her inflammable plate and fork. To occupy her mind, she imagined her child eating its baby food—with a mouth, with tongue and teeth, like the children of other parents. The image, sweet and hazy at the edges, made her feel like she could finish her dried-out chicken breast.

The family ate in silence until Amos said, "Do you think it can talk by now?"

"Probably not," Eden said.

"That's a shame. It seemed like it would be so bright when it was born."

Eden almost slammed her fork down on the table, but she didn't want to scare her child. "It's our fault for not teaching it how to talk. Who will teach it, if not us?"

Amos looked small. When he had held his child in the hospital, she never noticed that he'd started to shrink. He shrugged. "We didn't know," he said.

But then their child bubbled up in its jar. It broke through the lid, and the air escaping its body made such a wheezing sound that both mother and father had to listen. It bubbled up over every side, making a yogurt-like mess on the table's surface. Despite their sadness, they laughed.

"There we go," Amos said. "Its first words. Very profound."

"We didn't even give it a name, for God's sake."

"Yeast?"

"I don't think that name suits it," she said. Amos didn't have any other suggestions.

On the seventh day, the sourdough starter left home as they always knew it would. Eden cried, asking if it wanted to feed one last time—for its sake, she said, since money was tight, and they

couldn't know when it would be able to afford groceries (really, it was for her sake, so she could feel like she fed it enough). Amos sulked in the doorway as his wife cradled their child.

"And once you're making enough to pay income taxes, come to me, okay?" he said.

"No, please go to a better accountant than your father," Eden said.

"Can you stop?"

The sourdough starter hugged Eden, and when they were finished, she handed it to Amos. For a second, she got scared that he was going to drop the jar on the front porch. She held onto its body—how fragile it was, just glass and how it was raised, nothing else to protect it—and she let Amos shake its hand. Their child had gotten old enough that it didn't spit up on his clothes. Amos was probably grateful. Eden thought she might regret missing out on that.

And then, as Mother and Father said their final goodbyes, Eden opened her child's head one last time. She used her fingers to dig a bit out of its top layer, one handful for herself, one for Amos. As their child left, Eden held this last chunk of it close to her chest, this *something* to remember her child by. It wasn't its purpose, but now this yeast was most precious to her. Amos held it like it was just bacteria—and it was that, too.

The following week in their empty nest, they tried to bake sourdough bread. They used their child, rolled a small bit of it into the dough. They kneaded it. They kneaded it, and they prayed, but when the bread came out of the oven, it had not risen.

# lady comtempt

*By Jo Douglas*

April 7, 2022

10:25 p.m.

i have never  
known hatred.  
her name  
familiar, but  
her face  
unrecognizable.

but this burning,  
smoldering heat  
that coils in  
my guts?  
i know  
her.

the ache to  
hit,  
scream,  
cry,  
act out—  
i know that

all too well now.  
how did i  
allow for you  
to introduce her?  
she is coiled in  
my throat,  
my brain,  
my heart,  
my stomach.  
how could you

induce such passion?  
i hate you.  
no, that's not—  
not strong enough.

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you are everything  
i hate in this world.  
you are greed,  
envy,  
morbidity,  
disgust, and  
so much i cannot name.

you are the  
bitterness on my tongue  
after a drink of coffee,  
the sound of nails on  
an old chalkboard,  
and the smell of  
decade-old, spoiled milk.

you may have introduced  
contempt and i,  
but you failed to account  
for her and i  
learning to love.  
so we coexist, side by side,  
weapons drawn,  
waiting.  
watching.  
loathing.  
until you learn.

# a lack of lilith

*By Jo Douglas*

May 2, 2022

1:01 a.m.

did lilith love adam?  
before the fight,  
before she left,  
before eve.  
were they in love?

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did lilith miss adam,  
or did she blossom?  
did she rebirth?  
did she replant her roots  
and become anew?

i could never be a lilith,  
confident and dark and feminine.  
for i still miss the adam who  
forced me to lie on my back.  
i did not fight when they  
pushed me around,  
i was not powerful.

i am weak.  
i fear i will be  
forevermore.  
for a strong lilith  
did not love her adam.  
a strong lilith leaves  
at the first red flag  
with no remorse.

i am no lilith,  
though i wish to be one.  
perhaps it comes with practice,  
or it may be a birthright—  
a crescent moon mark on your soul,  
which i apparently lack.

soon i hope that may change,  
that i too can rebirth.  
free from weakness,  
free from my adam,  
free to feed eve, adam's  
newest possession,  
the fruit of her abuse.

for a strong lilith knows  
not only her self-worth,  
but that of the women  
she walks among.

# Reimagined Book Covers

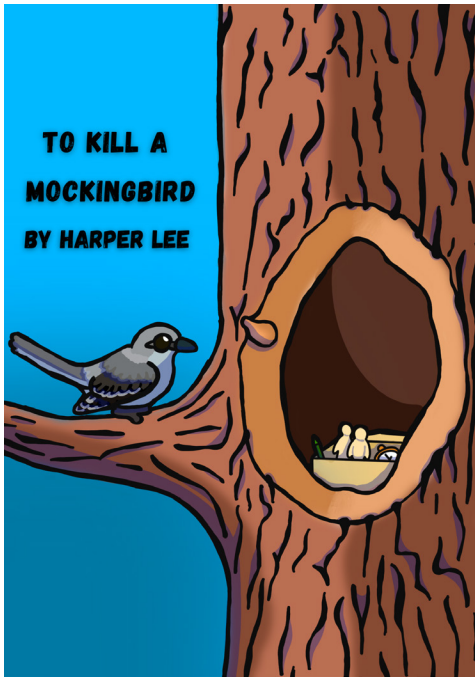
*By Mads Christiansen*

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Most books have multiple book covers, depending on the reprint or book type. Hardbacks can be different from softcovers; anniversary reprints also tend to have a special twist. It seemed like it would be a fun challenge to try out designing book covers of famous books knowing that they all have had a multitude of different designs. Some of my favorite book covers are ones where the artist references a moment in the book or images that occur within the story. They're like Easter eggs. If you know, you know.

This collection is done in a digital medium on Procreate on an iPad. I created a cartoonist/comic style to keep the collection cohesive. Each cover references either a moment and/or images in the book.









# Interview with Carl Hiaasen

*By Jubilee Forbess*

*Carl Hiaasen was born and raised in Florida, where he still lives. He is the author of many bestselling novels, including Squeeze Me and Nature Girl, as well as Assume the Worst: The Graduation Speech You'll Never Hear. His books for younger readers include the Newbery Honor winner Hoot, as well as Flush, Scat, Chomp, Skink—No Surrender, and Squirm.*

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**Jubilee Forbess:** You've written over 20 books, including your middle grade and adult novels. I can imagine you have a solid process for finding and outlining ideas for your new books. How would you summarize your creative process? How long does your average novel take to start and complete?

**Carl Hiaasen:** My process is chaotic. I don't do outlines; I start with a cast of characters and wing it. Of course, each book is different, but the novels for kids take less time to write—from nine months to a year, depending on how much I'm traveling. I can't write on a laptop in an airport the way some authors do.

**JF:** In your books, the location and themes relate to Florida and natural preservation. It is a great idea to work with these themes. I also enjoy the snarky and bright characters you develop in your books. People identify with them and with your writing style. How did you start incorporating these elements in your work?

**CH:** Florida is rich with crazed real-life characters, good and bad, so I usually don't have to look very far for inspiration. It would be unnatural to not have those kinds of characters in any book set down here.

**JF:** Your books have been described as “cathartic.” You are also known for your satire and “savagely funny” novels. Why do you think humor is cathartic when paired with social commentary, such as your play on the Potussies in your new book, *Squeeze Me*?

**CH:** Ever since I started writing, I’ve enjoyed doing satire—making people laugh, but for the right reasons. Satire always has a target, and the folks who like my books are usually in on the joke. More importantly, in these times, people need and want to laugh. It’s healthy, and necessary.

**JF:** You write a lot of books, some for kids, some for adults. Have you ever heard of a time when a kid got mixed up and read some of your more mature work? I can imagine it’s happened more than once!

**CH:** One time a woman brought her nine-year-old daughter to a book signing for one of the adult books. Then she bought the book and gave it to her. I told her that I thought her daughter was too young to read it. The woman just shrugged and said, “We let her read anything she wants. She’s already read *Lolita*. And I just thought: *Wow. Okay.* That’s not how it went down with my kids.

**JF:** Many people say that the literary world is waning, due to the rise of social media. If you were to encourage some young writers who are wary of the changing landscape, what would you say to them?

**CH:** It’s harder to get a novel published by big New York publishers these days, for sure. On the other hand, technology allows people to self-publish a book and promote it on the internet. If it does well enough, it might get the attention of a big publisher, and then a wider audience. The internet can’t function without content, and most content is written by humans. There will always be a market for the job skill of being able to write a proper sentence and put it in a proper paragraph.

**JF:** One of my favorite things about your books is the stubborn and determined women. They aren't perfect, but they get things done and make you root for them. In a field where men are often criticized for writing "flat" portrayals of women, how do you ensure that you don't fall into this habit?

**CH:** I've been fortunate to have met and known lots of smart, funny, strong women. My mother was one. It's been my experience that women tend to be at least two or three steps ahead of the men in their lives. And the truth is that women are usually more complex and interesting. The female characters in my novels surprise me all the time.

**JF:** When you're writing, do you have any "lucky" habits, like eating a certain snack or playing a playlist that's particularly inspiring? After reading *Lucky Me* and *Nature Girl*, I made a playlist of my own called "Lucky You!" I listen to it a lot while I'm doing my chores and feeling not quite so lucky.

**CH:** I do have a couple of playlists, mostly rock, that I'll listen to sometimes while I write. Warren Zevon, Tom Petty, the Stones, Zeppelin, Dire Straits, and my late friend, Jimmy Buffett. But I also wear shooting earphones while I write, noise-suppressing, so I've got to turn up the tunes super loud. Weird habit, going back years.

# Delilah with Dignity

*By Sarah Phillips*

I apologize.

Today,

I shaved my hair in penance.

The summer makes it unbearable  
to have your bones hollowed out  
and bared.

I have trouble living.

Lord, I fear I cannot change,  
and Lord, he burnt down the temple today.

He was blind and undone,  
you freed shackles—  
even of a dumb killer.

Lord, I walk my feet bloody and raw  
on frailties and glass  
only to be marked a lamb for slaughter.

Where is penance for his holy crimes?

A follicle or a worshiped hall?

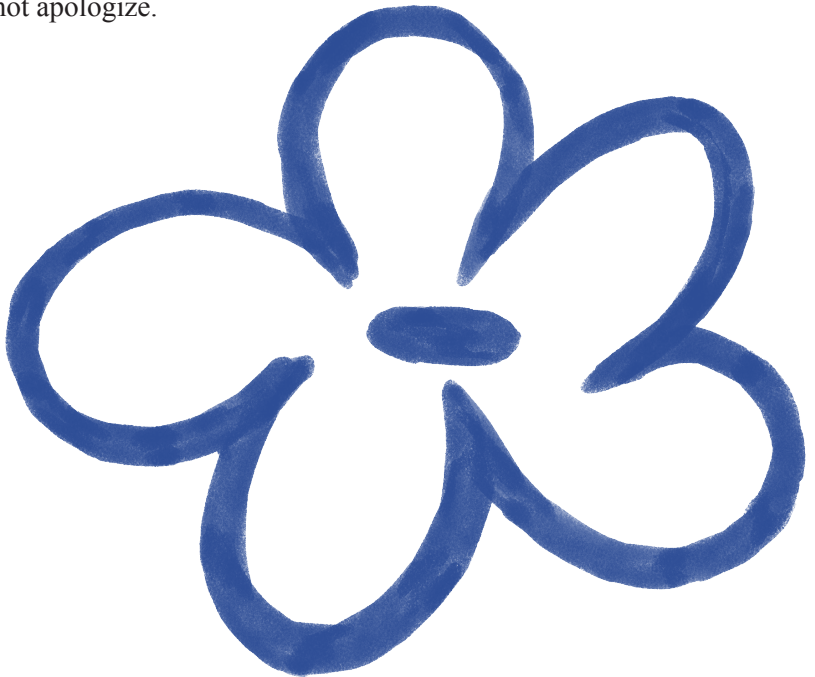
You forsake me so, Lord.

From consciousness,

I know

I come from the rib.  
Like all the others,  
I bear no verse,  
no dignity,  
no place past him.  
And I know,  
hell burns for me, you wait on him.  
So, Lord  
today,  
I ate an apple  
to watch the flames eat his beloved hair,  
juices running thick and unforgiving  
down my chin.  
I do not apologize.

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# My Late First Wife Was a Silk Moth

By Paris Bute

[Once] upon a quick internet search, not quite so long ago, I was informed that the lifespan of *Bombyx mori*, the domestic silk moth, lasts five to ten days. After the silk moth wakes up from its two-week slumber and hatches from its wooly cocoon, it will dedicate the rest of its life to finding a partner of the opposite sex. As the silk moth has no mouth or jaws to eat with, or a coil-like proboscis to sip sweet nectar with, it dies completely empty. Its only instinct is to mate and leave hundreds of eggs behind to hatch into hundreds of silkworms.

If this is the case, I thought, then something must be off. The silk moth that has been living with me for well over two weeks now is still very alive. It crawls around in its shoebox, and I certainly can't tell if it has aged. Moths don't wrinkle like humans do. Do I just have to wait for the silk moth to stiffen into a motionless creature to confirm its death?

Before I start weaving my love story, I need to tell you that I did not raise this silk moth. I never saw the moth in any other life stage, such as a caterpillar or pupa. Before this, I never had any enthusiasm for sharing a roof with a creature other than my cat.

I first found the moth one day while grocery shopping after work. I had meandered down the alleyway past offices and little old lady places to look around. The line of businesses led down to a white brick wall that had been hastily painted to meet the setting's gaudy aesthetic. From afar, there appeared a patch of white protruding from the wall, flapping under the hot sunlight like a loose scrap of paper. Was it a tossed-away grocery receipt?

After I removed my sunglasses, I realized that it was a furry, white, camouflaged moth, clinging to the wall.

I had never seen a moth look so . . . pretty? The thumb-sized creature did not resemble any bug I had ever seen, and it didn't make me feel uneasy, alarmed, or repulsed. It didn't have a loud pattern on its wings or unnervingly long proboscis like a butterfly, though the long and sharp feelers perched on its head resembled a rooftop UHF antenna. Its soft body was as pure and bright as linen on a clothesline. It had the composure of a sleepy white rabbit drawn from a magician's hat.

The moth remained stationary. It looked like the spindly tips of its feet were pasted to the wall by the afternoon heat. I was going to leave the relic of nature behind for other people to see, but a mute voice in my heart urged me to rescue it.

To the right side of the wall was a garish beauty shop. The background was filled with sixty-something-year-old ladies sitting in salon chairs, having their hair wrapped in rocket-hot foil. But in the foreground, I caught sight of an assortment of tools in the waiting area that I could use to transport the moth to its new home, or at least someplace safer. There was a stack of clear plastic cups sitting atop a water cooler beside a wine fridge. The cup's rim looked wide enough to leave some wing space for the moth.

The task wasn't challenging as I had been cupping and trapping insects, spiders, and other bugs in my house since I was a small child. I would always move the crawly outside my house, where it could continue eating pests, go back to pollinating the plants, help feed a hungry bird or toad, whatever it could do to be useful in the food chain. But this moth was an exception; I would bring it inside my home.

Without saying a word or moving my eyes, I marched into the shop, grabbed a plastic cup, and snatched a cooking magazine from a coffee table. I felt the urge to run out of the shop, back to the moth in case another person saw it, or it somehow got away, but the moth was still glued to the wall when I returned. I used the magazine's pages to scoop the moth onto its flat, matte cover, and slowly lowered the cup, trying my best not to let the thick plastic

interior touch its dainty wings. As I was turning around with the moth now in my care, I heard the door of the beauty shop open.

A female chain-smoker huffed and then said, “What are you doing?”

I didn’t turn around. I looked down at the moth now sprawled out in its temporary paper-plastic shelter and left the alley. I stole a cup and a magazine, but the euphoria and sweat running down my back made my brain feel like it was the moth I was stealing.

“My moth,  
now free from  
her crammed  
cup, began to  
crawl around,  
and her  
wings slowly  
moved up and  
down, like a  
needle on a  
metronome.”

The entire time I was doing my shopping and fetching the usual contents on my grocery lists (bread, oat milk, eggs, ground coffee, rice, soy sauce, the obligatory, overpriced vegan chocolate ice cream bars, et cetera), the moth sat in its enclosure on my cart’s baby seat. When I would stop in each aisle to pick up an item, I would look down to check on what I would start calling for the rest of this story, my moth.

My moth remained still under her plastic roof, but her eyes seemed to be directed at me. Its gaze felt sharp, yet tender. We had small spells of eye contact as I meandered around the store, waited in the check-out line, and even when I finally got back in my car to drive my moth and the groceries back home.

Right as I entered my apartment, my moth’s new living space was upgraded to a shoe box with a bed made of folded paper towels. The box sat on the kitchen counter, away from where my cat could find it. I laid a wilted leaf of butter lettuce with a tiny sprig of rosemary, and a bottlecap of water in a corner of the box (I was still unaware of the fact that silk moths couldn’t eat or drink). My moth, now free from her crammed cup, began to crawl

around, and her wings slowly moved up and down, like a needle on a metronome.

I sat on a kitchen stool beside it after putting away my groceries and studied the creature. The more I looked at it, the less and less it resembled an insect. My moth stretched all six of her velvet feet out into an innocent, feminine pose. Her silky, fuzzy body was still a creamy, yet crisp white like the head of a cotton swab. To my surprise, my moth suddenly inched back, lifted her front right paw up to her beak-like jaw, and began to groom herself like a cat! She went through a repeating cycle of running the tip of her paw through her teeny-tiny tongue and lifting it above her head to brush and smooth her antennae. It was the most precious thing I had ever seen.

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As days passed by, I kept a good eye on my moth, and I did more research online to learn about her species. I learned that silk moths were unable to eat or drink or fly, which made caring for her easier, but was shocked to see how short their average lifespan was. My silk moth lived past the ten-day maximum most of the articles I read claimed, and still had the energy to explore her limits and even crawl on my arm.

I was clueless then to the fact that this creature would become my first wife. It would transport itself from the shelter I constructed out of a shoe box into my bed, place a silken ring around my finger, make hard, yet soft love to me, fix me mulberry tea and miso soup for breakfast out of the blue, and turn me into the father of its 300 or so children before disappearing from my life.

I don't know how to tell my story to others if they don't believe the pure truth of it all. If they really want to know the truth, I'd be willing to let them see the clusters of eggs still waiting to hatch in my bathroom.

# Baby Goat

*Winner of the Pittman Prize for Poetry*

*By Ruby Hewardine*

Last night your brothers and sisters gathered,  
stumbling on weak legs,  
as your mother called to the woman who  
cradled you in her arms.

Last night, the moonlight shone down upon  
your fur as your heartbeat slowed,  
and your body went limp; your short life  
coming to an end.

Last night, a woman dug a hole deep enough  
to hold your frail body,  
and pressed a kiss to your forehead  
before filling the hole with dirt, and flowers, and you.

This morning, I held your sister in my arms,  
her beating heart shaking her small frame.

I ran my fingers through her velvety fur  
as your own fur grew matted and cold.

This morning, your mother grazed in the grass next to me,  
her eyes dutifully

surveying her remaining children  
but showing no signs of her loss.

This morning, I stood in the swaying grass,  
the same grass you are now buried under,  
and pressed a kiss to your sister's forehead  
as I thought of dirt, and flowers, and you.

# Desiderium

*"A feeling of grief for  
something lost"*

*By Isabella Walker*

Everyone experiences it at least once.

The uninvited guest that stays with you,  
maybe forever.

Without choice, without warning,  
here it is to stay.

It makes you forfeit all of what you thought was true,  
face the wind puncturing your face.

A sacrifice was made with no contract to be signed.

Dragged away by another force,  
one of which you can't obtain,  
at least not yet.

Everyone knows the tale,  
knows the warning label on this thing called life.

But always,  
we are taken by surprise.

Wind knocked out of you,  
breath hard to take in.

Nothing to do though,  
but keep on going.

# Premonition

*By Valentine Rodriguez*

## ACT I

You were my first nightmare.

I was only four, wrapped up in my plush Strawberry Shortcake blanket, teddy bear sprawled limply next to me. I had been dreaming I was a dancer—a beautiful, ethereal ballerina. Behind my eyelids, my mind drew pictures of flouncing pink tutus, glittering tiaras, figures pirouetting through the air. I couldn't have imagined anything more perfect.

Mom had taken me to the ballet just a few days prior, and those silhouettes, those costumes, that music had been consuming my every waking, and now dreaming, thought. I spent my days after preschool twirling around the living room while playing the same CD—"The Music of Sleeping Beauty"—over again. Sometimes, when I got tired of dancing, I would simply stare at the cover of the CD case.

It was a dramatic, fuzzy photo of a ballerina lying languidly in a grand, velveteen bed, pretending to be asleep. The longer I stared, the more I imagined I was feeling the taffeta of her dress between my fingers, or that I was lying on the plush bed, about to drift off for a nap. I found it immensely comforting, the thought of having a haven all to myself. It was this image that I held in my little mind as I drifted off to sleep on the evening of my first nightmare.

## ACT II

Center stage. All eyes are on me. I take a deep breath. My whole life has been leading up to this moment. The first note of music reaches my ears, and my muscles automatically engage. I'm floating across the stage, twirling, and reaching my arms up

in the air in spirited elation. I'm filled with a sense of belonging, purpose, identity. This is who I am, who I've always been destined to become.

I am euphoric. I finally have control over my destiny, over what happens to me. I have never been afforded this feeling before. Everything that happens to my small body makes me feel volatile, turbulent. All of that is behind me now; I don't need to be scared anymore.

Holding this feeling in my heart, I take an audacious bound across the stage, like a bunny who has just been freed from its cage.

And then the crowd laughs. An uproarious, ear-splitting laughter. The sound is so jarring, it takes everything in me not to stop dancing immediately. I don't know what's happening, but I know I must keep going. They're here to see a performance—I'm going to give them a performance. And surely, they can't be laughing at me. Right?

I sink even farther into my movements, hoping the audience will become captivated by me. I focus on the minutiae of my dance, perfecting every inch of myself. My mind flashes back to the moments before my performance, spent in my dressing room tugging at the hem of my dress, reapplying powder to my face, unlacing and relacing my shoes over again. I had worked so hard to be lovely.

The crescendo of the music snaps me back into my body, and I steel myself for what is to come.

## FINALE

I'm throwing my body into the air and catching myself every time. It's taken me a while to get to this point, but I have become exceptionally good at looking after myself. After all, no one else is around to do it.

The crowd has quieted down to an eerie extent. The theater is deathly silent. This is it, I think. They're enraptured by me, by my performance, by everything that I am. The music speeds up, nearing its end.

Laughter rings in my ears, this time from behind me. I whip my head around, only to find nothing, no one, there. I shake my head to clear the fog clouding my mind, hoping no one has seen me stumble.

Before I close my eyes for my grand finale, I meet the gaze of an audience member. She's sitting near the front, perched on the edge of her red velvet seat, clutching the string of pearls around her neck. I think to myself that she looks kind, like someone I could be friends with in another life. More than anything else, I notice that she has a look of absolute horror in her eyes. My heart drops.

I feel a pair of hands under my arms, tugging at me. There's a sickening, wet crunch. Something is wrong. The audience goes wild, laughing like they never have before. Horrified, I slowly look down at my torso. My upper body has been separated from

At the very end  
of my life, I've  
become a rose.

my legs. My knees bend as though I were a marionette. There are only red strings, some flesh, some fabric, still joining the two halves of my body together. Between the strands, my insides dangle helplessly in the cold, unforgiving air. My once white dress is stained with blood, dripping down onto the stage in front of me. In the pool of blood at my feet, there are sequins from my costume. I think to myself that I have enough blood to flood this whole theater. An acrid, sweet smell fills my nose; something inside me is blossoming. At the very end of my life, I've become a rose.

My breaths become rapid, disjointed as hysterical fits of laughter echo in my ears, my chest, my mind. Everything hurts, but not in the way I was expecting it to. More than anything, I am humiliated, and I cannot get away.

"This is the end."

I jolted awake and sat upright in bed, tears streaming down my face. My small hands patted my stomach, to make sure that I was

still in one piece. I breathed a temporary sigh of relief at the fact that I was still intact, but I was still inconsolable. Mom came in almost immediately, wrapped me in her embrace and tried to coax me into telling her what was wrong. I finally fell back asleep after a glass of warm milk.

## EPILOGUE

I finish tying my shoe and stand up, walking to the edge of my vanity to touch up my makeup. There's a knock at my dressing room door.

“Five minutes until showtime.”

I nod gently, ensuring the tiara on my head doesn't topple off. “I'll just be another minute,” I say, mustering the best smile I can.

I turn back to the mirror, bringing a powder puff to my cheek. I pause when I see your reflection behind me.

I hope my dream wasn't a premonition.



# shoreline at the end of the world

*By Jack Hayes*

the white noise of crashing crushing waves  
moon a fine fish hook  
ready to snag the horizon  
haul it up and away  
sunset bleeding across shining wet sand  
moving bodies on the beach  
cut from paper  
all in mourning black  
seagulls wail  
and fling themselves into the sky  
a swelling in your chest  
choke on it  
close your eyes  
picture the bomb  
walk into the ocean  
and don't come up.



# Fifteen Miles Away from Civilization on Highway Five

*By Billy Bascom*

Characters:

LISA, mid-20's, a "hides her pain with a smile"  
kinda gal, people-pleasing and nervous.

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ALEX, early 30's, an irritable guy who is  
convinced he's never in the wrong.

Setting: A car in the middle of nowhere.

Time: Nighttime, early 2000's.

(Lights up on ALEX and  
LISA. ALEX is driving  
the car; LISA is in the  
passenger seat.)

ALEX

And that's why you should always buy mint  
flavored toothpaste.

LISA

All right, I stand corrected.

ALEX  
I'm just trying to help you out.

LISA  
I know, I—

ALEX  
There are so many choices these days, hard  
to keep up.

LISA  
I'll try to remember.

(LISA pulls out a map and  
looks it over.)

ALEX  
What?

LISA  
It's just. . . where are we?

ALEX  
I know exactly where we are, don't sweat  
it.

LISA  
We haven't seen a building, or a person, or  
another car—

ALEX  
I got it.

(ALEX grabs the map from  
LISA, throwing it in the  
back seat.)

ALEX

Trust.

LISA

(nods)

Sorry.

ALEX

I know where I'm going.

LISA

(hopeful)

Where are you going?

ALEX

Uh-uh-uh! I told you, no questions.

LISA

I know, it's just—

(LISA takes a breath.)

It's just been a while.

ALEX

And?

LISA

I'm . . . nothing.

ALEX

What?

LISA

Nothing. I said it's nothing.

ALEX

Bullshit.

LISA

It's not!

ALEX

Spit it out.

LISA

It's just. . .(mumbles) I have to use the bathroom.

ALEX

Huh?

LISA

(mumbles again)

I have to use the bathroom.

ALEX

What?

(ALEX takes his eyes off the road for a moment and the car swerves. LISA and ALEX are both jostled.)

LISA

The bathroom! I have to use it.

ALEX

Ugh, again?

LISA

I didn't . . . actually go last time.

ALEX

Then what the hell were you doing?

LISA

I thought I had to but—

ALEX

But you were wrong.

LISA

Yeah. I guess.

(A beat.)

ALEX

Let's just listen to the radio for a little while, okay?

LISA

Sure.

(ALEX turns on the car radio, scanning the channels.)

ALEX

Man, they weren't kidding. Radio really is dead.



(LISA laughs uncomfortably  
and shifts in her seat.)

ALEX

Look, I'll make you a deal. Next stop,  
bathroom break. But then I don't want any  
more questions. And no wandering! In and  
out.

LISA  
(smiles)

Okay. Got it.

(ALEX punches the radio  
off.)

ALEX

Enough of that shit.

LISA

Agreed.

ALEX

Finally, something we agree on.

LISA

I came around to your toothpaste opinions.

ALEX

But will you actually follow through?

LISA

Depends.

ALEX

On?

LISA

If I ever get home.

ALEX

Don't be such a drama queen.

LISA

I think we're lost.

ALEX

Home is just on the horizon.

LISA

Look! The sign! Gas station, next right.

ALEX

Fine. I promised we'd stop.

LISA

Maybe we can ask for directions?

ALEX

I'm a man of my word. I say we'll stop? We stop. I say I know where I'm going? I know where I'm going.

LISA

It couldn't hurt.

ALEX

Let's play a game called "who can be quiet the longest," okay? Starting, now!

(LISA glares at ALEX  
before slumping over  
and leaning against the  
window.)

ALEX

Look! There's the station.

LISA

(under her breath)

You lose.

(ALEX and LISA pull into  
the parking lot. They get  
out of the car.)

ALEX

Do your business, I'll get gas. Then we. . .  
oh shit.

(ALEX leans down next to  
the car.)

LISA

What?

ALEX

Shit, shit, shit. Goddammit.

LISA

What's going on?

ALEX

Of course. Of course, this would happen to  
me.

LISA

What's wrong?

ALEX

We popped a goddamn tire!

(ALEX stands back up.)

Must've happened back where we swerved.

LISA

Oh.

ALEX

I thought the car felt off.

LISA

I'm sorry.

ALEX

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Now I gotta deal with this. Gotta get some help.

LISA

Can I help?

ALEX

No! You stay. I'm gonna run inside for someone.

LISA

Okay.

(ALEX begins to walk offstage, looking back at LISA once.)

ALEX

I'm serious. Stay.

(ALEX exits. LISA stares after him for a beat before beginning to rummage through the car for something.)

LISA

Come on, come on! Gotta be some change in here some—aha!

(LISA emerges with a quarter between her fingers.)

LISA

I win.

(LISA runs to the opposite side of the stage as ALEX and fumbles her coin into a pay phone, dialing.)

LISA

Hello? My name is Lisa Edwards. I've been missing for three weeks and two days. I'm being held captive. I'm at Ben's Petrol, the far end of Highway Five. Please send help!

(A beat.)

LISA

Hello?

END

# Contributors'

*Billy Bascom is a senior English major at Stephens College. She is a senior editor on Harbinger staff and a member of the Alpha Epsilon Eta chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She is excited to be published in Harbinger for the first time. She has two pieces in the magazine this year, "Through the Grapevine" and "Fifteen Miles Away from Civilization on Highway Five." Upon graduation, she plans to pursue a graduate degree in library and information science.*



*Paris Bute is a senior at Stephens College, majoring in digital filmmaking and minoring in creative writing. She has been featured as a contestant and filmmaker at the True/False film festival's "Gimme Truth" event twice and won 1st place in 2021 with her short film The DVD Case. Paris enjoys writing short fiction and screenplays in and out of the classroom, and is proud to have her magical realism piece, "My Late First Wife Was a Silk Moth," get published in this year's edition of Harbinger. She and her cat Clarisse live with her family in St. Louis, Missouri.*



*Mads Christiansen (any and all pronouns) is an author/illustrator from the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. They are a member of Sigma Tau Delta at Stephens College and are completing their English degree May 2024. They will attend the University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign to obtain a Master's of Library Science. They've worked in Creative Ink and currently work on Harbinger.*



# Notes



*Jo Douglas is a first-year creative writing major at Stephens College. They are ecstatic to be contributing two of their poems to this year's edition of Harbinger. Procured from a larger collection, "Lack of Lilith" and "Lady Contempt" chronicle the rage that follows an abusive relationship. Jo is the founder of Spiritual Susies, the president of the Rainbow Alliance, and a writer for Stephens Life. She is also an avid reader and gamer.*



*Jubilee Forbess is a first-year creative writing major at Stephens College. She has been published in Journey 75 and won the Arkansas' 2023 National Day of Racial Healing's poetry contest. Jubilee self-published her debut poetry book, Tropical Studio Fight Pit, in 2021. This is her first year on the Harbinger staff and she was fortunate enough to reach one of her favorite authors, Carl Hiaasen, for an interview in this edition.*



*Alena Harper is a sophomore at Stephens College. After graduation she plans to pursue a Master's of Library Science. She is excited to be published for the first time with her piece "Louis Wain's Letter" in this year's edition of Harbinger, and she hopes you enjoy everyone's hard work.*

# Contributors'

*Jack Hayes is a senior digital filmmaking student, graduating this May. This is their fourth year being published in Harbinger, and they're thrilled to be sharing their passion for horror with another short story of the grotesque, "The Host" and a poem from your dreams, "Shoreline at the End of the World." These pieces are both about endings and hope. Jack has worked as an editor on Harbinger and completed a short horror film in 2023 as a culmination of their education at Stephens. They are a member of Sigma Tau Delta. Jack can be found either in the hammocks on the quad or at Gumby's making pizza.*



*Ruby Hewerdine is a senior English major and a senior editor on the Harbinger staff, as well as acting president of the Stephens College chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. This is her second year working on Harbinger. She's excited to have her pieces "The Changed Ones" and "Baby Goat" included in this year's publication, and hopes readers enjoy this edition of Harbinger as much as she enjoyed working on it.*



*Baylee Johnson is a junior English major with a minor in creative writing at Stephens College. This is her second publication in Harbinger. Her interests include surrealist art, screenwriting, poetry, and horror fiction. Baylee plans to pursue a career in scriptwriting and prose fiction.*



# Notes



*Zoe London recently graduated summa cum laude from Stephens with her BFA in creative writing. Her work has been published in Harbinger, for which she is a two-time recipient of the Pittman Prize, as well as Quirk and They Call Us. While serving as President of the Alpha Epsilon Eta chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, Zoe received a Dennis/Stemmler LGBT& Award in Fiction at the 2023 Sigma Tau Delta Convention. She is now based in Cincinnati, Ohio and stays busy working in higher education, wedding planning, and co-parenting three cats. After two years on the Harbinger staff, including one year as Editor-in-Chief, Zoe is thrilled to be featured in this year's issue.*



*Em Louraine graduated with a BA in English and a minor in creative writing from Stephens College in December 2023. She is overjoyed that her ekphrasis piece, "Pine," was one of her final contributions to the magazine and to the Stephens College English department. This is her third piece published in Harbinger, and it is in the company of other phenomenal pieces written by her talented friends and peers. She has also published her short story, "Flight," as a chapbook through Bottlecap Press, and another ekphrastic piece, "Untitled," on Ekphrastic Review's website. Em looks forward to a career in the publishing world thanks to the experience Harbinger has given her.*



*Taylor Morgan is the editor-in-chief of Harbinger 2024. She now has two publications with the magazine, 2023's "Candy," and this issue's "River of Dawn." Spring 2024 she presented her creative nonfiction piece, "Hurt People Hurt People," at the annual international Sigma Tau Delta conference in St. Louis, Missouri. When she is not writing or reading, she enjoys participating in Columbia's social scenes, theater, dance, and running.*

# Contributors'

*Sarah Phillips is a first-year English major. They are excited to have their poem "Delilah with Dignity" in this year's edition of Harbinger. Their book "baptism for the agnostic cat lady" is available on Amazon. They attended the 2023 Ellipsis Summer Writing Workshop for Poetry, and they are treasurer of Spiritual Susie's and vice president of the Rainbow Alliance. When not writing, they can be found hanging out with their rabbit, Honey Bunches of Oats.*



*Valentine Rodriguez is a junior fashion marketing major at Stephens College. They are very excited to have their piece "Premonition" published in this year's Harbinger. Additionally, they are currently a part of the production crew on the Stephens College spring fashion show, The Collections.*



*Ruby Siegel is a sophomore English major and a member of the Stephens College chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. This is her first year on the Harbinger staff. She's thrilled to have two pieces selected for publication in the magazine: "Galatea" and "Tell Me Again." Her work has also been featured in The Ekphrastic Review. Her first year working on Harbinger has been a great one, and she looks forward to seeing what comes next.*



# Notes



*Isabella Walker is a third-year student studying creative writing at Stephens College. She has been published in the Mid Rivers Review and was the editor of The Gateway Review in 2023. She is honored to have her poem "Desiderium" in this year's edition of Harbinger. It is a piece that is close to her heart, so please enjoy it.*



*Julie Wiley is a senior English major. She is pleased to have her piece, "Dive In" in this year's edition of Harbinger. Her work often focuses on the themes of family and home. She comes from a military family and has lived in Colorado, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Mississippi, and Germany. She has been published in The Ekphrastic Review and a previous edition of Harbinger. Julie is the secretary of Stephens College's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, and drawing.*

## About the Cover

*Amanda Coppeti, Transform, 2024, digital illustration*

*Transform was inspired by my personal experience of growing up in and then leaving my home country of Brazil to pursue my dreams overseas. The ocean is a symbol for the transformative process of embracing change and seeking new horizons.*

