

Harbinger

2022



Weight of the World

Harbinger

2022

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jer]

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

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Foreword

Weight of the World: The Struggles Are Real

There are moments in life that make or break us. It is how we bounce back that matters most. In fact, struggle is a natural subject for literature. No conflict, no story. *Harbinger 2022: Weight of the World* showcases a range of struggles—both real and imagined—faced by young people today.

Like my peers, I struggled during my college years—both in my writing and in my family life. During my sophomore year at Stephens College, my mom announced to the family that we were moving to Michigan. We were no strangers to moving. I grew up in St. Louis, and then moved to Washington, Missouri. My mom, who is originally from Michigan, convinced my father to ditch the Midwest heat waves for Northern cold lakes. Initially, I was excited about the move, but soon discovered I was unprepared for helping pack up and move an entire household. My junior year as a member of Residential Life and deep into my classwork for my English degree, I soon learned to be thankful for the calm of my life at Stephens. At home, it was nonstop packing. I made several twelve-hour drives to help my family, until finally, June 2020, shortly after the pandemic began, we completed our move to Michigan. Summer in our new home was hot and crowded. But I learned to adapt until I was able to return in August to campus life.

Though less dramatic, my experiences remind me of Cylin Busby's *The Year We Disappeared*, a true-crime memoir she cowrote with her father. In 1979, while driving home one evening, he was shot in the face. Before losing consciousness, he wrote down the name of a local man with mob affiliations. The Busbys' life was totally disrupted; they went from having a "normal" family life to living with police protection. Cylin's struggle to regain control of her life as a young adult is painfully recounted and becomes instructive to those facing seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Hunger, a memoir by Roxane Gay, depicts with candor and vulnerability her struggle with her body. As an overweight woman, she feels undermined by the world, yet she explains these conflicts have made her who she is today. Gay does not allow public opinion to define her. Instead, she uses it to motivate her to fight back.

The Year We Disappeared and *Hunger* are gripping memoirs about the strength that comes from adversity. *Harbinger 2022: Weight of the World* showcases a similar kind of strength found through struggle in its featured nonfiction, poetry, short stories, and literary interview. In “The Truth Is in the Epidural,” Kaitlyn Smith tells the true story of an unexpected pregnancy. She skillfully moves the reader through the challenges of delivery, and ends with Ruth, a little girl whom she sees as her present and future. Dakota Gibson’s nonfiction piece “A Very Merry Coochmas” details the struggles she went through to transition into her true self. She takes the reader on her journey from being “alone in my suffering,” particularly acute during Christmas, to a celebration complete with tiara of becoming who she was always meant to be. Arabela Rowland’s “Carbon Copy” explores her real-life struggles in her relationship with her mother who died when she was eight years old. She writes, “I did not understand what death was.” Today Arabela vows to honor her mother but also break the chain of habits that plagued her.

These are a few of the highlights of this year’s issue. *Harbinger 2022: Weight of the World* features many more big and small moments of struggle and redemption. We must always remember that we are not alone. We all have challenges and need to share our stories about them. This is what makes great literature. This is what unites us.

Lauren M. Granich
Editor-in-Chief



The Truth Is in the Epidural

Kaitlyn Smith

I never realized there were so many pregnancy tests on the market: different colors, response times, accuracy rates, and more. I grabbed a test that I recognized from commercials, paid fifteen dollars, and drove home, feeling dizzy along the way. It was crazy. In thirty minutes, the appearance of two little lines could change my whole life.

I rushed into my apartment bathroom, unwrapped the pink plastic stick, sat down, and did the deed. As I waited, I paced, put on a Netflix show, and lit a candle. Those two minutes felt like an eternity. Finally, there was the familiar ring of my phone. If I didn't look, and just threw away the test, maybe I would get my period again. I debated with myself for five minutes before I finally checked the results.

Damn, there were those two little lines that I had feared.

I felt even dizzier. The lighting in my bathroom dimmed and took on a yellow tint. I needed to lie down. I couldn't stop thinking about giving birth. I hated the smell, the taste, and the sight of blood. And I didn't like pain or hospital rooms either. I couldn't get over the image of a doctor with blood-stained gloves or the fact that something unfamiliar was growing inside me, waiting to bust out. I can't do this; I just can't.

Later that night, I discussed my options with my partner. I struggled with the idea of adoption. Knowing that a child who shared half of my DNA was in the world somewhere would hurt. I would search for the child in every face I saw. It didn't take long for us to decide to keep the baby and soon we were picking a name.

I thought of the origin story of my own name. It was originally supposed to be Klair (yes, spelled in an unusual way), but my father hated it. He liked Katie, which to my mom sounded like a nickname. After a long battle, they settled on Kaitlyn. But now I understood that there was a world of possibilities and problems in selecting a name. Panic and you might end up naming your kid Rufus. We knew we wanted a gender-neutral name, and settled on Theo. Or rather Theodore if it was a boy and Theodora for a girl.

Damn, there were those two little lines that I had feared.

After a few weeks of sleepless nights and swollen feet, I went in for an ultrasound to find out the baby's gender, though what interested me most was the baby's health.

In the examination room, I laid down on a table covered in stiff white crinkly paper. The ultrasound tech sat beside me at a computer and what looked like a blank television screen.

"This is going to be a bit cold," she said as she squeezed a generous amount of gel on my stomach.

When I saw my yawning and kicking baby on a large television monitor it was a strangely intimate and beautiful moment.

"So, do you want to know what you're having?"
We decided, yes, why not?

The image zoomed in closer. "IT'S A GIRL!!!" flashed across the screen.

After we left, while looking at the dozen photos of our little girl from different angles— pictures of a

nose, foot, hand, and full body—I touched my stomach and thought, “This is my baby. I created this.”

While we sat in the car in the parking lot at Hy-Vee, my partner Tim looked at me and said shyly, “Is it okay if we don’t use the name Theo?”

I didn’t know how to answer. I was attached to the name.

“Well, if you don’t want the name Theo, what do you want?”

Tim shifted in his seat, looking out the window at the busy parking lot filled with Valentine’s decorations.

“I was thinking, maybe we could use a family name? Also, a classic name. One that doesn’t go out of style. What about Ruth? That’s my great-aunt’s name.”

We made intense eye contact while I thought about it, and then finally said, “Sure.”

He looked so happy. “Are you sure? We can keep Theo. But I always thought if I had a daughter, I would name her Ruth.”

For some reason it suddenly felt as if she was always meant to be Ruth.

“I’m sure, and Ruth is sure.”

Time passed both fast and very, very slowly. I did all my classes over Zoom, maneuvering the camera so only my face was showing. As a supervisor at Lakota Coffee, I stayed by the espresso machine so customers couldn’t gawk at the pregnant barista. I eventually cut back on my hours after a scary hospital visit.

It was March, almost two months until my due date. I woke that morning feeling in an off mood and experiencing sharp and quick pains in my lower abdomen. When I discovered that I was bleeding, I called

Women's and Children's Hospital. The nurse sounded young and happy to help.

"So, this is pretty normal; it should be okay. However, we want to make sure the baby is fine. Let's have you come in for an observation. You might have to stay overnight if the nurses think you should. We'll see you soon!"

Trying to stay calm, I called Tim.

"Everything should be okay, but can you drive me to the hospital?" I asked, holding back tears.

He got to my house quickly and then drove me to the hospital. While I filled out the paperwork, my hand shook.

"So, what's the reason for your visit today?" a woman asked from behind plexiglass.

"Well, I'm bleeding. I'm also seven months pregnant. Where should I go?"

She said that they would take care of me in the Labor and Delivery Department.

As I waddled into the elevator with Tim beside me, we avoided eye contact, keeping our anxiety to ourselves.

After I checked in and changed into a backless hospital gown, they hooked me up to a lot of machines. The most important one monitored Ruth's heartbeat. She was fine, but I might be in early labor.

I said to Tim, "I'm not ready."

He looked at me and laughed, before saying, "It's Ruth's decision when to come out, not yours."

"Well, what if I don't want to deliver today? Can't I just go home?"

I got my wish. Ruth had decided she wasn't quite ready yet, so I went home and tried to relax. When

I wasn't in class or doing homework, I was working at the coffee shop or attending weekly doctor visits.

A month before my due date, I moved into my mother's house in Boonville and began nesting. My body was swollen and uncomfortable. I felt like Violet from *Willy Wonka*. Soon someone would have to roll me out of my room.

And then after my baby shower, while writing thank you notes, it happened. My water broke. My mother is a nurse with a nurse's attitude. Together we calmly called the nurse hotline and were told that I should come in—“just in case.”

Before getting settled into the room that looked exactly like the one I had been in the month before, I called Tim and said simply, “Get here fast. My water broke.”

I went into labor on May 15th at 3:30 pm.

The first IV consisted of fluids to keep me hydrated. Next was Pitocin, a version of oxytocin used to strengthen labor contractions. When the nurse started the Pitocin, pain rushed through my body, warm and shocking. I looked over to the monitor; Ruth's heartbeat was dropping quickly.

The nurse ran out of the room and then returned with six nurses and a doctor. They told me to get on all fours and then jabbed me in the leg with adrenaline. I started shaking badly. I couldn't breathe. If this was the first hour of labor, how was I ever going to manage it?

The nurse explained to my mother that she had accidentally given me too much of this very strong medication. But the crisis was averted and slowly the hours ticked on.

Initially I had been determined to have a natural

birth because my mother had all three of her children, including me, naturally. But labor messes with a person's thought process. According to my nurse if they didn't give me an epidural in the next hour, I would be too far along.

I was scared. Huge needles going into my spine were even scarier than a human coming out of me.

Tim looked at me in pain and made the call. "You need the epidural. I hate seeing you suffer."

I agreed; I hated being in pain. I signed a consent form, acknowledging that I understood there to be the potential of infection, paralysis, and nerve damage.

As the doctor injected me with the largest needle I had ever seen, the nurse tried to reassure me. "You're doing great," she said, while the doctor said, "Ma'am, you need to stop moving. If you move, then I can misplace the needle and we have to start over."

That's when I lost it. "Sir, I am in pain. I can't stay still, and don't call me ma'am," I said, before I noticed that the pain had completely disappeared and then I fell asleep.

An hour later when the nurse woke me with the gentle words, "Kaitlyn, sweetie, it's time to push," all I could do was smile, completely at peace from the drugs. The next thing I knew, I was pushing while six women counted in unison to ten and then said, "Breathe."

Tim held my hand while my mother stood off in the corner, anxious but smiling. And then, after a few minutes, I could feel something.

"Okay, we see her head. It looks like she has hair! One last big push to get Ruth out."

The women repeated, "One, two, three, four, five," and then whoosh; Ruth came flying out into the

doctor's hands. The nurses rushed her out of the room, and it took a few seconds until we finally heard her crying.

I was flooded with a sense of relief.

Tim cut her cord, and then in what seemed like a century my baby was finally handed to me. I held her close; she was naked, except for a tiny hat

According to my nurse if they didn't give me an epidural in the next hour, I would be too far along.

My mother took photos of the new family and then ordered us a feast from Denny's. I badly needed pancakes, eggs, toast, and bacon, which Tim hand-fed to me.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Different doctors buzzed in and out of my room to check on me while Ruth slept through most of the night in a bassinet at my bedside. The next morning when the sun came up, there were a few more tests and paperwork until finally mom and baby were approved to go home.

A nurse helped Ruth and me get into my mom's Jeep that was pulled up in the front of the hospital. In her car seat, Ruth looked like a little doll. As we headed into the drizzling, cloudy Monday morning, I looked over at Ruth who was fast asleep, cozy in a swaddling of blankets. I held her hand as I dozed off slowly, content in the fact that this was my present and future.

i spy, i spy

Zoe London

I am a most covert watcher of people
frequent observer, less frequent participant,
but I don't resent my bird's eye view.

I like to understand what I do not
study, learn, record my findings in a worn journal—
what are people, if not another story?

I spy, I spy, and with my sharpened eye.
I must leave a little space between the you and the I,
and I'm a bit wistful as I ask, "what if I lived how I write?"



semicolon

Zoe London

thought not
that I might live
more than partially alive.
stuck, stagnant, liminal space,
windows open—shutters drawn,
I emerged optimistic on weekends
only to contend with my hopeful half,
so quickly crawled under covers,
drawn back within skin
like the shutters.
I hope to
live;
no,
I want to live
on the precipice of,
and just a step away from,
“send the email” and soon I’ll be—
I realize that I am scared to live because
living a fraction of the heart on my sleeve
became a favorite sweater that I wore
even in blistering sweat-stain heat.
I shed the safety blanket and
step off the precipice.
maybe now
I live.



love, in three acts

Zoe London

i.

and i think being in love is a choice
but falling in love is involuntary
as you trip, tumble, torn beneath the tide
in the rapturous shipwreck.

but falling in love is involuntary,
i should say—falling in love is easy.
in the rapturous shipwreck,
the choice to love seems straightforward.

i should say—falling in love is easy,
like a perfect first draft or clean brush stroke.
the choice to love seems straightforward;
sometimes old ways constrict us like outgrown clothes.

like a perfect first draft or clean brush stroke,
we inevitably change, and
sometimes old ways constrict us like outgrown clothes;
we sew, and thrift, and sell.

we inevitably change, and
love is harder to see as vision fades.
we sew, and thrift, and sell,
getting dressed next to each other again.

love is harder to see as vision fades,
so, we beg ourselves to listen carefully.
getting dressed next to each other again,
love is found in silence when it's no longer loud.

so, we beg ourselves to listen carefully
when it's whispered, confusing, incomprehensible.
love is found in silence when it's no longer loud
but it's still there, my love, it's still there

when it's whispered, confusing, incomprehensible,
as you trip, tumble, torn beneath the tide—
but it's still there, my love, it's still there,
and i think being in love is a choice.

ii.

mixed with wet streaks,
snot drips down your
nose, lips, chin.
you, fortune teller of abandonment—
doomsday is approaching.
you push the door,
hold it wide open
and whisper,
i would understand.

crying, shaking,
fleeing a gentle grasp that feels too tight,
and she says,
i love you awake,
and i love you beautiful,
but i also love you
like this.

iii.

and so,
i don't think that love is a word
but an action done
again and again,
of tired hands still holding
and hugs even when it's hot outside
and spilled ramen (along with every cup, mug, and glass)
and too many layovers and road trips that
lead you back to me.
but night drives make up for it,
and i can still hear
"the author" playing in the car
as we tell each other stories—
and so,
i'll tell you stories forever
and even though it's more than a word,
i'll hang on your every "i love you"
and answer with my own,
which is
the most precious story you can tell.

Canine Crime

Jessamin McSwain

It's a sunny Saturday in early summer. An energetic Rottweiler-Bluetick hound mix is chewing on toys and playing chase at the dog park. His name is Cooper. In March, I rescued him from the Humane Society and a life of street begging. He is now learning how to "dog," how to share his toys, and how to love his human. We're learning about each other.

We've made friends with a couple and their beautiful fluffy dog who keeps coaxing affection from me. Cooper is catching the ice cubes from their drinks. All three of us are amused when an ice cube hits his face and falls to the ground. But behind my smile, I am growing concerned. We've been here for two and a half hours. Cooper is getting tired. I let the game of ice-cube catch continue, promising myself we'll leave right after. That's all the time it takes for the day to be ruined.

Cooper fails to catch another ice cube, and a small black Corgi puppy (whose owners are not in sight) lunges for it. Cooper has growled at dogs before, but this pup didn't listen to his words, "This is mine."

In a flash, Cooper has clamped onto the naive puppy as it yelps and cries. I'm not an idiot. There's no way I'm getting involved. I remember my father's words: Don't get involved in a dog fight. A couple rushes toward me. They're yelling and screaming.

"Why the fuck did you bring an aggressive dog to the park? What the hell is wrong with you?"

They don't know me, but their anger does. I'm frozen by their verbal barrage and offer apologies they ignore. I tell anyone who will listen that Cooper has never done anything like this before. It doesn't stop her from shouting. It doesn't stop him from reaching for the dogs, into the tangle of gnashing teeth and regretful yelps.

Don't let Cooper hurt them. They'll take him away. They'll kill him before he has a chance. I pull myself together. I pick up the pieces of my naiveté. My right hand grabs Cooper's collar as I pull up and away, trapping his body between my thighs. My left hand enters the fray before the man can get involved. I won't let them be bitten by Cooper. And I won't let them hurt

him. My thumb presses against the bottom of his mouth, and he instinctively let's go. I hardly

register the pain in my left hand, and I won't notice until all is said and done that I'm bleeding.

They're still yelling, scolding me. The woman worries over her puppy as the man demands my contact information. I'm numb, strangely feeling nothing but concern for Cooper.

"I'm so sorry. Is your dog okay?" I ask, plugging my phone number into their phone.

They leave without responding. They leave without concern for my bleeding hand. My strength waivers. There are dozens of people with their dogs, but no one says a thing to me. Cooper is quiet. He doesn't care anymore. I hold onto him despite his desire to play.

I'm on the ground, holding Cooper, crying. I'm crying. Why am I crying? I'm angry at Cooper; angry that he can't be nice. I'm angry at the couple who yelled at me. I'm angry at the couple who were tossing

What can you do for a woman having an anxiety attack in public? It's only Cooper and me sitting in the dirt.

ice cubes. I'm angry I didn't leave when I knew we were done. No, I'm not angry. I'm scared. I hold onto Cooper as I'm racked with sobs. I can't lose him. He's my best friend.

No one comforts me. No one asks if I'm okay. No one else's dog comes near us. It's as if they know not to engage in an uncomfortable situation. What can you do for a woman having an anxiety attack in public? It's only Cooper and me sitting in the dirt.

It takes me a long time to stop shaking. We leave through the side entrance, descending the hill to the safety of my car. I'm still sobbing as I sit in the driver's seat and use a first aid kit from the console to slather my hand in antiseptic and then apply Band-Aids. There are small puncture wounds across my knuckles and on the side of my finger. The fingernail on my index finger has an inch-long tear. It leaves a scar for months afterwards.

I'm still sobbing when the couple calls, wanting Cooper's vaccination records. I tell them over and over that I am sorry. They call one last time after the puppy is finished getting stitches. I'm afraid they're going to ask me to pay their vet bills. I'm afraid they're going to want Cooper to be put down. On the verge of tears, I ask for their dog's vaccination records for my wounds.

They apologize. The couple expresses regret for screaming at me and accusing me of having an aggressive dog. They don't blame me or Cooper for reacting. They claim their puppy didn't know any better. They blame the couple throwing ice cubes for causing a food fight. They offer their dog's vaccination records for my injuries, and we never talk again.

Cooper is asleep on the couch next to me. I lie next to him with my head on his chest, listening to him breathe. Over the next few weeks, we work on sharing toys and the command “drop it.” Cooper doesn’t take to it very well. I limit our days at the dog park. We go early mornings when there are only a few dogs. He misses playing with new friends, but there is less of a risk of him getting upset.

I work with my therapist to overcome my anxiety of returning to the dog park, to returning to the spot of the metaphorical crime. Cooper is a good boy with a few flaws. Therapy doesn’t stop me from worrying and watching him like a hawk. There isn’t a moment at the park where he leaves my sight. We take more walks on the trails away from people and dogs, away from anxiety. I break my foot a month later, and Cooper spends the rest of the summer at my parents’ farm running free and learning to mind his manners.

The background of the cover features a vibrant green aurora borealis (Northern Lights) against a dark blue, starry night sky. The aurora consists of several vertical, wavy bands of light that transition from a bright green at the bottom to a darker green and blue at the top. The stars are small, white dots scattered across the dark blue background.

Keep Calm and Carriage On

Danielle Rodriguez

INTERNATIONAL AMTRAK TRAIN. DISTANT
TALKING. RUMBLES FROM MOVING TRAIN.

JONATHAN: (Monotone voice) Hi everyone. Please pullout your tickets. Have them ready to scan. Remember, if you want food or drink, the dining car is at the back of the train. I'm Jonathan, and this is my coworker, Steven. We will be seated at the front of the car. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Thank you for choosing Amtrak.

STEVEN: Could you sound any more dead inside?

JONATHAN: Yes actually, this is one of my good days. Ticket sir?

A REOCCURING BEEP AFTER EVERY TICKET
SCAN.

STEVEN: So what's up? You finally going to do it?

JONATHAN: Do what? Ticket please.

STEVEN: I was checking out the schedule, and you and Vanessa are off this weekend. I don't know about you, but I think it's fate.

JONATHAN: I thought she was seeing some police officer? Do you have a ticket, ma'am?

STEVEN: Look, my sister's friend's cousin is Vanessa's roommate, and she said that her friend's cousin said that her and the police guy broke up last week. He was caught in some girl's DMs.

JONATHAN: So is she heartbroken or can I make a move? Ma'am, this is a coupon.

PASSENGER 1: Oh, sorry. I don't have my cheaters on.

STEVEN: Three for two dollars on family-size chips? Where at?

JONATHAN: Steven.

STEVEN: Oh, yeah, you can make your move now. Ma'am, will you be using that coupon?

JONATHAN: He's joking, ma'am. Don't pay attention to him. Enjoy your ride.

STEVEN: (whisper) Dude, she's leaving the state. She doesn't need it.

JONATHAN: Can we get back to Vanessa—

TRAIN DOORS OPEN.

STEVEN: Speak of the newly single devil. Hi Vanessa! Passing through?

VANESSA: Hi guys. I'm looking for Charles. Have you seen him?

STEVEN: We have not, but we have a question for you.

VANESSA: What can I do for ya?

STEVEN: Take it away, Jonathan!

JONATHAN: Do you like music?

VANESSA: Music? Yeah, I like music. Do you?

JONATHAN: Yes, I also like music.

VANESSA: Cool.

JONATHAN: Cool. We both happen to like music, and we work together—

VANESSA: Yeah! Hey, it's nice chatting, but I must go find Charles.

TRAIN DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE.

STEVEN: (Mocks) Do you like music? Idiot.

JONATHAN: I wasn't prepared!

STEVEN: Embarrassing.

JONATHAN: Just finish scanning tickets. I'm going to go sit down.

STEVEN: (laughs) Yeah, you go do that, player.

NOISE FADES OUT AND COMES BACK.
PASSENGERS SPEAK QUIETLY.

STEVEN: How come I've never seen one of those white cows with the black spots like you do in the movies and on TV?

JONATHAN: Do you think I'll ever recover from that conversation with Vanessa? I think she thinks I'm an idiot.

STEVEN: You ever notice? They are all almost full brown or brown and white or black. Not those TV cows though. I don't ever see those.

JONATHAN: I mean, she might have just found it funny. Wait what?

STEVEN: Cows, man. I watch them when we pass by the fields.

JONATHAN: You're saying you have never seen a black-and-white cow before?

STEVEN: Nah, man. We passed plenty of cow fields, and I've never seen one. You are lying if you say you have seen one because we passed the same fields together.

JONATHAN: Actually, the Holstein Friesian cattle are more common in Northern Holland and Northern Germany. There are some here, but we've shortened the name to Holstein. They are in the process of going extinct, so we more commonly have different breeds. It's just that the Holstein Friesian are most often the 'face' of marketing milk and other dairy products.

STEVEN: What are you, a cow expert?

JONATHAN: I occasionally read.

STEVEN: About cows? I've worked here with you for three years and never seen you pick up a book.

JONATHAN: I happened to see an article about it. I didn't have anything else to read. Besides, when I do read it's while you and Mandy are "cleaning" the bathrooms. I must cover for you.

STEVEN LAUGHS.

STEVEN: Speaking of Mandy—

JONATHAN: Not today, dude. Hey, what time is it?

STEVEN: 12 pm. Why?

JONATHAN: Break time!

STEVEN: No, you have it at 1 pm usually.

JONATHAN: Talked to Charles the other day to move it up, so it matches Vanessa's. It's my time!

STEVEN: I feel bad for Vanessa. She gotta hear you stutter for an hour. Hey man, share your cow knowledge. Apparently that's all you know.

FOOTSTEPS. CONVERSATIONS FADE IN AND OUT. TRAIN DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE UNTIL JONATHAN REACHES THE DINING CAR. SOFT MUSIC PLAYS OVER SPEAKERS.

VANESSA: Jonathan? Hi, I thought your break wasn't until one?

JONATHAN: Yeah, it usually is, but Charles changed it for some reason. Did you ever get to talk to him like you wanted to earlier?

VANESSA: Cool! Have a seat then. I didn't get to talk to him. He was super busy this morning. Something about a ticket mix-up.

THEY BOTH STAY QUIET AS THE SOFT MUSIC PLAYS OVER THE SPEAKERS.

JONATHAN: Do you watch the cows pass?

VANESSA: The cows?

JONATHAN: Yeah, Steven and I—

PAUSE.

VANESSA: Hey, can I ask you something?

JONATHAN: Oh yeah, of course.

VANESSA: I was thinking—

TRAIN DOORS OPEN.

STEVEN: Don't worry, I am here to cure the awkward silence I can sense from two cars down.

JONATHAN: We were talking. Thank you for gracing us with your unwanted presence. Aren't you supposed to be—I don't know—doing your job?

STEVEN: I was doing my job, but then Mandy came. Then suddenly I wasn't doing my job.

JONATHAN: So why are you here and not with Mandy not doing your job?

STEVEN: Well, that's why I'm here—

VANESSA: Um, should I give you guys a minute?

JONATHAN: What? No. It's fine. He's going to go back to his car.

STEVEN: Dude, we need to talk.

VANESSA: I'm going to go find Mandy. You guys seem like you need to talk. I'll catch up with you later, Jonathan.

JONATHAN: Wait—

TRAIN DOORS OPEN AND SHUT. SOFT MUSIC
LINGERS IN THE BACKGROUND.

JONATHAN: Dude, what the hell.

STEVEN: It's important to trust me.

JONATHAN: Well, what is it then?

STEVEN: I was hanging out with Mandy, right? Charles saw us and got mad. He told me that we must always be at least three feet from each other.

JONATHAN: What does this have to do with you interrupting?

STEVEN: Come on, man. You know I don't like it when you interrupt my storytelling.

JONATHAN: (Sarcastic) You're right. How rude. Please go on.

STEVEN: So he told us to stay three feet apart, right? I guess I got Mandy talking, you know. When she starts there's no getting her to stop. So, she brought up Vanessa—

JONATHAN: Vanessa?

STEVEN: Yeah! You see where I'm going now.

JONATHAN: Continue.

STEVEN: Vanessa was telling Mandy that she really wants to—

PASSENGER 2: Excuse me.

JONATHAN: How can I help you, Miss?

PASSENGER 2: Yeah, can I get a hot dog?

JONATHAN: Um, Miss, I don't work the concession stand. That's him over there.

PASSENGER 2: You work here, don't you?

JONATHAN Well, yes but—

PASSENGER 2: Great. Then you can get me a plain hot dog and a Coke. Thanks.

JONATHAN: Uh, Miss?

PASSENGER 2: Thank you.

JONATHAN: I'll be right back.

FOOTSTEPS FADE OUT.

STEVEN: Hi, my name is Steven. Can I say you are incredibly beautiful?

PASSENGER 2: Not a chance.

STEVEN: Hey, I always shoot. I don't always score, but I always shoot.

FOOTSTEPS APPROACH.

JONATHAN: Here you go.

PASSENGER 2: Keep the change.

TRAIN DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE.

STEVEN: You never did find it, huh Jonathan?

JONATHAN: Find what?

STEVEN: Your backbone.

JONATHAN: Vanessa really wants to what?

STEVEN: Oh yeah! Vanessa told Mandy that she really wants to—

TRAIN DOORS OPEN

CHARLES: Steven! Why aren't you in your designated area? You are not scheduled for a break for another hour.

STEVEN: Charles! Listen, I got thirsty, and I left Mandy in my spot so that I could grab a bottle of water.

CHARLES: I know, that's what Mandy told me fifteen minutes ago. Get back to work.

STEVEN: All right, all right, I'm going.

JONATHAN: Wait, what about Vanessa?

TRAIN DOORS CLOSE.

CHARLES: Good afternoon, Jonathan. If he tries to come back send him back again, would you?

JONATHAN: Yes, sir.

TRAIN DOORS OPEN.

VANESSA: Hello, Charles.

CHARLES: Hello, Vanessa. I know you've been looking for me all day, but give me a few minutes and I'll come back to talk.

VANESSA: No problem. See you soon. Hi again, Jonathan.

JONATHAN: Seems like we can never have a conversation around here. What was it you were going to ask me?

VANESSA: What? Oh, yeah, never mind. I ended up talking it over with Mandy again. I figured it all out.

JONATHAN: Cool. So anyway, remember I asked if you liked music?

VANESSA: Yes, I remember.

JONATHAN: Well, there's a band playing at Blue Chicago this weekend. Real nice band. I've been listening to them for about a year now and I was wondering—

VANESSA: Oh my God! A live band! That's perfect! You're so smart, Jonathan.

JONATHAN: What?

VANESSA: You just gave me the best idea.

JONATHAN: What do you mean?

VANESSA: I was going to ask you if it was a smart idea to ask out Charles. I've liked him for a while now. I've been nervous that he'd turn me down because of the age difference. But Mandy convinced me just now that it was fine.

JONATHAN: He's like forty-five, isn't he?

VANESSA: Well, yeah, but I'm twenty-five. I'm tired of guys my age. I'm ready for something serious. I was just worried that I wouldn't know where our first date could be, but Blue Chicago is perfect! Who doesn't love live music?

JONATHAN: Wait, Vanessa, I really wanted to—

VANESSA: I must run it by Mandy before he comes back to talk to me. See you later. Enjoy the rest of your break.

FOOTSTEPS FADE AWAY.

JONATHAN: Did I just plan a date for her to use on another man?

TRAIN DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE. FOOTSTEPS.
PEOPLE TALKING SOFTLY AS JONATHAN
MAKES HIS WAY TO HIS CAR.

JONATHAN: You will not believe what I just did.

STEVEN: I have an idea, but please do tell.

JONATHAN: You knew she wanted Charles.

STEVEN: To be fair, I was trying to tell you, man.

JONATHAN: She's going to go to Blue Chicago this weekend with another guy. Not only another guy but my boss, to go see my favorite band play live.

STEVEN: Hey man, I know you're all bummed out, but the good news is see that lady over there?

JONATHAN: Yeah?

STEVEN: While you were gone, I convinced her to give us her coupon. So, when we get home, I'll buy you a bag of chips for your troubles.

JONATHAN: I guess that's cool.

STEVEN: Oh wait—

JONATHAN: What?

STEVEN: It's expired.

JONATHAN: Figures.

NOISE FADES OUT. END.

Pretty Girls

Dakota Gibson

O.M.G., I love that dress!
Wow, your hair is so pretty!
Your nose is literally perfect.
Don't you dare get a nose job
When you smile it outshines the sun.
Too bad your teeth are crooked.
Are those your real lips?
Is that your natural color?
Ugh, I wish my boobs were that big!
Oh, that's mighty bold of you to wear that outfit with
your figure!
You're so brave, honey,
I could never!
Those shoes are to die for,
but you need to shave your legs,
and your pits for that matter,
and don't forget below the belt, ugh!
Brush out your hair,
straighten your skirt,
cover up your tattoos!
God, no man will ever want you with that demeanor.
Don't slouch, dear.
Smile!

Oh my god, shut up!
Shut up,
Shut up!

You are so beautiful.
So authentic,
So, you!

Shouldn't that be enough?

How many pills do I have to take before it'll be
enough?

I love myself,
and that's enough.

Do you really think I'm pretty?



Carbon Copy

Arabela Rowland

I have always been compared to my mother. Except for my pale skin, blue eyes, and Anglo traits I received from my dad, I am her spitting image. There are a few insignificant ways in which we are different, but her face and body are mine. Relatives tell me that we are similarly bright, odd, and free-spirited.

My mother was an active parent. She kept me on a tight schedule and took me with her everywhere she could. I had to have my homework done by a certain time, no matter how laborious the assignment. I had to have read a certain number of books a week, including dreaded lengthy ones. My mother made me write reports during summer break in addition to attending summer school. She made me practice flashcards for hours when I stayed home sick, vomiting with a fever.

My mother put me on a strict diet. I was not allowed to have soda, fast food, or candy except on long road trips. I had eaten so much spinach and broccoli as a child that they were my favorite pizza toppings. My mother seldom let me skip out on exercising. She had me running, doing push-ups, and performing household chores before I started kindergarten. She also pushed me to make friends and participate in school and church activities.

Clearly my mother was the disciplinarian in our household. If I told a lie, yelled, or said a naughty word, I had to suck on soap for thirty minutes. If I was bratty, obnoxious, or lazy, my mother would tan my hide with a belt. Talking back was the worst thing I could do. My mother would not hesitate to slap me hard, reddening my cheeks. When my mother was exhausted, she would make me write what I had done wrong and why until my wrist cramped with pain. My father never partici-

pated in these punishments, and my parents even fought over my mother's strict approach to parenting.

My mother passed away when I was eight years old. I did not know how or why my mother was taken from me at this time. Her death was never explained, but it put an end to my strict schedule and all the rules. Also gone were the hot meals and the colorful stickers

I suppose she hated
letting her emotions
show so she poured out
her heart on the page.

for my childhood
successes.

I did not cry when
my father told me
that my mother was
dead. I did not cry
at the funeral either.

I did not understand
what death was. I somehow thought it was temporary. I thought that I would wake up one day and my mother would be in the kitchen making breakfast. I was uncertain how long I would have to wait, but in my heart, I thought she would come back. I did not realize that she was gone forever, unclaimable, erased from the world.

Slowly I realized my mother would never get to see the woman I would become. Her son would forget about her entirely. I wondered what plans she would have had for us. Would she have raised my brother the same way she raised me? I will never know. Despite my fear of my mother's temper, I loved her. In the words of William Thackeray, "Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children."

Several months after my mother passed away, my family tried to put itself back together. My dad fed us fast food, home-made hamburgers, and SpaghettiOs. My grandparents gave me whatever food I desired. I

started putting on the pounds. I no longer had anyone to make me exercise every day, so I stopped. I was free to read at my own pace and watch what I wanted on television. I could even play games on my computer. It was liberating but strange. It was also the beginning of my struggles with self-discipline. I was free, but I was miserable and lonely.

One day when I was a little older, my father decided to let me go through my mother's possessions. He said, "I don't really need any of this. And it is too painful to keep."

A lot of my mother's clothes fit me perfectly, but it made me uncomfortable wearing them. I kept only a few pieces of her jewelry, but seldom wore them. I also kept her books and old manuscripts. Most importantly I found her journals and class notebooks. When I read through them, I finally understood what my mother was really like. She made a lot of intricate doodles whenever she was bored in class. She wrote about how vulnerable she felt in her friendships and relationship with my father.

Under a picture of herself in the yearbook, she wrote the words "never again." I had learned that during her junior year she weighed over three hundred pounds. Her critical older sister later told me that my mother slimmed down when she became bulimic. The journals also revealed her experimentation with drugs, which my father later revealed was what eventually killed her.

Before learning all of this about my mother, I thought she was made of steel. To me she was a pillar of strength and control. Growing up, I was sometimes unsure of my mother's love for me, but her notebooks

told a different story. I suppose she hated letting her emotions show so she poured out her heart on the page. I used to think that she was hard on me because she would not settle for anything less than perfection in her first born. I now understand that the only reason my mother pushed me so hard was because she did not want me to turn into her, always struggling for a semblance of control and stability. But in many ways, I became like her anyway.

Our matriarchal line is like a fax machine. Every one of us, although living in different circumstances and times, seem to be bright women with a lot of ambition but little follow through. We seem to dislike ourselves no matter how much we accomplish. We fall madly in love with men who are not right for us, and we can never seem to control our spiraling health. I live in fear of raising a child as ill-prepared for the world as I was. I do not wish my life's perspectives, fears, and frustrations on anyone else, especially my future child. It is time to retire the fax machine and begin anew.



Eyes Forward

Jessamin McSwain

Something's wrong.

I feel it too.

I don't think we're alone . . .

I see him.

Maybe he's just walking by.

I think we're safe.

We should stay in the car.

My apartment is just across the street.

This is a bad idea.

I'm going. Are you coming with me?

Always.

He's just standing there

In the rain.

Without an umbrella.

Walk faster.

I'm keeping up.

He's still there.

Do you think he's following us?

He's just standing under the streetlamp.

Is he holding something?

Who is that guy?

Are there any cars coming?

There is. We must wait.

I feel like he's watching us.

Just ignore him.

I can't.

Just a few more seconds and we can cross.

Does he seem like he's getting closer?

Don't turn around.

Should we go?

Yes. Walk fast, very fast.

Just walk.

Is it him?

Good. Keep walking. Don't turn around.

We're halfway there

Keep going.

He's following us, isn't he?

Almost there.

You're scaring me.

We'll make it.

He's going to catch us.

Don't turn around.

I'm scared.

We're safe, I promise.

Why?

Open the door.

You're lying.

Close it.

I am.

Did you lock it?

I did.

Don't look outside.

Yes.

I'm not sure anymore.

Is he there?

No one's out there.
He wasn't following us.

Where did you go?

Hello?

I remember . . .

I'm okay.

I'm safe.

But you weren't.



Ten Long Years

Zoe Miner

Waiting

Waiting

Waiting

My fantasy of this long-awaited journey
is finally here.

I have been knighted,
I have been told my task,
but first,

I must travel
deep within the Winter Woods,
and release the Mage

who has waited ten years for my return.

Once she is free,
she and I will win this drawn-out war.

Waiting

Waiting

Waiting

Cold's Embrace

Zoe Miner

Deep in my bones
cold has crept in
and wraps herself around me.

I cannot move,
scream,
or fight.

Cold freezes me,
dragging me to unconsciousness,
making me wait.

Here I lie,
deep in the Winter Woods,
in the Hollow Glass Tree.

Waiting to be released,
of cold's tight embrace,
but for now,

I slumber,
the nights and days
away

deep within,
my tomb,
my Hollow Glass Tree.

Glass Tree

Zoe Miner

Bright winter forest,
crisp chill air filling
my lungs.

I hold the key
to enter
the Hollow Glass Tree.

Deep in the forest,
there she sleeps, waiting
for my return.

You and I will fight together
like we once did
as children.

Slaying monsters, demons, and ghouls,
the good will triumph
over evil.

But first, I must release you
from the glass prison,
I placed you in

deep in the Winter Woods.

Glass Tree II

Zoe Miner

I have returned
to the place
we once knew.

The Winter Woods,
treacherous, deadly,
holds your resting place.

I possess the key
and after ten years
I shall release you.

Cold's magic will thaw,
you will awaken
and our quest may continue.

Rise my Mage
so that we may fulfill
the destiny set before us.

But after so long
how can I face you
just to tell you how nothing has changed?

I know you wanted everything
a bit better
but I failed you, and I am sorry.

Warm Embrace

Zoe Miner

Darkness,
ice cold darkness.

There,
in the distance,
a light.

I have not seen
light in so long.

Nor felt its warmth,
yet there it is,
waiting.

I must leave,
leave cold behind
and breakaway

from the ice that binds,
and the shattered crystals
at my feet.

It's so bright,
I nearly can't see
in front of me,
a silhouette.

Please tell me,
it is not a dream.

But I feel you,
your arms around me,
your warm embrace.

You have released me,
released the Mage,
from the Hollow Glass Tree.

Dark Waters

Jessamin McSwain

He liked that my skin wasn't all black, making me more like him. He liked that my hair was cut short, making me look less wild. He liked that my price tag was low, saving him money. I never learned the Ofays' name, and I had no plans on doing so.

"What a peculiar creature," he called me. He was a fat man dressed in a pinstripe suit and smelled of cigar smoke. He licked his lips too often and constantly wiped his hands on his stomach. Enid told me I was purchased with the intent of expanding his harem, to satisfy his needs and look pretty.

When he spoke, spit dribbled from his mouth. He told me, "If it weren't for me, the duke would've killed you, brat. You owe me."

I refused to let him touch me. I didn't owe him anything.

"Amoy?" Enid asks, her soft voice pulling me from the dark recesses of my mind, the one place I could hide. She lightly touches my arm, expressing her concern without many words. She was never a very vocal woman.

"I'm okay. Just thinking," I say.

Enid sits next to me on our makeshift seat. She holds my hand, her thumb caressing the mismatched coloration of my skin. My fingers are white, but my arm brown. White patches developed when I was younger, but I didn't give it a second thought. Now my very skin made me "exotic."

Enid was lucky. She was a mulatto. No men looked at her and claimed she was a fantastic beast to be tamed. She had never been called bizarre or avant-garde. She was simple, overlooked. Often, I found myself wondering what would've been different

if I looked like her. Would I have been bred like a caged beast? Would I have cut myself open?

Enid kisses my hand and gives me a tender look. I tell myself that she can't read minds, but my expressions? She knows me too well. There are so many things that I despise about my own body, but she offers a sense that perhaps I can love myself one day. I smile, resting my head on her shoulder.

The world beyond our tower is drenched in a torrential downpour. The indigo sea churns, rogue waves crashing against the aging walls of the lighthouse. He had sent us here to remain hidden while I recovered. Enid was meant to be my keeper, but instead she became my healer, my companion. She demands nothing of me, instead providing the gentle touch I lost with Mama. Grandnan wasn't as kind. She raised me after Mama died, telling me the stories passed down by generations of our kin.

"We came from Terrene, expectin' equal rights to the cosmos. But they lied. The Ofay stole our people and forced us to work." Grandnan would pace our small quarters, her voice bolstered by the truths of the past. "We built their colonies, did their dirty work, and when they were done with that, they sold us to another. Just like on Terrene, we ain't nothin' to them."

Naive babe that I was, I said what I had been told: "But Nan, we need the Ofay to survive."

"No, we don't! That's just another lie they tell us." She grabbed my ear and dragged me upright until I met her eyes. "You don't owe no one nothin', you hear me? No Ofay will ever provide you more than you could make on your own."

"But we ran away and now we have nothing."

I received a beating that night as Grandnan told me to be thankful for what we had. If only I had understood then. I'd rather be free and poor than an Ofays' bitch parading around in decadence and false pleasure. I'd rather be dead.

Thunder shakes the glass of latticed windows. "It's an omen," Grandnan said, "when a storm passes through before the Ofay arrive. It means Mami-Wata is watching out for you."

Grandnan never lied. He was meant to arrive, to retrieve Enid and me from this accursed lighthouse, but the storm caused a delay. We assumed it would only delay the inevitable for a few hours, but instead it had been a few days. I pray the storm never ends.

Practice of Mami-Wata had been outlawed long before my birth. Grandnan taught me anyway. She taught me to give thanks to Mami-Wata, to provide her with sweets and shiny trinkets. She taught me that Mami-Wata had many names: Watramama, River Mamma, Mamy Wata, and Maman Dlo. She taught me that Mami-Wata was benevolent yet malevolent. She causes disease but cures infertility. She is bound to Terrene yet is also a free spirit swimming within the cosmos, watching over her children.

Enid slips from my side, keeping hold of my hand. "Let's go to bed."

"In a moment," I say. She once more kisses my hand before descending into our shared chamber. We had pushed the beds together to share warmth and many other things. As soon as the storm passes that too will end.

The beacon of the lighthouse attempts to illuminate the overcast sky, a fruitless effort. Nothing can

pierce the darkness of a storm. I glance at the stairs wondering whether to sleep. It could be our last night together. My heart wails, but my mind knows better. I can't go back. I can't keep living like this. I can't.

I push open the watchroom door, stepping through the veil onto the cool balcony. The rain cracks against my skin, revealing the mask I wear to stay alive. Lightning strikes distant land and a rolling thunderclap follows, leaving my ears ringing. This is what it must

It could be our last night together. My heart wails, but my mind knows better. I can't go back. I can't keep living like this. I can't.

feel like to be alive.

My skin melts as the rain tears apart my walls. Arms outstretched, I welcome the beating drums

of the storm. A rogue wave collides with the lighthouse, spraying water far into the air. It touches the balcony, then my bare toes, showering me in the salt of an alien sea. Grandnan showed me drawings of Terrene and the oceans that covered it, but it had never been real to me. This is.

Enid could live this life. She didn't understand the pain of despising herself. She didn't understand why I purged myself of that filth. She didn't understand I wanted us both to die. I carefully run my hand across the keloid scar on my lower abdomen.

In barely a whisper, I release the guilt: "I'm sorry Khenan." I had killed my son, not wanting him born into this world. I wanted to go with him, to teach him about Grandnan and Mama and our people. Instead, I

remained alive, cursed at and cast aside. I never asked for the Ofay's help. I never asked to continue. I'm a dead woman walking.

Grandnan told me a story once of a young girl who prayed to Mami-Wata each day, giving her gifts, and keeping the beach clean. She asked Mami-Wata to help her escape her village and to escape the Ofay. One day she arrived at the beach to give another offering and discovered a sea turtle hatchling being pestered by gulls. The girl protected the hatchling with a palm frond until at last it reached the waves and freedom. Satisfied, she sat and watched the hatchling leave, wishing she too could do the same.

That night, a great wave descended on the village and the young girl was lost. Grandnan said that it was Mami-Wata who took the girl. She said the girl was taken to the paradisiacal realm of Mami-Wata as a reward for her diligence and aid to the hatchling. I don't have a hatchling to protect.

Drenched, I step back into the watchroom from the balcony. Without thought, I descend into our prison. Enid is asleep, her light freckled skin lit only by the candle at her bedside. She has left it burning for me. I caress her cheek and give her a light kiss before taking the candle.

"I love you," I whisper. I descend farther down the lighthouse, to the small storage room at its base. Setting the candle on a barrel, I begin turning the bulkhead door. As the seal releases, waves splash through the opening. I've been planning this since day one, but I never expected to fall in love. I stayed for Enid, for the love she gave me. I want her to remember me well.

Closing the bulkhead door, I stand on the bal-

cony over the high-tide line. Strong currents from the storm cause large waves to crash against me. The force is enough to seriously harm anyone caught unaware. The banister is slick but provides the handholds I need to find the ladder down. Boats would wait here, delivering supplies or removing residents. It wasn't meant for a bare body.

I cry as I'm pressed against the metal rungs by a rogue wave. My ribs ache: perhaps they are broken. I continue my descent, counting down in preparation for my jump onto the shoal below.

"Please Mami, let me go," I scream into the night. A wave responds, its force knocking my skull into a rung. The world spins as I gasp. What would I do if I stayed? What good would it do if I lived?

I plead, "I can't. Not anymore."

Another wave crashes against the lighthouse, its strength pushing me upward. Someone or something is answering, pleading back. I want to die and it—she—wants me to live. But for what?

The wind causes the bulkhead door to creak and then slam open. The metal shudders as Enid pulls herself toward me along the banister.

"Amoy! What're you doing?" she calls, her voice swallowed by the wind.

What am I doing? I'm hurting her. I'm hurting myself. I gasp for air as another wave envelopes me. I can't let go. I meet her eyes, knowing my own must appear wild and uncertain.

"Come back to me," she pleads, arm outstretched as she kneels. She's crying. I know that feeling. I felt it when Grandnan died, when she gave up.

I grab hold of the rung above me and start

climbing. What would I do if I stayed? Love her. What good would it do if I lived? She would be happy. What am I living for? Her.

I grab onto Enid's arm, and she helps me crawl onto the balcony. The sea seems to calm, the spray of the waves kissing my legs. Its frustration passes. Lying beside Enid, sodden in saltwater, I laugh. She turns to me with a confused expression, fussing over the bruise on my forehead.

“Mami-Wata wasn't delaying him. She was trying to teach me,” I yell through the thunder, a smile plastered on my face. “Trying to teach me to fight for the things I love.” I kiss Enid, letting my fears dissolve. No Ofay would take her from me. No Ofay would own me. No Ofay would survive my wrath.

A Life in Literature:

A Conversation with Poets

Krysten Hill and Emily Davis-Fletcher

Staff: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

Krysten Hill: I grew up in the inner city of Kansas City, and I spent most of my childhood in the same house where my mama was raised. I learned to be a kid of front porches because it wasn't always safe to walk around the neighborhood. This wasn't a deficit though. I grew up learning how to observe a place and to learn.

Staff: And you, Emily?

Emily Davis-Fletcher: I grew up in St. Louis with my mom and my younger sister, Lora, who also graduated from Stephens College. In 1992, when I was eight, we moved to Gerald, Missouri, population 888, and lived on a small pig farm with a man who would become my stepfather. In St. Louis, my mom was always afraid of something from the outside getting in and hurting us whereas in the country the violence was in the home with my stepdad.

Staff: It is interesting that one of you is from Kansas City and the other from St. Louis and that you both seemed to have had challenging childhoods. Did you move around much before graduating from high school?

KH: During middle school, my mama moved us to the suburbs. I hated it. The block didn't have the same vibrant energy. As a black kid surrounded by white kids, it could be lonely. On top of that, I was shy, and it took a lot of work for me to talk to other people. Thank goodness for libraries!

EDF: I was able to escape at thirteen when I was accepted to an all-girls boarding school, Marian Heights Academy, in Ferdinand, Indiana, which I'm sure was a steppingstone to Stephens.

Staff: It is natural at this point to ask why you attended Stephens. You also returned fall 2021 to co-teach our poetry workshop.

KH: I came to Stephens in 2004. Honestly, I applied on a dare. A teacher at my high school said there was no way I could get into Stephens. Some of that had to do with my financial standing and some of that was her racism. I'm glad I found the courage to apply because my time at Stephens was formative for me.

EDF: I also needed a bit of courage and felt lost about the decision-making process. But signs from a higher power kept popping up for me to go to Stephens. I had several college applications for women's colleges, but I felt totally paralyzed making the decision. And I couldn't finish the college essays. By the time I should have had the application done and been accepted to Stephens, I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Women who are going places start at Stephens College." Still, I couldn't get through the essay. Another couple of months went by and my mom became friends with this couple who owned an old movie theatre in Washington, Missouri, and their daughter was starting at Stephens fall 2001. It was June, time was running out, so meeting her got my attention. I finished my essay and submitted my application.

Staff: What do you remember most about your time at Stephens?

KH: At Stephens I found the language for the ideals I've believed in for most of my life. I knew I believed in feminism and that I had experienced the effects of racism and misogyny throughout my life, but I entered classrooms where I was learning how to share these things and unpack them in an academic way. These were the classrooms where I first encountered Audre Lorde, *The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves*, or plays by black women. I was also part of a rad feminist learning community on campus called Wood Hall. We did some controversial events and protests on campus. We chalked the campus with statistics about sexual violence, brought in sex-ed speakers to talk about sexual health, and had some memorable dance parties. I'm still in touch with a lot of those folks today.

EDF: I loved my time at Stephens. I felt really blessed to be there. I remember sitting in a large flowerpot on the quad at night (sober) feeling completely grateful and blessed to be at Stephens. I continue to feel blessed for the experience. At Stephens, I felt comfortable and accepted and made friends quickly. But I still struggled with confidence and anxiety about writing even though I had this strong calling to be a writer. My anxiety and perfectionism made it difficult to turn in many writing assignments on time. Often, I'd have to go to the library to write where I could get away from distractions or excuses not to write.

Staff: Time to talk poetry. I would love to hear about your evolution as a poet.

KH: Back in the day, I wanted to sound like a mix of Sylvia Plath and Saul Williams. Sometimes, I forced rhyming to make work sound more musical. I was also scared to say some things because I thought about offending a reader. Turns out, I had to pull away from imagining my reader as one thing. I had to think about who I wanted to talk to in my poetry and how to reach them. Sometimes, I underestimated the power of sounding like myself. The more I read, the more I saw a space for sounding like myself and revealing my own experience.

EDF: My poetry has grown in tandem with my spiritual and personal healing. It's been a healing journey to find joy and freedom in my relationship with my writing. Treating my inner artist like a child has helped tremendously as well. For example, setting small goals, rewarding myself, emphasizing fun and process not product, etc. I highly recommend *The Artist Way* by Julia Cameron for writers or artists who struggle expressing their creativity, and I am always happy to talk about what's worked for me, so please reach out.

Staff: Artists and writers often wonder about the value and importance of what they do. Talk a little bit about the importance of a life in poetry.

KH: Poetry saved my life. A lot of people say that, but for real. In high school, I was going through a lot and feeling displaced. I found myself in a mental hospital

for a few weeks. In the resource room, I remember finding Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese." The first line simply proclaims, "You do not have to be good." In the permission of the first line of Oliver's poem, I found the strength to reexamine myself and my worth in a difficult world. Here was a poet telling me I didn't have to be perfect and that I belonged everywhere. That was a gateway for me to other poets who helped me investigate the process of selfness and discovery.

EDF: I also found poetry to be a mode of healing. A sanctuary. A friend. It's that voice within me that tells me I am not alone. I always have my writing, my creativity. It's also a form of transcendence, catharsis, expansion. When my experiences and imagination meld into poetry, they become greater than the moment, than something that is mine. They transcend time, place, me. The work of so many poets reminds me about what's essential in life, what matters. They give words to my feelings. I hope my work does the same for others.

Staff: We are all so proud of you two. I would love to take a moment and talk about your many accomplishments since graduation.

KH: In 2016, Productions published my chapbook, *How Her Spirit Got Out*. They are a small but mighty independent press that take chances on brave work. That little book just keeps doing things and reaching communities I would never have imagined. In 2017, my chapbook won the Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize. I always tell beginning writers to never discount the power of indie presses. Additionally, I do various readings in

Boston, where I live, but now, because of the pandemic and online readings, I've been able to reach people in the international community as well. Most recently, I received the 2020 Mass Cultural Council Poetry Fellowship, which came with some money to help me apply to other fellowships and contests.

EDF: I was shortlisted for the Sublingual Poetry Prize in 2019, which was judged by Dorianne Laux whom I hugely admire. I've read at numerous events in Ireland, such as the Cork International Poetry Festival in 2018; and I've been involved with many literary groups, events and taught workshops in South Carolina, where I've lived for several years. Last year, I was a featured poet on the online poetry show *Chewing the Gristle*, which is an educational resource for poets. Currently, I am earning my MFA at Hollins University. Teaching a short poetry class at Stephens College in 2021 was a tremendous honor. I felt I had come full circle. It allowed me to give back to the English and creative writing department that fostered my writing.

Staff: Should we end with a bit of advice for emerging writers?

KH: It will be hard. You must hustle. There may be weeks, months, or years when you don't write much, or do anything but "collecting" and observing the world. Wherever you find yourself, seek out communities that help you grow and keep writing. Go to readings by yourself. Attend terrible open mics for the practice and community. Read a book every week. Don't just read poetry. MFA programs are not the only pathway to

writing and publishing, and don't let anyone make you feel like "literary success" is one thing or just involves academia. If there is no literary community where you are, start small spaces for generating work and community workshops. Find your people.

EDF: Yes, I completely agree. I would also add, listen to your heart and when you can't tell the difference between your heart and your head, go for a walk. You will hear that inner voice that guides you to your dreams. I remind myself and my workshop students that as writers a big part of what we do is wonder and play in the realm of uncertainty, so sitting and wondering is ok. It's part of the job. Just ask Keats. Keep a notebook and set small goals like writing for ten minutes a day. Let questions guide your writing. Take up practices that help you love and accept yourself because they will nourish your relationship with your writing, as well as all other relationships in life. Trust that everything you do is feeding your craft, even if it seems totally unrelated to poetry, like mining or bagging groceries. Trust that you are living poetry!

Staff: You two are the best. Thanks so much for answering our questions. Also thank for allowing *Harbinger* to be the first publisher of a new poem by each of you.

Tornado Season

Krysten Hill

Sister, it's the same nightmare.
Mama comes back months after we bury her,
young again on new legs, running through rooms
we outgrew, urging us to go
to the lowest part of the house.
Below, the dirt kicks into our noses,
and she pushes us into the pantry.
Before she yanks the door closed, we see it
through the basement window— the ground it takes
into its skirt, the final Good Lord
it takes from her mouth before
she shuts us inside. All we own shifts
above us. Our possessions moan across the ceiling.
And then the house peels back, yawning, a roof
of a mouth breaking from its jaw.

My Top Right Central Incisor

Emily Davis-Fletcher

This man with latex hands jokes
with his assistant—
Pass the hammer.

As if it can be fixed
like a leaning fence post.
As if it could make me smile
like a pair of sad clown portraits.
As if I could forget it
like the tiger's eye in my pocket.

As if my top right central incisor is not
myself out of line, hip jutting,
arms crossed when I lie
deny I told Mel at Saturday's sleepover
my uncle has AIDS.

A stone that shelters a frog
from summer sun.
Sit there, I tell my sister.
And when the stone rocks forward
I drop on her
You killed a frog.

The snout of a 'possum skull
poking through a hayloft
smelling I'm stuck with the wasp
I shake in a jar 'til my arms ache.

A hard, smooth belly of garlic undressed
under the sharp knife I hold for the first time
chop the way Mom shows me.
Without cutting myself, I say,

You should have an abortion.

His t-shirt I punch in the back
on a line of whites.

My bedroom door that jumps
as the stray we named Al is beaten
for biting the tail off a calf.

Your three pillows to my one.
Hug me, I whisper up.
No, hug me, you whisper down.

The Breakup: A Poem in Three Parts

Maggie Lowery



Reminders

I find myself finding
things that remind me of you.
Sometimes it's a song,
other times a small trinket.
I find myself
absorbed by the object,
letting it consume me,
until I snap-back
in a puddle of my own tears.

Words

One last time.
It was one last time they met.
He picked a public place
because he knew how she would react.
When she heard the words
it was like a knife to the throat.
She could not say a word.
Instead, a single tear dropped
in the coffee she was holding tenderly.

Touch

Every time he held her,
time moved slower and she felt safe.
Touch was her way of talking
when words would not do the trick.
He slowly stopped touching her,
starting during small moments
that became more noticeable.
Once touch started to leave,
thoughts of doubt filled the gap.

Rotten Luck

Jack Hayes

“Hey! Jude!”

The wind stings my cheeks; my nose is red. I tug my denim jacket closed against the chill. The leaves I’m trudging through are soggy and gross from last night’s rain.

“Jude!” I call again. “Don’t ignore me, doofus.”

“Huh?” Jude turns, confused. She tugs off the headphones of her Walkman. “Hey, what’re you doin’ here, Ramona? Don’t you bike to school with Eddie?”

I’ve been friends with Jude since sixth grade. When my best friend Sarah moved to Oregon and left me alone with a friendship bracelet and our co-parented Tamagotchi, Jude was there. I sat down next to her in the cafeteria, and she asked if I wanted to see the weird bug she found. I’ve been tagging along after her ever since.

I take a moment to catch my breath, hands on my knees. “Geez, you walk fast.”

“No, you’ve got short legs.”

“I don’t, and yeah, I usually go with Eddie, but my bike got stolen on Friday.”

Her gray eyes grow wide. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I start to pout even though Jude teases me about acting like a kid. “Some jerk took the oldest bike of the bunch. Why couldn’t he cut me some slack, huh?”

“You shoulda told me. I’d have beat that creep-azoid into the dust!” Jude punches her palm for emphasis.

I roll my eyes at her tomboy act and yank my baseball cap down to keep the November wind out of my face. I’ve always been unlucky. I must’ve broken a few dozen mirrors when I was born. My games are always

getting rained out at the park. I fall on my butt during kickball. And I get paired with the laziest kid in class for projects. And now my rust-bucket bike has been stolen during the wettest, most miserable November ever.

A slug crawls across the sidewalk in front of us. Jude stops, crouches down, and nudges it into the grass with a stick. “Well, guess you’re stuck with me,” she says with a shrug. “Let’s get going.”

The road to school does seem longer when I’m not racing Eddie, trying to beat his record. My mom would lose her mind if she knew how fast we rode, though I bet she did the same thing when she was my age.

I kind of zone out during Jude’s babble. She’s what my mom calls a blabbermouth, which seems rude but true. She talks about her Taekwondo class. Her dad signed her up after some girl went missing a few streets over. It’s not like she needs the classes, though. I’ve seen Jude take down some jerk in the cafeteria with a lunchbox.

“Hey.” Jude nudges me. “You wanna take a shortcut?”

“Huh?” I’m startled out of my thoughts. We’re still a few minutes away from school, and the morning bell will ring soon.

“There’s no way I’m cutting through someone’s backyards,” I say. “My mom grounded me last time I jumped fences with you. Forget it.”

“No, dummy, through the woods.” Jude points toward a thick stand of trees. She grabs me by the arm and drags me off the sidewalk before I can protest. “C’mon. If I’m tardy again, I’m gonna get detention, and Mom will confiscate my N64.”

“You mean your brother’s N64,” I make a point of saying, envious that she’s got one at all.

Jude walks with the confidence of an explorer. She pushes aside a branch opening onto a muddy path that winds through the trees. There is a babbling creek up ahead and a big concrete pipe where Eddie fell over once on his bike and broke his arm. The few cars driving by fade into silence as their tires move through the mud.

“We can cut through the woods, then the park. School’s just on the other side,” Jude explains breathlessly.

“Geez, are you really late this often?”

She shrugs and hops over a tree root. “Yeah, when Mom’s working. Dad usually burns breakfast, and I have to wait for him to make it again.”

The stream rushes over rocks and discarded beer bottles. The water is cloudy and choked with plants that sway in the current.

Jude leaps to the first rock, and says, “Last one across is a rotten egg!”

I stop at the creek’s edge; the water laps at the toes of my sneakers. Light streaming through the trees almost makes the day seem nice and sunny. My reflection in the water wavers and smiles back at me, all crooked teeth and big nose. When a leaf lands on the water’s surface, my reflection disappears in the ripples. Pretty place, even if it stinks like garbage right now.

“Hey, slowpoke, what are you—”

When I look up, Jude’s standing on a large flat rock in the middle of the stream, halfway across.

She points at something downstream, splayed out in the water. Some fleshy thing.

“I think it’s dead.”

“Is it a deer?” I ask, though I know it’s not.

There’s no fur, no hooves, no antlers. Just a thing lying there at an unnatural angle. My fingers twist at the hem of my shirt. I want it to be a deer. Better a deer than anything else.

Jude doesn’t answer. She jumps into the water up to her ankles and makes a beeline for the dead thing. As I follow her, my shoes sink into the mud. My skin crawls. I really don’t want to check this thing out, but I also don’t want Jude to think I’m chicken. Wouldn’t be the first time.

As we creep up on the thing, we hit a wall of stink. It’s smells like the porta potties at the farmer’s market and the mildew in the showers at the YMCA. Or the dead raccoon in our attic last summer.

Jude inhales sharply and then pinches her nose. Her eyes bug out of her head. “It’s a kid,” she says, her voice strained.

I look down at it. It’s a kid in the same way that we’re kids, I guess. First my eyes catch her long, stringy brown hair, then chipped and sparkly blue nail polish. Same shade as mine, the cheap stuff from Claire’s. One of her arms is folded under her body, and the other is splayed out over her head. Flies skitter across her bare back.

“It’s a dead body. A real one.” Jude slaps a hand over her mouth. “Do you think it’s Shelley Mansfield? They never found her.”

“I think Shelley was blonde,” I whisper. My voice won’t come out any louder.

“God, I’m gonna be sick, Ramona. I’m serious.” All the blood has drained from Jude’s face, just like the

dead girl. Jude hunches over, curling in on herself.

I crouch down to take a closer look. I feel like I know this girl. If I saw her at the grocery store, I'd be able to shout her name. I lean forward to steady myself on a rock; the muddy bank gives way and I slip. I extend my hand to catch myself, and it lands on the girl's cold skin.

Jude shrieks, "Shit! Shit! You touched her."

"I just want to see who she is! I think I know her from school or something..." My heart beats like a jackhammer now. I just touched a dead body. It's nothing like the kind of stuff I read in *Goosebumps*. There are no corpses in *Goosebumps*. I take a deep breath and say, "I'm just gonna flip her over."

Jude swallows nervously and says, "This is such a bad idea. This isn't kid stuff. This is a dead body. My uncle's a cop, we're gonna... oh, my god, we're gonna go to jail!"

I don't know why I have to turn over the body, but I can't think of anything else to do. Maybe I want the body to be a person with a face and eyes and not just a dead thing we discovered in the woods.

Slowly and carefully, I roll her over. The water gently moves the girl's hair out of her face. Her eyes are open, rolled back and bloodshot. Dark brown but clouded over. A fat, purple tongue sticks out of her slack mouth. It's like some kinda monster mask with a creepy, toothy yawn.

Dark, spiderweb-like veins cover a body of pale and pruney skin. Her bruised neck is turned at a weird angle. She's so skinny and childlike that I suddenly don't want to look anymore. It feels as if I'm invading her privacy.

When I look up at Jude, she grips herself tightly and turns away. “This is so messed up,” she whines.

I don’t respond. I’m trying to find in the girl’s face features I recognize. I know her, but from where? Where have I seen her before?

“Ramona?”

“What?” I reply breathlessly, still staring at the dead girl’s unseeing eyes.

“She looks like—” Jude can’t quite form a sentence.

“What?” I repeat.

“You. It’s you,” she blurts out.

My brows scrunch together. “That’s not funny. Don’t say that.”

“I’m not being funny, look.” Jude points at the body like I haven’t already been staring at it.

“She has your hair, your nail polish, your eyes.”

“I said it’s not funny!” My voice breaks. She’s trying to get back at me for flipping over the body. She’s being a jerk. “I get it, I shouldn’t have touched her. You can stop now!”

Jude grabs my wrist. “Look at her. Look.”

I shove Jude away. She stumbles back, nearly falling into the creek.

“Stop being a-a dick,” I say. My face feels hot and my eyes prickle with tears. I know my cheeks are going blotchy as I try not to cry. I don’t want Jude to see me cry.

“The friendship bracelet,” Jude says flatly.

I stand there for a minute, then rub my jacket sleeve across my face and sniff. I can’t look. I have to. I do.

Yeah. She's right. The dead girl has a braided, embroidery thread bracelet around her wrist. All the colors of the rainbow. Sarah gave me the same bracelet before she moved away. Bile rises in my throat and when I swallow, it burns.

"It's you," Jude says again, sniffing but still forceful.

I step back from the body. I unclench my fist and look at the chipped polish on my nails. In the creek, my reflection wavers like TV static. If I took down my ponytail, we'd have the same long, mousy brown hair. We have the same big nose and chapped lips and thin ugly face, but hers is bloated and gross from days, maybe weeks face down in the water.

I rasp, "This isn't real, right? It can't be me. I'm not dead—"

"Are you a ghost?" Jude asks in a hushed voice.

"You grabbed my arm, stupid. Do I feel like a ghost?"

My head is racing. I can't keep track of my thoughts. I want to scream, but it doesn't seem like enough to make this better. I'm going to throw up. I try to breathe, but my breath feels shallow and thin.

"I don't know. I don't get it." Jude pushes her hands through her hair. "This is some serious *Twilight Zone* shit!"

"We need an adult. We need to call the police. We could walk back to my place and use our phone. It's not far."

"What do we say, Ramona? 'Hey, officer, I found a dead body in the creek, and I'm pretty sure it's me!' You can't say that!" Jude grabs my arm to pull me away from the body. "They won't believe us. They'll

think we're crazy, or we'll get blamed!"

"We're not crazy. The body's right there!"

"What if they do think it looks like you? What if they call your mom, and she has to identify you? That's what they have to do when they're rotted enough—"

"We can't leave." I look back at the body.

She—I—look so small and thin. It's cold. What happened to me? Why am I here, in two places at once?

"Yes, we can! No one knows we're here. We can go to school and pretend this never happened." Jude leans down and tugs on my arm. "Ramona, please."

My head hurts. I squeeze my eyes shut and listen to Jude's breathing, to the creek rushing at my feet, to the birds chirping in the trees. It's impossible that this is happening; everything sounds so normal. It's all just going on without me.

"C'mon. Let's go, please."

I take a deep breath. What a mistake. My mouth fills with that horrible smell—the stink of my own rot. It's all I can taste.

Without opening my eyes, I nod to Jude. "Yes, let's go."

We take off running, slipping in the mud as we scramble up the other side of the riverbank. We sprint breathlessly through the wet grass of the park and don't look back.

A week passed. The cops never came to talk to us. Kids played in the park, people drove over the bridge, and nobody called the police to tell them there was a body in the creek. Jude and I haven't talked about it again.

Something funny happened, though. Weird-funny, not haha-funny. Another girl went missing that week. Hannah Goldstein. They just found her body a few days ago.

My mom says she's glad that old bike of mine got stolen. I guess Hannah got snatched up while riding hers home from school. She says, "That could've been you, Mona. I don't want you walking home from school alone anymore."

Yeah. Bad luck, right? I avoid the woods now. Jude still cuts through it, but I don't have the nerve to ask her if my body is still there.

Maybe we dreamed it up. Dumb kid stuff. I hope we did. I don't want to think about what it means if we didn't. What we might've stumbled into.

I guess I should be glad my bike got stolen.

The Room

Lauren M. Granich

There was a stain on the mattress,
and I stayed as far away from it as I could.
The door hadn't opened in three weeks.
Silence filled what had once been my home,
and I feared the worst.
I had been left alone with my thoughts,
and that was the most
unpleasant punishment
I could have ever had.



She's Soft!

Lauren M. Granich

her stomach is warm, rounded, and soft.
my hand grazes it on its way to
her chest,
her throat,
her pulse.
it hums softly beneath her skin.
even her chest, where her collarbone pokes
sharply through her glowing skin,
is soft to the palm of my hands.
My calloused fingers graze
her chest,
her throat,
her pulse.
my thumb presses against her nose,
which is soft too,
and I exhale.
soft. round.
home.

Fear, Horror, Girl

Zoe London

Fear — /'fir/, noun and verb.

To live with it for ages, like a curse, like a familiar companion. And yet, fear itself is a living thing. It's not always a white-hot flash. Sometimes, it lies dormant beneath fingernails, in split cuticles, in barely closed cuts. Fear may take an obvious form. It may disguise itself. Perhaps it takes the shape of nothing at all.

It's all five senses, each raising a new goose-bump on your exposed flesh. The taste being a smidge off when you bite down on your sandwich. The smell when you walk into your apartment—it could be smoke, an intruder, an open flame. The sound of laughter as you pass a group—they don't even know you so why are they laughing at you? The reach under your bed with eyes closed, unsure of what might crawl into your outstretched palm.

Eyes open, you look into the face of someone you suddenly can't understand, questioning if this is when everything comes crashing down.

Fear is quiet, and then it is loud as it screams out: *Run*.

* * *

Horror — /'hôrər/, noun.

If fear is the spark, horror is the flame. It is destruction, by way of revulsion and disgust, our trusted friends. It's the ball dropping. A sinking realization. The second, more terrifying chapter in a novel. A jumpscare in an empty movie theater.

Always, it's the five senses—but as a continuation. You retch into your toilet because your sandwich gave you food poisoning. You connect the smell of smoke to the flame that engulfs your stove top, which you forgot to turn off, and the footsteps coming through

your front door, which you forgot to lock. You hear your name amidst whispers, and the recurrence is a stone in the pit of your stomach. The monster under your bed pulls you toward her.

Being told: *This is the end. I'm leaving.*

Fear waits, and horror strikes when we find we can't run any longer. But the strike is a thrill. The twisted delight of being caught, of feeling the pain of being alive. Horror brings it all to the surface—who we are, and who we wish we were not.

* * *

Girl — /gərl/, noun.

You are three things.

You are a girl.

You are not exactly a girl.

You are not *not* exactly a girl.

Somehow, all these parts of you exist. They do not coexist, but they inhabit one body.

i.

One of you lurks in your bathroom with the chipped paint and the fragrant smell of perfume (your mom's perfume, not your own). You have too many bags of makeup, but they don't paint your face the way you like. Your face has always looked wrong. However, you don't have the words to describe what you would prefer.

You are a girl, but you feel as though you are not living as the girls around you are. Winged eyeliner, lipstick, contour, foundation, eyeshadow of every

color—and you look like them, but you don't. You've never had a boyfriend. You get the sinking feeling that you're going to die alone.

You try a charcoal face mask one night, and your face breaks out into red, splotchy welts. You resign yourself to the face you've been given. You don't love it, but over time, you think it suits you.

ii.

One of you lurks in a group of four on a summer day. You are the only one who didn't wear a dress. Dresses used to suit you at every party, every audition, every glamorous event. Now, they feel too tight.

Constriction. It starts in your lungs, encircles your chest, arms, ribcage. You stare at the men's section in Old Navy. But you are a girl, and you're too afraid to be seen walking to the other side of the store. You are afraid of what you'll see, afraid of being seen. So, you don't.

You wear a red crop top, black jeans, white tennis shoes. Your hair is too long, but you can't make yourself schedule a haircut. You sweat, and you sweat, and you feel like you're drowning in your clothes, simultaneously too loose and too tight. But you are not exactly a girl, so you are afraid to wear a sundress like the others. And still, you must escape.

You can't breathe. Out out out. Please.

You stumble into the nearest clothing store. You buy a men's shirt, blue and white with a floral pattern. Others might call it tacky, but you love it. You change in the grungy bathroom of a sandwich shop. With each button, you can breathe a little easier.

iii.

With the fall leaves, one of you cuts your hair. You buy dozens of men's shirts, but they don't always feel right, either. You are not exactly a girl, even though your dresses have found their way back into your closet—but you are not *not* exactly a girl, and sometimes your new clothes feel just as ill-fitting.

You breathe on a technicality. You navigate your closet on touch alone, hot and cold steering you. You avoid mirrors, so that you do not catch your eyes. There are too many eyes staring back at you.

You should know that you are more than one, or two, or three. You are all the above. But you are seized with the feeling that you are neither. None. Nothing.



A Very Merry Coochmas

Dakota Gibson

Who doesn't love a good Christmas story? I'm an atheist, and Christmas is still one of my favorite holidays. That being said, growing up I did not always have the best Christmas experiences. I never got the gifts I wanted, while my sister always got the best presents.

Let's get one thing out in the open. I am transgender. I was born with a mix-up in the hormones department. I came out wonky and doomed to go through puberty as a male. It sucked. The universe had decided to play a sick joke on me from the moment my Y chromosome developed in the womb. Thanks, Dad.

How does being transgender figure into this Christmas story? Let's go back to the cringe fest of my childhood. My sister, Maryn, was born two years before me. If we conform to archaic societal standards of gender order, the next child my parents were to have was a boy, right? Even before I could comprehend the world, I was forced into a role I didn't like and didn't understand.

My sister was pretty and girly and bitchy, and I was expected to be strong and athletic and handsome. I wanted to barf when I was called handsome. I didn't want to be handsome. I wanted to be beautiful like Maryn.

I envied Maryn, and at Christmas my envy was at its worst. She would get Barbies and Littlest Pet Shops and cute clothes, while I was stuck with footballs and Bob the Builder figures. In college, my grandfather had played football for KU, and when he gave me one of my many footballs, I looked at it like it was a severed head. I had no idea what to do with it. I didn't want it. I didn't ask for it. I didn't want to be that. I wanted to be like Maryn, not a football player, but a cheerleader. Not a builder, but a fashionista. Not a boy, but a girl.

These were complicated, dangerous feelings, and I thought I was alone in my suffering. I was a freak who needed to “man up.” This internal self-damnation kept me from seeking support for a long time.

The first time I ever wore a dress I was seven years old and coerced into it by Maryn. There was an internet trend of sisters making up their brothers to look like girls. I played the role of reluctant,

Eventually, I started imagining a different version of my future. I saw myself with longer hair, a slimmer yet curvier body, maybe even wearing a dress and heels. But that wasn't possible, was it?

mortified little brother, when secretly I loved every second of it. Sure, the makeup looked horrible, and the dress didn't fit, but when I saw my reflection in the mirror I wanted to cry. I felt pretty, an unfamiliar sensation.

Years of trying on my sister's clothes in secret followed, coupled with repression, denial, and a sprinkling of shame. I was terrified that someone would find out the truth about me. Growing up in suburban Kansas, I wasn't brave enough to face the repercussions. And I didn't want to disappoint my father. On some level we both knew I wasn't the son he wanted me to be. Sports weren't my forte. On the soccer team he coached, I spent every match on the bench, moping. I didn't want to get dirty with the boys. I wanted to be at the gym, practicing cheer routines with my sister and her friends. But I couldn't tell him. What would he think if he knew his only son hated being a boy? So, I buried it and told myself it was a phase.

By the time I reached high school, more than a dozen Christmases had come and gone, and I never once received a dress or makeup as a gift. After graduation, I attended a school in Chicago with my best friend, Reilly, and planned on becoming a famous actor. But the thought of my face plastered on billboards and buses made me sick. I hated my face.

Eventually, I started imagining a different version of my future. I saw myself with longer hair, a slimmer yet curvier body, maybe even wearing a dress and heels. But that wasn't possible, was it?

I started researching and educating myself. I had always known I was different, but now having a clear idea of what that meant was horrifying. The thought of the way this country treated the transgender community formed a pit in my stomach. Was I willing to risk my safety and privilege for happiness? I didn't know, and I had no idea where to begin.

When I started dating my co-worker, Lizzie, I told her that I was experimenting with my gender identity. I didn't want to lose her, but we had agreed that we would break-up before going off to college. We knew that going in, yet we couldn't help falling in love.

"I don't want this to end."

"Neither do I, but I can't make you choose me over your own happiness."

"What if being with you is what would make me happy?"

"We both know what would really make you happy. If we stayed together, I would need you to be a man. That's something I can't ask of you. I won't let you sacrifice your shot at being happy for me."

As fast and as passionately as our short love af-

fair had started, it was over. But I will be forever grateful for the friendship we have shared ever since.

Later in Chicago with Reilly, I felt like a fish thrust out of water straight into a boiler. I hadn't come out to him yet, though I leaned on him for emotional support. I also convinced myself I hadn't fallen in love with him.

When I went home for Christmas break, I told my mom I needed to transition. She was scared for me, but she stood by me. I also came out to my dad. Although he has been divorced from my mom for over a decade, I still wanted him to be part of my life. I wasn't sure if he would want the same thing.

At IHOP over lunch, I took a breath and said, "Dad, I'm transgender."

He had a lot of questions:

"So, you want to wear dresses and stuff?"

"Do you at least like women still?"

"Are you going to start wearing makeup?"

And my personal favorite, "Does this mean you want to cut off your dick?"

He had always been blunt, my father, so I returned the sentiment and said, "Yes, I do."

It took a long time for him to wrap his head around my choice, but he accepted it and reaffirmed that he loved me. He just wanted me to be happy.

His reaction was nothing compared to Maryn's. "Oh my god, I've always wanted a sister," she told me.

And before I knew it, it was Christmas. My mom took me shopping for a new wardrobe. I cried tears of joy as I tried on outfit after outfit, modeling each one in the stores for my mother and sister. My life was just beginning.

Within a few months, I started Hormone Replacement Therapy and got pre-approved for surgery. Despite these strides, I had to face the awkward stage of my transition in Chicago where Reilly had a new girlfriend who turned out to be a better friend to me than he was.

The city was a scary place for a girl like me. After finishing my freshman year, I transferred schools, needing to be in a place where I felt comfortable. It was one of the best decisions I could have made. I completed my second year of school online while I got a job at Box Lunch. Working in retail helped me become comfortable interacting with people I didn't know.

Christmas that year was uneventful, but I loved it. I got sweaters and skirts and gift cards galore from Windsor, H&M, and Forever 21. But the New Year was not so kind. Two days into January, I attended a birthday party for a friend's boyfriend. At the end of the evening, he'd followed me into the bathroom and blocked the door. Everything went by in a blur, but I do remember the look on his face as if I owed him something. I also remember the feeling of his rough hands on my shoulders as he pushed me down. I left in shambles, vowing that no one would ever treat my body like it belonged to them ever again.

That meant treating my body like it belonged to me. I started researching gender confirmation surgery, the next step I needed to take. My clinic put me on a waiting list for surgery. It seemed like a long shot but in November they called with some good news.

"Hey, hon! We had a cancellation for surgery in December, and you're next on the waitlist. Is that still something you're interested in?"

My date was set for December 22nd, which I affectionately began referring to as “Coochmas.” Because of COVID, I had to quarantine in my house for a month. I drank a lot of wine and watched a lot of television until the purgatory ended and Coochmas had arrived. My mom drove me to the hospital in Kansas City and waited during the three-hour procedure.

I’d like to say that when I woke up it felt as if a weight had been lifted off me, but no, I was just on a lot of drugs. As they wheeled my bed into recovery, my mom came into focus.

“Hi mama, are you okay?” There was worry on her face, which was then replaced with a strained laugh.

“I was about to ask you the same thing, baby girl!”

They settled me into a room and told me to relax, to let my body adjust. I was too excited to listen. My mom had brought a tiara for me to wear in pictures. I kept my friends updated with a “Merry Coochmas” Instagram post.

After a night of restless sleep, the sun rose. My mom was with me asleep on the couch. She has always been my biggest fan. She helped me get out of bed and practice walking. We watched TV and ordered hospital food. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, and chocolate cake for dessert.

Due to COVID protocols, I went home that day. They wheeled me down to the first floor where my mom picked me up in her van, and I was sent on my way with pain meds and procedures for the next week.

Three days after Coochmas was Christmas, which I spent on the couch. My family and closest friends stopped in to see me. I got so many clothes, not

to mention oils and face masks and other accessories, that you'd think I was a princess. I felt like a princess.

A week after the surgery it was time to get my catheter and vaginal packing taken out. Have you ever seen a magician do that trick of pulling a ribbon from his sleeve? He keeps pulling and more and more ribbons just keep coming out? That's what this experience seemed like. Not my favorite sensation, but I would do it all again.

With both Coochmas and Christmas having come and gone, I returned to life with a sense of renewal and confidence. I finally felt like myself. I like to joke that since my surgery, I've become a born-again virgin. I've always been quite sentimental, and although I've had my fair share of not so sweet sexual experiences, I still can't let go of the idea of losing my virginity to someone special. But for the time being I put my more carnal desires on the backburner. Instead, I've chosen to focus on my new life.

It's mind boggling to think that I've made it this far, and I'm excited for what comes next. My one-year Vaginaversary has come and gone, and I feel like I've only just begun to really experience what it means to truly be alive and to know what it is to be happy with who I am. If there's one thing that I've learned from my experience, it's to appreciate and embrace the beauty in life, no matter how overshadowed by darkness things may seem. With that, I will leave you with a Very Merry Coochmas, and to all a good night!

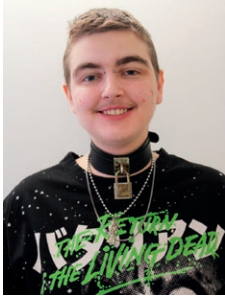
Contributors' Notes



Dakota Grace Gibson, a senior in the English and creative writing department at Stephens College, is from Kansas City. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and Kappa Delta Sorority. She aspires to be a published author. This is her first publication in *Harbinger* and is thankful to Kris Somerville and the magazine's editorial staff for an amazing experience.



Lauren M. Granich is a senior English major. She is honored to have been the editor-in-chief of this year's *Harbinger*. In her free time, she writes when she's not in school, and is trying to complete her seventh novel. Lauren finds comfort in both reading and writing romances and hopes to work in publishing as a fiction copy editor after graduation.



Jack Hayes is a third-year digital film major. This is their second publication in *Harbinger*, and their second year on staff. Similar to their previous publication "27 Guests at the Eastbrook Inn," "Rotten Luck" is a weird, wet, horror story. Their short screenplay made it into the semifinals of Coverfly's Killer Shorts contest. They hope to continue writing for the screen and for any other audience.



Zoe London, a junior creative writing major at Stephens College, is thrilled to have her fiction and poetry published in *Harbinger*. This is her first publication, as well as her first time working as part of an editorial team. She has a passion for children's literature, fantasy, and poetry, and in the future, she plans to pursue a career in writing and publishing. When she's not writing, Zoe enjoys spending time with her partner and their two cats.



Maggie Lowery is a sophomore English major at Stephens College and is from Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri. This is her first publication in *Harbinger* and her first time working on the magazine's editorial staff. Maggie is a member of Kappa Delta Sorority. She enjoys reading old books and learning new things in her free time. After college, she wants to work in publications at either a magazine or news branch.



Jessamin McSwain is a junior creative writing major and art history minor at Stephens College. She is the recipient of the college's Creative Writing Scholarship. She is co-president of Stephens' Sigma Tau Delta chapter and attended the national convention in Atlanta to present her piece, "Homeward Bound." She expects to graduate with honors in May 2023.



Zoe Miner is a senior creative writing major with a minor in women's studies at Stephens College. They are the vice president for Poets of Infinity, so are pleased to have their first poetry publication in *Harbinger*. Currently from Tennessee where they live with their family, Zoe plans to pursue a publishing career after graduation.



Danielle Rodriguez is a senior creative writing major from Chicago, Illinois. *Keep Calm and Carriage On* is her second publication in *Harbinger*. This is her third and final year as *Harbinger's* graphic designer. After graduation, she plans to return to Chicago and launch a career as a playwright.



Arabela Rowland graduated from Stephens College with honors fall 2021 and received a B.A. in English with a minor in psychology. She served as vice president of Stephens's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and has previously published her work in *Harbinger* and *Stephens Life*. She often writes fantastic stories about escapism and the darker side of the human mind. She enjoys puzzles, charcoal sketching, and volunteering her time.



Kate Stevens is a freshman majoring in communication design at Stephens College. This is her first experience designing *Harbinger's* cover and interior motif. When she isn't sitting in front of a computer, she is spending time with friends. She also loves being outside with her dog, Jack. Kate is excited to have her work published and looks forward to working with the magazine again in the future.



Kaitlyn Smith is a junior English major and early childhood education minor. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and plans on graduating with honors fall 2022. She will continue her education in graduate school, pursuing a master's in library and information sciences. Her career ambition is to become a children's librarian. When Kaitlyn is not at school, she's either playing with her daughter Ruth, reading, or making coffee at a local cafe.



Designer's Statement

Whether it's my clothes, my room, or digital design, I have always had a need for design. It is simply something I love and need to do. It is what brought me to Stephens College and has now given me the opportunity to create a cover for *Harbinger*.

Working with a theme like "Weight of the World," it's hard to not have a creative spark. When I read the magazine's content, I kept imagining a woman reaching for help. She was also reaching for a friend, love, or a fantasy. I wanted to bring light and hope to the dark theme and image of the reaching arms. I was able to find a beautiful picture of the Aurora, or Northern Lights, which I use as a backdrop. The hands reach through a layer of clouds, resembling something soft. The clouds give a light feel so that the woman doesn't seem overly weighed down by the world. We all know the feeling of being held back by the problems of the world, but I wanted to show someone who was breaking through rather than being suffocated by the struggles.

Creating the cover of *Harbinger* 2022 has been an amazing experience, and I hope to help more during my time at Stephens College.

Kate Stevens
Harbinger 2022

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

Sigma Tau Delta

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“Looks good, reads great. One of the best showcases of young talent I’ve seen.”

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The Missouri Review

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Andrew Leland, Editor

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“Stephens College is bursting with engaged and interesting young writers, and *Harbinger* is an excellent vehicle for all that talent.”

Gabriel Fried, Poetry Editor

Persea Books

“Captivating and powerful work by bright writers. Devour it all.”

Carey Salerno, Editor

Alice James Books

“Working on *Harbinger* as a student at Stephens, I learned the fundamentals that would inform my entire career. I look forward to seeing the new edition every year!”

Jen Woods, Editor

Typecast Publishing

“Stunning work in a stylish package. You’ll want to devour it.”

Laura McHugh, Author

The Weight of Blood, Arrowood, and The Wolf Wants In

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

Jill Orr, Author

The Good Byline, The Bad Break and The Ugly Truth

“*Harbinger* is one of the best showcases of the next generation of artists, editors, poets, and writers who will absolutely take the literary scene by storm.”

Shelly Romero, Editor

Cake Creative