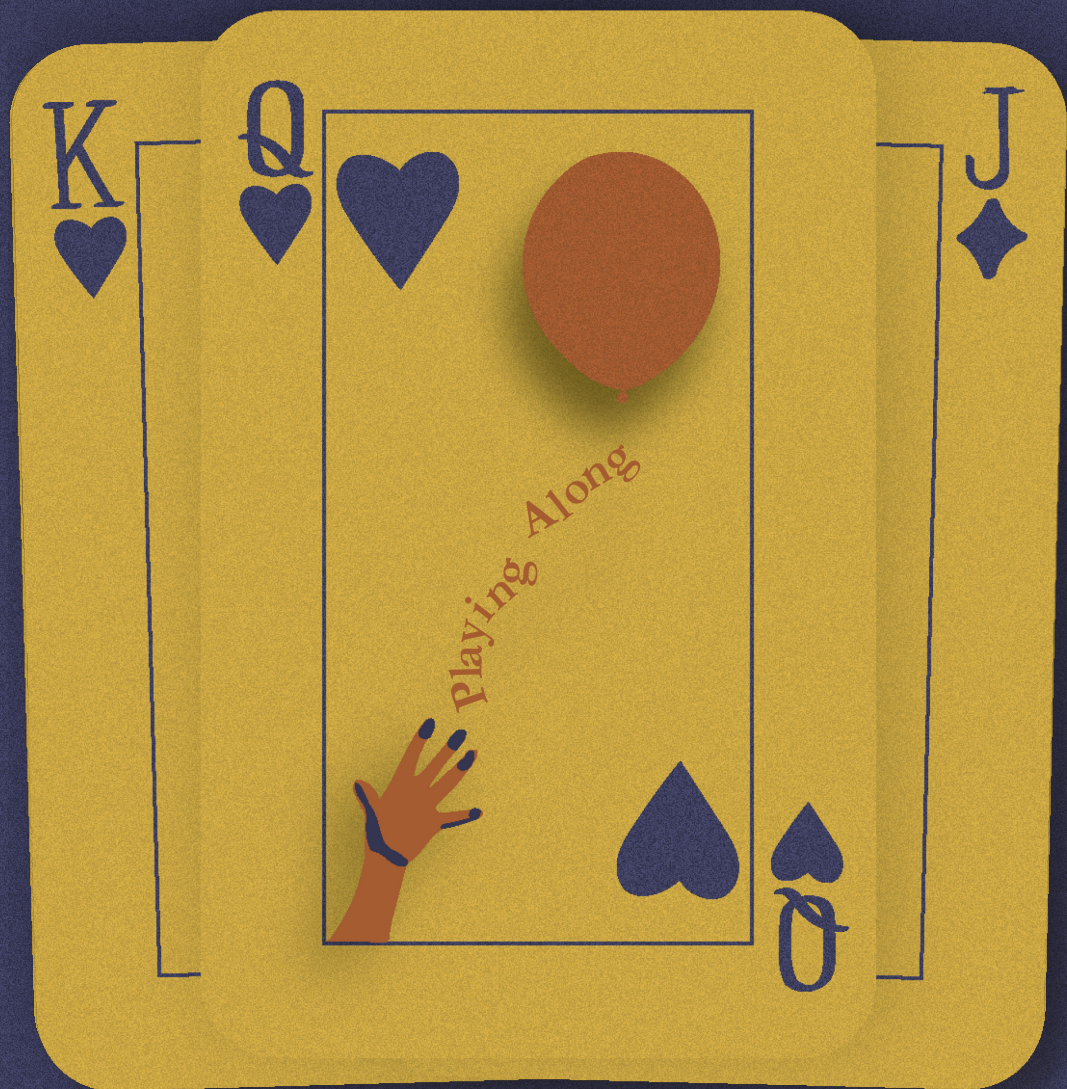


Harbinger

2026



Harbinger 2026

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jer]

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

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

PRAISE FOR HARBINGER

First place winner in the 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020 Literary Arts Journal Category and second place winner in 2015, 2022, and 2024.

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English Honor Society

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special Thanks:

Miranda Richardson

Donors:

Casey M. Baker, Dr. Judith P. Clark, Elizabeth Daniel-Stone, Kelley Marchbanks, Dr. Leslie Miller, Ray G. Miller, J.E. and Marjorie B. Pittman Foundation for Donald Pittman and Rush Pittman, Shelly Romero

Harbinger is a student-edited and designed magazine published each spring since 1980.

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CONTENTS

Fiction

The Night Shift | Kadence “Jo” Douglas | 10

There’s a Sheep in the Elevator | Miah Sickler | 12

Glue Holds Me, Though I Am Free | Sarah Phillips | 21

The Girl in the Mirror | Camri Jones | 36

Of Rivers and Veins | Kadence “Jo” Douglas | 39

Exhibitionist | Miah Sickler | 44

By Gibbet, Fire, or Cross | Allison Easter | 48

The Lookout | Tierney Privett | 50

Pittman Prize Winner in Prose

Vow of Devotion: Epilogue | Laine Andrews | 55

Stalemate | Alena Harper | 78

Pittman Prize Winner in Prose

Nonfiction

Candy Cities, Candy Lands | Jubilee Forbess | 28

**For Obstinate and Headstrong Girls Who Find No Pleasure
Like Reading** | Genavieve Hudson | 69

Poetry

Get Out of Town | Alena Harper | 17

The Shape of Understanding | Laine Andrews | 33

Troupes of Shrimp Perform | Genavieve Hudson | 38

baptism for the agnostic cat lady | Sarah Phillips | 40

Butchers | Sarah Phillips | 41

Pittman Prize Winner in Poetry

Jarrell | J. Hunter | 43

A Love Story | Birdie Wardlaw | 54

you should check the fridge | Ollie Ubaldo | 66

corndogs | Ollie Ubaldo | 67

at the bodega | Jubilee Forbess | 72

Don't Read Beat Poetry to a Dead Horse | Jubilee Forbess | 74

Sauna Body | Jubilee Forbess | 75

Drama

Mary Shelley: Percy's Heart | Lydia Sheehan | 15

Interviews

Sarah Nguyen Interview | Genavieve Hudson | 23

Janet Saidi Interview | Genavieve Hudson | 59

Art

Annabel Lee | Daz Murray | 35

Pierce My Soul | Genavieve Hudson | 68





Harbinger 2026: Playing Along

Dealing out a deck of cards is the new breaking bread. At gatherings with friends, the grease-drenched \$7 large two topping pizzas are no longer the main event. Instead, we hurriedly scarf down pizza slices, then wipe our fingers clean with scrappy brown napkins because we don't dare stain a playing card.

Today board and card games offer up worlds with a variety of roles to be played. In Monopoly we become slimy scheming capitalists. In Operation, we become shaky handed surgeons. In Clue we become sleuthing detectives. I'm not an actor, but I am a player. and if acting is the way to win then I'll do anything I need to.

While playing a game, I might assume the persona of a gumshoe detective, or less easily, a cloak-and-dagger spy. The only games that I must confess to being definitively bad at are the ones that require bluffing. No matter how firm I hold a poker face, the facade falters the second someone flat out asks if I'm lying. My palms sweat, my laugh stutters, "What? No, I swear I'm not the werewolf dude, what are you talking about?" I lose the game with ease.

In everyday life we all have multiple masks we wear depending on the people we're around or the situation we're in. The jokes I make over Uno to friends are different from those I toss at my grandpa from across a Scrabble board. A break in convention in these social situations must be a deliberate and carefully made choice. In this way, game playing becomes a metaphor for life. Sitting across the game table from each other, pizza slice in hand, we all play many parts depending on the demands and rules of engagement.



The theme of *Harbinger 2026* is “Playing Along.” While compiling this year’s issue, the editorial staff discovered that many of the works—drama, prose, and poetry alike—toyed with the concept of quiet rebellion. We encounter characters stuck in less than desirable circumstances who find small ways to persevere or overcome. There may be no government overthrowing here, but don’t mistake these stories as compliant or complacent. Controlled defiance is the name of the game.

Harbinger 2026: Playing Along opens with Kadence “Jo” Douglas’s short story “The Night Shift.” When an over-worked college student encounters an alley cat, they are motivated to get their act together and become worthy of the independent animal’s affection. The poem “corndogs” by Ollie Ubaldo is an absurdist piece where the narrator faces a confrontation with a corndog man at the fair. The brief encounter results in a surprising and illuminating moment.

The short story “By Gibbet, Fire, or Cross” by Allison Easter places the reader in a scene where a queen takes hold of her own fate by not allowing her enemy the satisfaction of killing her. Lydia Sheehan’s brief dramatic piece “Mary Shelley: Percy’s Heart” interprets how the legendary literary figure might have unconventionally mourned the death of her husband.

At every turn, *Harbinger 2026: Playing Along* offers up characters who are casually confronting the status quo. With these selected stories, poems, interviews, and art features, I hope you’ll find new ways to go against the grain. Learn the rules of the game, so you can break them.

A.H.

The Night Shift

Kadence “Jo” Douglas

You can't remember the last time you felt happy. You eat, work, study, sleep, repeat. Every day you push yourself to the limits, and every day you receive nothing in return. It was nice at first, when your schoolwork was extraordinary, and you were employee of the month. But your focus has slipped and your performance has suffered from stress. Your A's have become B's and then C's. “Employee of the Month” is just another worker bee. You are surviving. That is all.

Sometimes you feel as though you're gliding through life like paper in the wind. When it rains, it soaks through your skin and threatens to tear you apart. When it storms, oh boy! You built yourself into what you had always wanted to be, but the pressure has ripped you in half.

That's it. You're missing a part of yourself. You can feel that missing piece as you clean the counter, remembering that you have an essay due tomorrow. You have not even begun to write it. A patron raises his voice at your female coworker, and all you can do is hope that someone else speaks up. You're too exhausted. A baby in a highchair bawls because he must eat his broccoli. Oh, how you wish that was why you cried every night. You feel it.

Your shift is over. You need a smoke break. Instead of going back to your shitty apartment to finish that goddamned essay about human development or whatever, you walk into the alley. It is dark and barely lit, but a good place to smoke a cigarette.

You take out your lighter. You draw it to your lips. Before you ignite the butt, you stop midway. A cat slinks across the alleyway and toward the garbage.

You had never noticed it before, but you do now. It is black as night with eyes as bright and yellow as the moon. This is the miscreant your coworkers have complained about. His reputation precedes him: he is known for digging through trash, begging for food, and hissing at everyone. Apparently, he's not even good at catching mice.

You've never met him before. Surely, he can't be that bad. So, instead of turning and leaving, you crouch, extend your hand, rub your fingers together, and click your tongue—all to get the attention of a tomcat.

To your surprise, he turns from his trash adventure to look at you. Not with a yowl or bent-back ears, but with interest. He eyes your hand and tilts his head. After a moment of deeply intense

thought for a cat, he begins walking to you. You hold your breath and stay completely still. When he reaches your hand, he sniffs it. Sniffs it some more. Then he rubs his head against it.

His fur is tangled and coarse and you swear you can feel little bugs on his skin. You'll have to wash your hands later, but for now, this is nice. You flip your hand to pet him, and he indulges you. His loud purring nearly reverberates. You laugh at that.

The cat startles. He jumps back, glares at you, and skitters back into the shadows.

You watch him leave in silence. It takes you a moment, but when you rise from your crouched position, you've made a promise to yourself. Every shift you work, you'll come back here and feed the cat scraps until he likes you.

You'll take him home, clean him, take him to the vet, buy him toys and Fancy Feast and his own bed that he'll never use. You'll name him something stupid like Darth Vader or Missile. You'll get your grades back up. You'll quit this job, graduate, and find something better. You'll grow. You'll change.

But for now, you're here, smoking a cigarette and watching a cat scamper away.

His fur is tangled and coarse and you swear you can feel little bugs on his skin. You'll have to wash your hands later, but for now, this is nice.

There's a Sheep in the Elevator

Miah Sickler

I don't know how else to put it. The doors just opened and there it was, a sheep.

I don't know if it's going up or down or why it's there at two in the morning, but that doesn't change the fact that there is a sheep in the elevator. And it's not getting off.

I could take the stairs. It'd probably be better for me in the long run—more steps, less sheep. It could be the tipping point between living to one hundred or dying at forty. But it's late, and I'm tired. Fifteen flights of stairs is a stupid number of stairs that I don't want to climb at two in the morning. So, I step onto the elevator, press the button for the 15th floor, and watch the doors slide shut. And then, I am sealed in a man-made metal box that, for some reason, has a sheep in it.

Miracles don't happen to people trapped in elevators with sheep, do they?

There's a sheepish silence between the two of us as we climb up and up and up. This elevator is never fast, even on a good day. I don't know why I'm standing here praying for a miracle where I close my eyes and the doors open and I don't have to think about the sheep anymore.

Miracles don't happen to people trapped in elevators with sheep, do they? Not from what I've read. It's always a poor sucker with cancer who needs divine intervention, not some selfish jerk like me whose suffering will end in a few minutes if they can get over the fact that there is a sheep in the elevator.

Maybe the sheep is a convincing illusion. Maybe sometime between leaving work and getting on the elevator I took drugs that make people picture sheep. Maybe I got hit by a late-night driver coming back from McGinty's, and the only way to get into Hell is to get onto an elevator

occupied by a sheep. Maybe I'm on a prank show that specializes in sheep-based humor that pulls a niche audience of farmers and farm fanatics. Or maybe there really is a sheep.

But that doesn't make any sense. Sheep don't get on elevators at two in the morning. Sheep don't go to the 15th floor of an apartment building. Sheep don't stand and stare at me like I'm the crazy one for questioning why there's a sheep in the elevator. Sheep hang out in fields. Sheep spend their days watching clouds even fluffier than they are. Sheep roll around in dirt and live their sheeepy lives on peaceful farms without ever knowing what an elevator is.

So why is there a sheep? I'd ask that question but it probably won't answer. The sheep probably doesn't even know what's going on. And it definitely doesn't know how an elevator works because it hasn't pressed a button.

I can see the numbers ticking up and up and up: 11 and 12 and 14. The sheep is going higher into the air than any sheep should even if it can't tell from inside this stupid metal box. Is this the price of mankind's hubris? To put a sheep into a box and send it into the sky and not even allow it to see what it is achieving?

The shaking elevator stops, and the doors slide open on the 15th floor. It looks the same as when I left it. Still, quiet, and sterile, if you ignore the noise and the carpet stains.

I step out of the elevator and the sheep doesn't move. It just stares at me as if I have answers to its millions of questions. Like I could provide some salvation from its plight. But I don't. And I can't. I don't even know what questions a sheep would ask, much less how to answer them in a way a sheep could understand.

Eventually, the doors slide closed, taking the sheep up or down or maybe not moving at all. If it doesn't matter to the sheep, why should it matter to me? So, I turn away, retracing the steps I've taken a thousand times. I move farther from the elevator with every unsteady step.

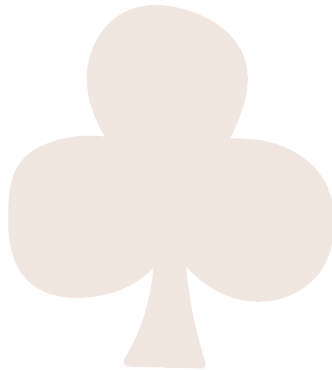
Someone said that counting sheep helps you sleep. It doesn't. I spent the rest of the night staring at the ceiling, counting. One. One. One. One sheep when there should be none. One sheep when they're supposed to be in a flock. One sheep fifteen hundred feet in the air.

Morning comes. People walk past the door. No one yells about a sheep in the elevator. No one even mentions it. I can hear it as it rises and falls, an almost silent ding as it moves, sometimes stopping on the 15th floor,

sometimes not. People get on. People get off. People move on. All of them are blissfully unaware.

No one believes me. Any time I tell anyone about the sheep in the elevator they tell me that I'm crazy. Or misremembering. Or making it up. Mr. Gillespie tells me that there has never been a sheep in his building and God-willing there will never be one. Kyle tells me it must've been that giant poodle on the 6th floor who looks a little sheep-like if you squint. Mom tells me to book a doctor's appointment because she heard from a friend of a friend that their cousin saw a cow on the subway and had a heart attack exactly one year later.

And at this point I'm starting to wonder if they're all right. Because seeing a sheep in an elevator is almost as insane as finding tufts of wool caught on the hallway carpets. Or seeing hoofprints on the neighbor's front door. Or hearing a distant bleat in the middle of the night while climbing the stairs. Because seeing a sheep in an elevator is probably a sign of impending death. Or the Rapture. Or Satan. Because a sheep in an elevator is not something people are supposed to see. Because sheep don't know how to use elevators.



Mary Shelley: Percy's Heart

Lydia Sheehan

Villa Diodati

(Mary stands in the doorway alone. Percy's calcified heart is in her hands.)

Mary Shelley: I hold it in my hands, unsure of what to do next. His once-beating heart now lies dormant, unable to be burned. What happens now? What do I do with this fragment? It is all that is left of him, and all that is left of me. It sits in my palms, unbreakable. A heart of stone, a massive anatomical heart. The love of my life, the father of my children, is laid to rest, and what do I do now? I hold his heart in my hands wondering. What would he want me to do? Keep writing. Percy would want me to keep writing. But I swear, I will do more than that. I will write for him. I will write in every possible way that allows him to live on. This life cut short, this legacy, it's up to me, for he will live within me and without. A part of my husband resides in this house.

(Mary walks downstage right from the entryway to the study and sits down at the desk.)

Mary Shelley: He will not be gone. I refuse it. He will not leave this earth unnoticed. The legacy of the poet Percy Shelley does not end here. He will not leave me the way the rest have. The way my mother left when I had just arrived in the world. The way Claire left this earth too soon. We were a trio. Running away from everything, all those years ago now. None of it made sense. None of it was smart or right, but we did it anyway. I fell in love with him, and our love was stronger than reason or the woman he already had. We loved each other. Although he was not always faithful, I remained true. I always will be.

(Mary puts the heart in a jar on her desk)

Mary Shelley: Your heart will live here, my love. And when you are not here, it is because I will be carrying you with me. Until I am buried with you, deep in the ground, away from this beautiful, wretched life, I will carry your heart with me wherever I go. And you will live on my love. And your beautiful, immortal writing? I will get it published. Your words, your brilliant poetry will find an audience. I stare at this beautiful heart, the heart that survived the burning fires. A miracle, when so little survives, there is always hope.

(Mary reaches into the desk and finds a copy of Percy's poem "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats", places it inside the jar, and wraps it around the calcified heart. She smiles knowingly to herself.)

(Lights out.)

Get Out of Town

Alena Harper

I.

Greenhouse Pastoral

On Tuesdays I live in the greenhouse
because I like to pretend I did it

Got Away.

because I'd be crazy to leave.
I have a husband, kids, a nice job, an easy life,
I'd be crazy to want to leave

so, on Tuesdays I live in the greenhouse
cupping
Miracle-Gro® Garden Soil—*feeds up to 3 months!*
like holy water in my hands,
it sprinkles through the cracks of my fingers,
covers cramped toes, cleanses concrete,
I cup soil, sprinkle and splash, cover cover cover
concrete

On Mondays, I clean the glass of the roof. Hard hat on head and Windex®—
streak free shine!—in hand.

I need to clean it. It's not clean enough. It's not. It won't ever be clear enough
for

once the floor is ground

I crouch, hands

dirtied

then

knees

then

elbows

touch

earth

“this is earth”
I peer
in between the leaves
of the plants in the
pots I ignore
on the ground
and if I get
real
close
I
swear
I
can
almost
believe
that I belong
that this is earth
and I have done it

Gotten Away!

On Wednesday mornings, my knees creak alive. I stand to sweep the soil back into its plastic home, as I sweep myself back into my own. Let my thoughts fester again until

II. Home

The
stairs scream
at me, but I don't know
what they want. I have tried to be
lighter in my steps. I clipped my toenails
in case they scratch through my socks. Imagine
all the weight and pressure in my body shifting skywards as I
all but float up the stairs. Still, they scream. My husband doesn't hear it.
Can't hear it? Refuses to acknowledge it. I was late to the office once, because I
swear I could hear it whispering to me. There were mumbblings of words, English in theory,
but gibberish in practice. I knelt by the bottom step and tried to listen. I'm listening. I hear you.
Please tell me

III.
Office, Office

My desk is to the left of the woman to my right.
Spreadsheet pixels burn my retinas.
Insert formula to A22. Tab over. Tab over.
Tab. Increase Decimal. Increase Decimal.
Increase. Zooming in and in and in and in.

Sometimes I find myself trying to zoom in on physical papers in front of me. I imagine my brain now looks like a thumbprint cookie. Smushed in, cutting off neural pathways deemed unnecessary, with no jam to fill the indent left by my company's finger. Is there still time to find jam to fill in the empty space? Huckleberry hobbies?

Once, I dragged my cursor to the corner of the grid and scrolled and scrolled in search for the edge of the world. The numbers ticked up and up and up and up and up and up and The clock struck 5 before I could find it.

My desk is to the right of the woman to my left.
Email loglines flood my vision.
Hi, thank you for bringing this to my attention
Hey, I hope this finds you well, we're
Hello, the company does intend to follow up on

Sometimes I find myself using my customer service speak on my husband. Like when I ask him why he has brought home whole milk instead of the 2% I asked him to buy. Hi, so sorry for any possible confusion on my part! If possible, could you please return this item and exchange it for the aforementioned one, per my last email? Thanks so much!

Once, I raised my voice at a customer on the phone. Just a little at first, hardly noticeable. But then I kept testing it, a little louder, and a little louder, and then a little more annoyed, and then the call ended.

IV.
Mall

Sometimes, I enter with twenty to spend and sometimes I leave with twenty unspent. I can't always bring myself to do it. Is it frivolous of me to buy soap? Is it a luxury to run my hands under warm water, and then pump out foaming suds instead of rubbing bits of bar into my skin? Humanity's past haunts me at every consumeristic decision. My ancestors' ancestors didn't have Raspberry Razzmatazz squirted out of automatic dispensers. I'm constantly apologizing to bones eighty feet under my toes. Still, I'll return later and then spend that twenty. I'll end up getting Pumpkin Patch Parade instead, because it's November, and I don't like fruity scents anyways.

V.
Getting Away

living in the greenhouse
and
carpeting the stairs
and
decorating my cubicle
and
making my own soap
and
throwing dirt on my feet
and
moving to a new home
and
getting a new position
and
making my own soap
and
bugs crawling over me in the grass
and
buying ear plugs in bulk
and
working remote in cafes
and
making my own soap
and
shoveling out a hole in my backyard, digging, digging, jumping into the earth
and
ripping out the stairs, fuck it, we'll just use ladders
and
quitting my job, one last scream at the screen, no two weeks' notice
and
making my own soap, rubbing my hands raw, covered in the horrible smell of unscented-ness
and
getting away
and
never leaving at all.



Glue Holds Me, Though I Am Free

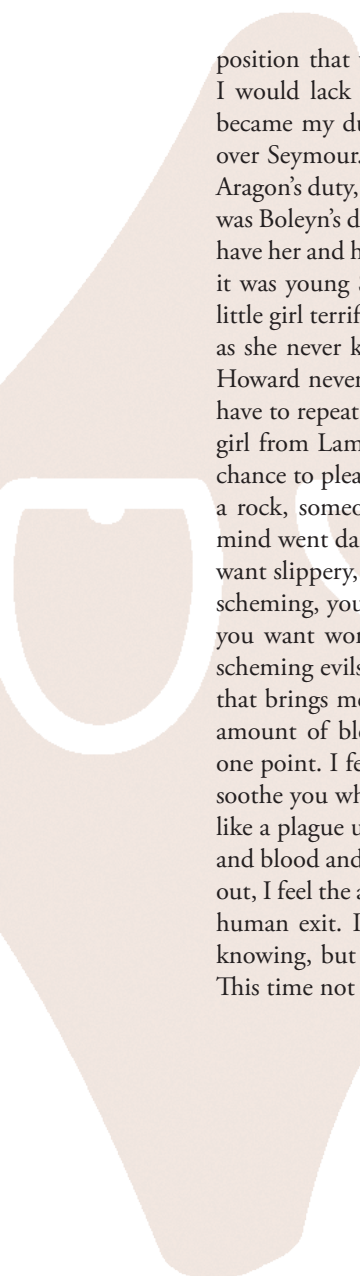
Sarah Phillips

From the other room on the eve of your death, I heard awful things. Not from anyone else, as was usual at that time, but from you, yourself. You were screaming at your wives and their bloodless frames, and I realized at that moment there were always seven people in this marriage: you, Catherine, Anne, Jane, Anne, Catherine, me. My dearest mother would tell me the things poor Aragon suffered through: the birth, the death, the ghosts at the last breath of life. I told myself I'd never suffer fools but I, at the very least, had that choice. Or I did? You learn very quickly, you can't say no to the king. So even as you stare at lifeless corpse after lifeless corpse, rumors swirling like fall leaves, severed heads dripping blood off pristine balconies, you find yourself unable to leave. Glue is set to your feet the moment you say yes and doesn't lose hold

until your last, whatever that may be. Death, divorce, what have you. My glue receded slowly as your health waned, but I still found myself stuck. Glue has been stuck, receded four times with me and only once have I been granted the release of death. Every day, I am

*Death, divorce,
what have you.*

glad I didn't die with your glue sticking me to the palace floor. Henry, you might think of your wives as glue from what I heard outside that room that night. However, your glue never stopped their heads from rolling or being dead in that cold nunnery or sent back to that frigid wasteland or dying giving you what you wanted most. Remember that night we got engaged? I mesh that in my mind with the night of your death. They were both deaths in a way. One was subtle, bloody. For I knew I would have the security of



position that was lacking with Neville and his treachery, but also I knew I would lack the security of personhood that was stripped as soon as it became my duty to please you. That was stripped the second I chose you over Seymour. I always knew it was my duty. I never questioned it. It was Aragon's duty, a young girl shipped from Spain, to marry a foreign prince. It was Boleyn's duty, promising to marry you after you went to great lengths to have her and her womb, sorry body, sorry, personhood. And when she failed it was young Seymour's duty and she delivered. You never saw the scared little girl terrified at her predecessor's outcome. Cleves never stood a chance as she never knew your appetites for the witty but meek, bold but quiet. Howard never knew she was a ghost of Boleyn and never knew she didn't have to repeat her follies in a much more ignorant manner. An uneducated girl from Lambeth staring at the gaping wound in your leg never stood a chance to please your changing appetites. As you became older you needed a rock, someone to maintain a pretty face as your body failed and your mind went dark. But it's easy to realize that you don't want solid, you don't want slippery, you don't want smart, you don't want dumb, you don't want scheming, you don't want docile. You don't want anything, Henry. I doubt you want women at all. Yes, sexually, but not for the minds or wiles or scheming evils or millions of multitudes that can make up what we are. So that brings me back to that last night. You called out the heads, the sheer amount of blood, even the pope and his shame made an appearance at one point. I felt the need to comfort you at points. To hold your hand and soothe you while you shook and moaned. But I worried comfort would be like a plague upon me, where when I died, I would see visions of the heads and blood and be tortured for all eternity. So, as I exit, blood and child rush out, I feel the arms of the wives, bringing me down to their level. An earthly, human exit. I can't tell them about their anger or thoughts, opinions or knowing, but I can tell them about their pain, alleviating at another exit. This time not at the hands of you.

Sarah Nguyen Interview

Genavieve Hudson



Sarah Nguyen is a mixed media artist who works primarily with paper. Storytelling is central to her hand cut-fiber panels and paintings. Her work has appeared in national and international solo and group exhibitions, publications, museums and festivals, including Seattle's Wing Luke Museum of Asian Pacific Experience, the Daum Museum, Pyramid Hill Sculpture Grounds and Museum, the Truman Museum, Cheekwood Estates and Gardens, and Kansas City's 2018 Open Spaces. She has been a visiting artist and teacher all over the world, including Serbia, Bulgaria, Japan, and France, as well as the United States. Sarah received her BFA in Illustration from Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA in Painting from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Genavieve Hudson: Your art portrays myth-based or story-centered themes. How do you decide when a story needs to be shown through visual art, and how do you implement these stories into your pieces? Further, what myths are most inspirational to you? Is there a specific geographic area that you draw from more than others regarding folklore or mythology?

Sarah Nguyen: Stories and myths of a culture convey a sense of place and a sense of the people who inhabit that place. In this way, visual art that interacts with story enters a narrative sphere where it must encounter the local. Looking at folklore and myth provides deep insight into the community and culture where we encounter that myth. Often, I look for myths that I grew up with, stories that may speak about my personal experience, or stories that teach me something about the culture or community where I find those myths. Goa Xingjian, author of *Soul Mountain*, wrote that folklore is a mixture of history, legend, and personal experience. I try to implement these themes of the interpretation of history, the beauty legend and the candor of personal experience in every piece. Folklore, reverence, refinement of nature, observance of daily life, are the general concepts behind my work.

G.H.: How long does an art piece usually take you to create and how do you know when it is complete?

S.N.: It depends on the size of the piece. A seven-or eight-foot height piece that is around four feet in width will typically take a month to complete from the initial sketch stage to the completed hand-cut paper piece. A 20 foot or longer piece may take three to four months to complete. I work at least five days a week for at least two hours on a piece. That said, I often think about making a piece a month before starting it. If the idea still appeals to me months later, then I will have the patience and interest to work on that piece long term.



Sarah Nguyen, *Break into Blossom I and II*, 2017

G.H.: You have frequently traveled to different places around the globe. What places have you been to that have inspired you and/or your art the most?

S.N.: I have been lucky enough to utilize art residencies across the globe to provide inspiration and new learning opportunities to support my artistic pursuits. Every place traveled, every day that I have lived has been a learning opportunity and provided moments for growth and change. In 2016, I had an artist residency in France, where I was able to study some of the cave art from the cave of Lascaux. The actual cave was and is closed to the public, so these were artifacts taken from the cave and the experience was from the replica cave. Delving deeper into a study of the original artists, the cave painters, and to take inspiration from them, was a liberating step for me. I was seized with this idea of art as an ongoing conversation with posterity in which artifacts of the past are painted over, yet traces of the original art remain—and using the cave-dweller as a metaphor for the fundamental human condition: forever shrouded in darkness and uncertainty, yet determined to leave our own visions upon the walls of the cave. When it comes to the most ancient human expressions of culture, the depth of their need—as a part of ritual—is evident in the spontaneous impulse to create these divine forms of animal and human life. Pablo Picasso, after seeing the caves of Lascaux for the first time, said, “We have learned nothing in twelve thousand years.” While it is tempting to shrug this off as an idle statement, after studying the cave paintings of Lascaux, I would accept his claim in dead earnest.

G.H.: How did you decide upon paper as your medium of expression?

S.N.: In 2015, I had an artist residency in Japan, to study stories/folklore of the Shinto religion. My work involved studying the various Japanese folklore and relating it to the everyday scenes which I witness during my travels in Japan. This religion, from which all true Japanese mythology springs, accepts that every natural thing, be it man, a volcano, or plum tree, has a Kami or spirit. Kami has been translated as a soul, a spirit, and a deity. Another possible translation of the word is “beings placed higher.” Nature, in other words, is inhibited by Kami. This word has the same pronunciation but different character for paper. It was at this residency in Japan that I delved into the medium of paper as the primary character in my work, not just a surface to hold and receive a medium, allowing the positive design and negative space to tell a story.

G.H.: How do you title or name your pieces? Is it based upon some aspect of the story you are trying to tell or a specific detail of the art piece itself?

S.N.: Poems are a wonderful inspiration and often I look at poems to find titles for exhibitions. The titles for the work itself depend on the series that I may be working on. I always want to add some insight to the work, so usually it is the deeper meaning or a name or phrase that is important to the piece.

G.H.: What was the reason that you got into the arts? Who or what do you paint for and why?

S.N.: Art is my therapy. I understand the world through making. Visual art is my language and foundation of my communication. Making art makes me a better person. When I worked as an illustrator I worked for the client, using my style of art as a brand and making images that I was not interested in making. Art is a path to problem solving but I was less interested in exploring the solutions to my clients' problems than solving my own. Making art is like breathing or eating, I could not imagine a life where I could not learn and create and there is so much joy and freedom in making art for oneself.

G.H.: Who are the artists that inspire you? Do you see their influence in your own work?

S.N.: I am truly inspired by daily life, by my partner and family, by nature and the community that I am living in. There are several contemporary artists that I have always looked up to and have been inspired by their work and themes that they bring into their work—Kira Walker, Kik Smith, Shahzia Sikander, and Jeanne Atonie—to name a few.

G.H.: What gave you the faith to stick in the arts as a profession and how did you know you could turn it into a career?

S.N.: After receiving my BFA, I worked as a teacher and illustrator and had a young family of three before pursuing my MFA. I got my MFA primarily with the goal to continue teaching at the university level, but what I received was the desire to practice art as my full time occupation and my practice changed from using art to make money to making art as a way of life.

G.H.: What is your job at Orr Street, and how do you help to keep Orr Street, as a nonprofit, running and engaged with the Columbia community?

S.N.: I serve as the studio manager at Orr Street Studios. It is a job that involves a lot of multitasking from doing administrative work to building maintenance. I assist and serve our 21 studio artists and four artists in residence and serve to educate and inform the community about our events and community outreach. I enforce our policies and support our programs and development which are created by our very hard-working board of directors. I work very closely with the President of the Board, Barbara Hoppe who goes above and beyond to serve the Orr St. Community and the greater Columbia community.



Sarah Nguyen, *God Heard*, 2018

Candy Cities, Candy Lands

Jubilee Forbess

Paleta Payaso

We live in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

It is not to be confused with Belize, Zimbabwe, or Malawi, as many people will ask me later. I have not ever seen a camel or a cocaine mountain, as many people will assume later.

When you first come to my city, you can count on hearing this word of advice: “Don’t drink the orange juice!”

I have lived here since I was a baby, and whenever we walk down the market streets, I still want to drink juice more than anything.

To see the sellers and their carts means smelling the rich, bright, citrus scent of beautiful round oranges, watching their skin curl off into big buckets. To hear them call out to you, each slice of citrus treasure shining like pearls in hand, calling, “*Casero, caserito, comprame uno!*”

It smells so good.

But the water is unreliable at best and can be so bad for you. That means no orange juice no matter how sweet the sellers are, no matter how good of an idea it seems. I can hardly peel my eyes away from the dazzling sight. My body yearns most for what it cannot have. My palms desire the cut and weight of a soft round forbidden fruit, delicate and dangerous in hand. I want the juice, yet the juice evades, taunts, and stays far away from me, little me.

As a consolation prize, my mother buys me Paleta Payasos from the supermarket. They are round marshmallow clown faces covered in chocolate and decorated with gummy eyes, nose, and smile.

I bite into the payaso’s head as we pass the orange juice sellers and chomp down hard, crushing the gummy eyes, nose, and smile. I think to myself, *one day I will do whatever I want! One day I will get severe diarrhea from drinking the most delicious orange juice in the world!*

De La Rosa Mazapan

We are leaving Cochabamba, Bolivia.

My heart is full of spikes and needles, but the ache is eased momentarily as I eat my precious candy. Little fruits made of marzipan are arranged on a shiny black platter and ready to melt in hot hands. I look out the window and pop a marzipan mango in my mouth, savoring it like it means the world to me, because my world is changing and I can't stop it.

My mother has her head in her hands. Before we left, she cut her hair short, dyed it bright red. The dye stained the bathtub, murder edition. But the only thing killed is the permanence I've known as a child, soft and fleeting as the coveted marzipan I'm eating. It is pretty and painted, but beneath the surface, the sweetness fades

into a dull, nutty ebb. If I was in Narnia, standing before the White Witch, I would not be tempted by Turkish Delight, but I would eagerly betray my family, friends, and country for marzipan bananas, mangos, and apples.

I am eight years old, disillusioned by life, and when the flight attendant asks me if I'm happy to go home, I crush the last marzipan fruit between my fingers and cry. The flight attendant probably sees little kids crying every day, and wants to tell me, "*Really, it'll be okay!*"

If I was in Narnia, standing before the White Witch, I would not be tempted by Turkish Delight, but I would eagerly betray my family, friends, and country for marzipan bananas, mangos, and apples.

Sapito

I am sharing stories about Cochabamba, Bolivia.

My new school is big, and *everyone* speaks English. They ask me questions about cars, plumbing, cocaine, and wild animals. I don't know what they've heard about my city, but it's not like they have much in advance compared to us. And I don't quite know what cocaine is, anyway.

In a last attempt to show them a true slice of my former home, I bring an offering. A chocolate frog, crunchy to perfection, wrapped in the lovingly colorful marketing only South America can provide. It sits in my backpack beside foreign evil rulers and calculators. I pull out the chocolate frog—the *Sapito*—and show my desk mate. She gives me a nasty, pigheaded look, and flicks it away.

I tell my mom later and she tells me not everything is worth sharing, and not everyone is worth sharing with. I understand, but I'm still confused when everyone jumps aboard the Harry Potter train, stuffing their faces with *Sapitos* by a different name.

Duvalin

I am remembering Cochabamba, Bolivia.

My brother and sister sit beside me in the car on our way home from the Mexican grocery store. I am holding a tiny plastic tin filled with vanilla and chocolate frosting. It feels like I am old, and I am teaching the youngsters an ancient ritual.

I pick up the white spoon and show my siblings how to dip it into the frosting, getting a sizable portion before eating it up like the bilingual hawk I am. My brother, three years younger than me, was born in Bolivia. So was my sister. This leaves me on the edge.

I was born in Colorado. Yet here I am, demonstrating. I take every opportunity to teach them this; we watch *Telemundo* every day at lunch and I make sure to introduce them to a new Latin artist whenever I can. I am doing my best. Sometimes it looks like an impromptu Spanish lesson: “*Embarazada means pregnant, not embarrassed!*” Sometimes it looks like all three of us crammed into the backseat of our homeschool-gold minivan, licking sugary frosting out of the bottom of a plastic tin.

Pulparindo

I am missing Cochabamba, Bolivia.

My church has a festival for kids every year. We set up bounce houses, make hot dogs and cotton candy till our eyes fall out, and of course, there are clowns. My new boyfriend is eating Pulparindo, a spicy paste candy, from a spoon. He’s laughing with the preacher’s wife, who has become like an aunt to me, and the world is as it should be. I take a bite of my own Pulparindo spoon and let the bitter mix of spice and sugar mingle against my teeth.

It’s funny how food can be the best metaphor for how I’m feeling. I am sitting in the parking lot of the *Geyer Springs Iglesia de Cristo*. I live closer to Hot Springs, but I spend a lot of time in Little Rock, and it has become my city.

Spanish floats and melts and weaves like an angel above my head. Children speed past me, barreling towards the nacho machine. I have no idea that this is one of the last times I will eat anything at this church building. In about a month, a woman from the English side of the congregation will accuse our church of unbiblical doctrine, (reader, she is, in fact, just a racist) and I will leave yet another home.

La Gelatina

I am dreaming about Cochabamba, Bolivia.

In the valleys of New Mexico, my nights are tinged with trips down the Andes, crammed in a bus and rattling down the narrow roads. It is summer, and I am tucked away for a week with my cousins, both by blood and by heart, and we live together in a house with one shower and limited hot water. My aunts make pots of beans and kettles full of chili, and we drink pitchers of iced tea, horchata, and lemonade.

The blend of Spanish and English achieves the perfect amplitude, defying the natural pull to stick to one or the other. In the mornings, we walk down the hill to the huge tent, where we sing and listen to sermons and wander around to look at book booths. Then we escape into the fields outside to picnic and throw stones at the nearby creek. One afternoon, my aunt takes us to the store.

We walk the straightened and cobbly sidewalks, balancing on invisible beams and chasing off pigeons. The New Mexico sky is cool for July. We are in search of snacks. In the store, my aunt picks up a carton of Jello candy. It looks just like the ones I grew up eating. As the clerk starts to giggle, we realize an important truth; this is a carton of Jello shots. My aunt has almost purchased a carton of alcoholic Jello shots for her crew of eight children, including myself and my two siblings. It is all we can talk about for the rest of the day. *Tere almost got the Jello shots! What a wild time we would have had!*

Pan Dulce

I am writing Cochabamba, Bolivia.

There are certain things that never leave you, like the sugary residue of pan dulce's crumbs on your lips and chin. Even after they are gone, you can close your eyes and recall them, lingering, languishing, and (re)laxing. In my college town, there is a lot to do. I visit record stores, theaters, bookshops, art galleries, and diners. I relish this time of exploration, of new friends and enemies, and of balancing the entire world in my own two hands. There is a lot to do here, in Columbia, Missouri, but one thing still stays missing, out of sight and out of reach.

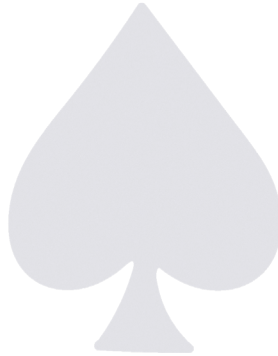
I cannot find a *panaderia* anywhere.

While my classmates, bless them, travel in packs to the nearest and dearest local coffee shops, I am pining for pan dulce. I want to feel the soft crunch of *orejitas* in my mouth, crumbling down my shirt and making a spectacular

breakfast miracle-mess. At the local Wal-Mart, they have small containers of pastries almost like the ones I want, but not quite. They're a little too contained or cold or marketed to office parties instead of *quinceñeras*, and I want to put my head in my hands and weep. ("But I don't weep, do you?" as Mr. Bukowski says.)

Finally, one day, I walk into a Mexican restaurant and behold the pantry I have been praying for. At Los Comales, by my friend's hair salon, there is bread. It's not wall-to-wall, or even floor-to ceiling, but it is there, smiling across the room from me, waiting behind glass and wood. I race to the cabinet and grab a tray; I start piling it with bread. I have *galletas choco chip* and *conchas* to spare. I pluck two *churros* and add an *empanada*, then head to the counter. In the car, I split my bounty with my boyfriend of three years.

It reminds me of when we visited Brooklyn over the Christmas break, and he brought me to the Chinese bakeries before we ventured off for the day. Eating rolls in his grandma's kitchen, even though we didn't speak the same language, brought us closer together in a big, sometimes lonely city. I finish my churro in the parking lot and wrap the rest of my bread in paper napkins. Maybe I will bring them to class tomorrow, or maybe I will sit in my dorm room and eat them one by one while I catch up on the next Facebook *telenovelas*. Either way, finding the *panaderia* corner in Columbia brings me closer to the city, like I'm closer to calling it home.



The Shape of Understanding

Laine Andrews

Sometimes
she spoke,
and I could hear
the architecture of her thoughts
the scaffolding of brilliance
rising behind every word.

It made me quiet,
not from fear,
but from awe.

We built our friendship
out of questions,
stacked them carefully
like stones along the sea.
Each one carried
its own shimmer of possibility.

When she laughed,
it sounded like a gate opening.
I wanted to step through,
to live in the world
where she found joy.

We shared notebooks,
dreams,
half-finished theories
written in the margins.

There were no walls between us then
just ink
and the echo
of our shared wonder.

Sometimes I think
what we created
wasn't a world at all,
but a bridge
a way to meet
in the middle of difference
and stay.

Annabel Lee

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

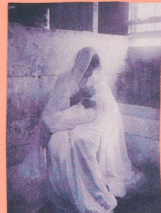
I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea;
But we loved with a love that was more than love-
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Covered her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsman came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling - my darling - my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me,
Yes! - that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we-
Of many far wiser than we-
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.



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The Girl in the Mirror

Camri Jones

They all know me as Marilyn. But when I stand in front of the mirror, all I see is the little freckled-faced girl with endless dreams ahead of her. Marilyn is my name on the posters; it's the name that the paparazzi chase after. But when I catch a glimpse of my own reflection, I still see Norma Jeane, the girl who shuffles around town in worn-out shoes and hand-made dresses. I see the child that bounced around from foster home to foster home, clutching her pillow tight each night while hoping and praying, because hope and prayer were the only things that had never left her. Who would have ever imagined that one day that little girl would appear on billboards, smiling down in technicolor, as if she owned the entire boulevard? Truth be told, even from up there on those bigger-than-life advertisements, I can still hear her voice shaking under her breath and feel her trembling in fear.

Folks like to think that it must be a dream being Marilyn Monroe. Sure, there are times that it feels like a dream. But other times it feels like a nightmare. It's the ballgowns sewn in Paris with rhinestones shining so bright they look like stars plucked out of the sky. It's how an entire room becomes silent once I step in, eyes following me as if I had cast a spell. It's the cameras flashing so bright, so sharp, and so blinding, catching me in mid-laugh, mid-breath, as if they've stolen a piece of me to keep forever. It's that kind of attention that feels like you have been standing in the sun—warm, dazzling, and all-consuming. But if you stay in it too long, it burns. They do not notice the bleach bleeding on my scalp, the curls doused and hardened in hairspray, the way my skin aches underneath all these layers of powders and creams. They only see what they want to see. It's only the shine and never the strain of keeping Marilyn stitched together, piece by piece, every single day.

I work harder than people think. They call me a joke, a dumb blonde, but not once have they seen me curled up on a couch at two in the morning,

coffee in one hand, a script in the other, lips moving ever so lightly as I read the lines repeatedly until they finally tasted right in my mouth. I wanted more than just cheesecake photos in monthly calendars. I wanted to be more than an actress; I wanted to be a woman with a voice that's worth hearing. But when I ask to stretch or study, the studio men just chuckle at me. "Marilyn doesn't do Shakespeare," they say. "She sells tickets." As if beauty was all I was used to and all I had. As if the wiggles of my hips were worth more than the thoughts in my own head.

I wasn't always this bold, I had to teach myself. It was almost like learning how to dance, but I had to teach myself how to walk into rooms with my shoulders pushed back, chin lifted, head held high,

"Marilyn doesn't do Shakespeare."

smiling as if I were always carrying a secret with me. I had to pretend my knees weren't constantly shaking in high heels, pretend not to hear the whispers coming from every direction. After a while, the pretending felt real. And that is how Marilyn was created. She was born out of fear, out of desperation to be noticed, until she became someone that people just could not ignore. Men promised me the moon, slipped diamonds all around me, called me their 'babydoll,' swept me into glossy photographs. For a second, I believed them. But sooner or later, their gaze dimmed, already in search of a new girl with the same burning red lips. They fell in love with Marilyn, but never Norma Jeane. And when the door finally shut and the room had fallen quiet, I was left with one question: Am I ever going to be enough without the sparkle?

I know that I hold a certain power; the glance, the laugh, the ability to capture the attention of an entire room. But somehow it still feels like I'm in a cage. Once people see you as a goddess, they forget you're still a human, too. They don't want to know about the sleepless nights, the aching pain, or the stained makeup tears ruining the pillows. They only want fantasy. I'm still a real person who gets frightened, who longs for romance and love, who works hard to be more than just a punchline. And when the lights start to fade, I only hope and pray that I'm not just remembered as a bombshell, but as a scared girl who still dared to shine through the fear, as bright as ever.

Troupes of Shrimp Perform

Genavieve Hudson

enter living / see pink flesh, turn white feathers to dusk / shell protects
cephalothorax
/ enter performers living / see the head meld to
thorax, little ant welder turned oceanic delicacy / type shrimp into
browser, find
recipe / eating, shell protects
shell sheds shell cracks
/ shell is carapace, like beetles, crisp, crawling baked, boiled,
broiled /
enter dancers living / see vibrant array scarab bone,
wrapped pendant like snakes
around neck / swallowed, satiating, separating, /
place beaded gem eyes, onyx, on table place
table on beaded gem eyes / enter traipse living / hear decibel sound
one-hundred-and-eighty kills homosapien, eats shell
engulfed / shape curved, like waxing moon reflect, revere, revolve
dazzle
/ find pot, porcelain water set
212°, bubbling
like champagne / enter knife-thrower, sword-swallower living /
feel pressure, see blue, and take stage / void blackness
black hole enter stage left, enter stage right, enter stage center /
enter elephants, floating, flaring, fishing living /
swoops in and scoops up into
abyssal / shell devoured /
take places / enter troupe dead /

Of Rivers and Veins

Kadence “Jo” Douglas

Anger flows through your veins like the fiery river of Phlegethon. It scorches your skin and your essence, making its way steadily past pain and sadness. You have never felt such unbridled hatred before. You are always one for second chances and fear and guilt, yet sympathy has been drained from your heart.

By the cold waters of Styx, you have sworn yourself to your loathing. You would not allow yourself doubt. But you let your kindness rot, ashes of who you once were. The perfect disgust and disdain you feel is what gets you up every morning. It is your lighthouse in the fog after years of fruitless endeavors across the murky sea.

But oh, as the swamp of Acheron, were you miserable. You realized how many of your “golden” years you had lost; how you had been held back from the life you could have led and people you could have met. Time would be made up. You would scavenge, barter and even steal if you could make something of your formative years.

Some days you wished you had cried. Your would-be tears could have flooded Cocytus itself. Yet you rarely did. You kept your pain on the inside and never let it spill. This type of healing was not pretty but you were no victim. The righteous, feminine rage filled your lungs and mind and bones and soul. There would be no passivity from you, only the knowledge that you are stronger than vengeance.

Now it's as if you drank from the river Lethe and forced those memories down, letting them reappear when triggered (or feeling especially masochistic). It helps in some ways, but it also ignites old feelings of guilt. When the wounds were fresh and aching, you could focus on the attacker, but the cuts have become scabs. There is no one to blame. It's easier to ruminate on where you went wrong, what you could have done differently.

No. You must force down those thoughts with alcohol and therapy and medication or whatever makes you understand that you are worthy of happiness. One day those scabs will become scars, and you will be able to trace them without any hint of agony. One day but surely not today.

baptism for the agnostic cat lady

Sarah Phillips

Cause the cat that was all skin and bones
told me it was a trick,
that god was a trick

Cats are never baptized
yet their fur is slick
with sandpaper spit,
holy and dipped in distaste
and cleaner than the newborn
with fresh food shavings,
dirty as a being

So why would holy water work?
“Water is a trick,” he told me

He took it upon himself
to baptize me
in the silence
of those moments while
laying on the couch
his sandpaper tongue,
and skimming whiskers
licked my head

As a crown of a king trying,
with everything to be born again,
he said “god didn’t exist” and
“water didn’t exist”
so why was I finding god and water in a cat?

Butchers

Do they know what happens in starvation?
To be the first victim
of dirt replacing blood,
salt replacing thirst,
terror replacing comfort.

Planes are carcasses to the ground.

Ears are nothing without sound,
tongues are nothing without food and
I am nothing without them.
Cycles, cycles, their rage,
a despondent blue,
turning a vivid red,
staining a green innocence yet again.

They tire without me,
eyes and hearts stop working.
I am their savior,
for in my wildest fantasy,
their hearts beg,
their teeth thrash.
They wouldn't want me truly.

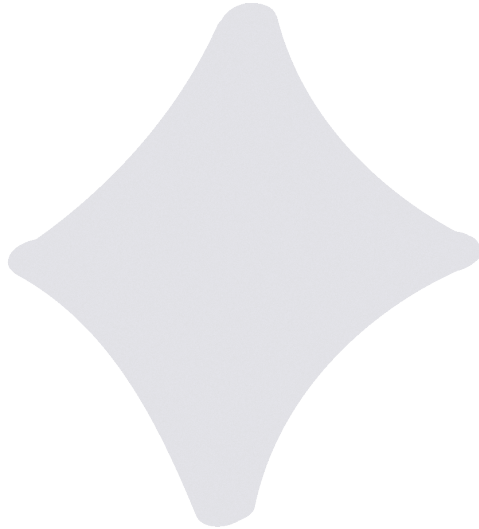
Planes are carcasses to the ground.

I am blood on blood,
flesh on flesh,
real on real.
Who eats my stomach?
Who eats my heart?
The raw flesh of it,
the stripped necessity of it,
do they leave fur on the floor?
Feel the innocence of it?
Feel the remorse of it?
Am I more than the substance
feeding vicious hounds and hands?

Vines caress and entwine around metal parts.

Planes are carcasses to the ground.

So, do they know what happens in starvation?
The heart eats itself,
the muscle of it whittles away
until a frame remains,
vacuumed in moss
like the plane,
a carcass in the ground—
natural once more



Jarrell

J. Hunter

There's a Storm brewing,
swirling, descending
from the empty heavens.
It breathes,
houses shudder,
cowards and heroes hide alike.
It wasn't supposed to visit that day.
Blue skies were scheduled,
but Storms don't care for agendas.
The Storm drops,
its single foot the rage of forsaken gods.
A town gave its name
whispered in ears hidden by a roar.
The Storm walks,
a dead man cries,
people flee.
A cotton field is gone,
scorched ground and bedrock remain,
brick basements ripped open. Flesh too.

There's a car in a field,
paint sanded off,
roof pressed into the ground over missing tires.
A highway spared, but only just.
Teasing, taunting,
threatening racing drivers,
tornadoes laugh at traffic laws,
mortals quiver at the unkindness.

For 19 minutes salvation was found below,
while devils found sanctuary in clouds above.
The 20th minute was silent as fresh death.
Breath returned, held tightly.
It's a quiet climb out,
no debris left to hinder.
Once again, man rises from dust,
but this is no Eden.

Exhibitionist

Miah Sickler

*“Holy shit, dude.
She’s naked.”*

“Holy shit, dude,” Ben was grinning like a maniac, “She’s naked.”

He wasn’t wrong. Sean had always pictured museums as places where old stuffy people gathered to complain about the youths and stare at walls -

he certainly hadn’t been expecting so many naked ladies. “Chill out, we’re supposed to act normal.”

Ben nodded, forcing a straight face, though the corner of his mouth still twitched as he stole a final glance at the statue’s bare chest.

It wasn’t that the two men were dumb or anything, they just, in Sean’s words, “weren’t museum people.” When he had said that to Courtney - the smoking chick he was kind of sort of talking to (they didn’t want to put a label on it yet), she had rolled her eyes and stated, “I can tell.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She had giggled, “You’re not an artsy guy, I mean, look at your walls!” Sean remembered her pointing at the bare white walls of his room and, for the first time, feeling embarrassed by them.

“It’s minimalism.”

“It’s boring.”

That hurt more than it should have. Sean knew he wasn’t boring; he was a “bright young man with a promising future.”—his high school guidance counselor had told him that. Sure, it had been a few years since then, but he was still the same bright young man, just a little older. He had done everything: gone to college, made some friends, got a solid job in finance. He had hobbies, kept up with football, watched movies. Sure, it was *Ant-Man* and not *Citizen Kane*, but that had to count for something.

“Aw, Sean! Look at this one!” Ben ran over to an, admittedly sick,

painting of a bunch of dudes going to war, “I bet I would have killed it as a soldier.”

Ben had always been Sean’s right-hand. Ever since middle school when he pushed Jeffrey Wilson down a flight of stairs for calling Sean’s favorite shirt gay. Sean figured that everyone needed a guy like Ben in their lives, someone who was willing to split rent and go to museums in the middle of a Saturday because their maybe-maybe-not girlfriend called them boring.

“*Newell Wyeth*,” Sean read the placard aloud, “*The Battle of Westport, 1864*.”

Ben nodded solemnly, “World War One.”

Maybe Ben was dumb after all.

The two meandered through the exhibits. Wars, religions, games, love - all aspects of life plastered across the walls. It should have been beautiful, moving even. Sean should have been brought to his knees with glorious revelation at the sight of a tenth European dude looking uncomfortable in a chair. But he wasn’t.

“I don’t get it,” Sean’s knuckles were turning white on the steering wheel, his eyes glued to the road as he pulled out of the lot, “Isn’t art supposed to be life changing?”

Ben, who had a surprisingly large gift shop bag sitting at his feet, barely looked up from his phone, “Yeah man, ‘supposed to make you feel introspective and stuff.”

“Do you?”

“Huh?”

“Do you feel more *introspective and stuff*?”

“I guess so.”

Neither of them spoke for a while, the hum of the road the only sound. Sean could only feel the stone in his stomach, twisting and turning in his organs, the sharp edges scraping the nerves and sending hateful messages to his brain.

You’re too dumb for art. Everyone else gets it.

Courtney’s going to leave you.

“Dude,” Ben’s voice snapped him out of the spiral. He held up his gift shop poster – a print of the naked statue, “I’m gonna put her in the living room.”

Dinner was Top Ramen and a few episodes of *Hell’s Kitchen*. The naked statue watched along from her new place above the couch. Ben yelled business advice alongside Gordon Ramsey, suddenly an expert on both

cooking and running a restaurant. Sean just listened. His eyes wandered around the room - Ben's old coffee table, still covered in paint stains from when he painted his own shoes. Ben's movie posters that he had snagged when he worked at a theater for a few weeks. Ben's shag rug that he picked up at Goodwill, insisting that he would wash it as he rolled it out. The cheap bookshelf that Ben had picked up at Walmart. The random assortment of CDs, figurines, and junk that Ben had collected over the years. The only thing Sean picked out was the old brown couch they both sat on, and he only picked that one because it was on clearance.

Maybe that's why Ben "got" the museum. Even surrounded by all this junk, he seemed to get art more than Sean ever could, all without trying.

His phone buzzed.

"Come over" Courtney's text ended with a single winking emoji.

Sean lay awake in Courtney's bed. It must've been three, four in the morning. He had thought about checking his phone a few times, but Courtney was lying on top of him, her soft breath tickling his chest with each exhale. Her room was not the room of someone who was boring. Her bed was covered in plush pillows and color-coordinated comforters. Next to it, a shelf with more knickknacks than books, including a picture of the two of them she had taken just a week before. Even her unsorted laundry seemed artistically thrown into the open closet, spilling onto the floor like it was making some statement about pollution. Everything about her was so *alive*, so much more than Sean. He looked back at her again, softly and carefully brushing some of her hair out of her face.

Courtney shifted, the ever-growing stone in Sean's stomach turned again as her eyes slowly opened, staring at him drowsily.

"Sorry," Sean whispered, "Just go back to sleep."

She grumbled, pulling the blankets closer and settling back down, her hands were like marble against Sean's skin. He ran a hand along her back, gently massaging her shoulders and tracing the butterfly tattoo he had become familiar with.

"Hey," He spoke softly, not even expecting an answer, "where'd you get this?"

Courtney's eyes flicked back open, she turned her head to glance at it, "The butterfly?"

"Yeah."

She let out a long sigh, tucking her head back against his chest, "That sketchy place downtown, they were doing flashes for like ten bucks and I

figured I'd get one."

"Does it mean something?"

"No, it just looked pretty."

Sean just watched her for a moment—the stunning girl who called him boring. The girl who color coordinated her bedspread and tried to hide her unsorted laundry in the closet. The girl who stored pictures of her friends on a bookshelf next to the romantasy that embarrassed her and the plushies that embarrassed her even more. The girl who put the marble statue of a naked lady to shame. Sean couldn't help but smile, relaxing against the pillows and letting his eyes slowly shut.

"It's beautiful."



By Gibbet, Fire, or Cross

Allison Easter

Would I have known that this day was to be my greatest failing, I would have sent ahead gifts of blood and sinew. I would have sent a Gaul rider into the Roman barricades. The message would have landed at the miserable feet of that trotter-footed magpie, Suetonius. What a dreadful name for a dreadful man. A terrible commander, an even poorer figure.

Were he to know that I stand amidst my people with the elegance of my approaching demise, proud and noble, he would sink to his knees and offer his head to my biting blade.

Would I have known that this was to be the end, I would have seen to it that the world would end with me.

Spears rained from the heavens to strike us down. It was blasphemous. How could the heavens aid the Romans? Maybe it was pity. Roman blood had painted our breasts and hands crimson; our linens, an acrid sunset. We wore the blood of men—the blood of tyrants and conquerors—willing to die so that we may be put in chains. I ordered their boys in leather and bronze to rot in cages, and later, to be slain by what they call downtrodden, second-class, weak, pitiful and prideful people.

Burn them.

Find the lumber and build cages. Erect crosses to raise their bodies so that they may see their armies retreating in blind panic from Camulodunum. Torch their eyes with oil from the fattest boars and set their bodies alight so that they burn like meat. All of this is what we have done, what we will do, what we will die doing.

*Torch their eyes
with oil from
the fattest boars.*

The Romans break our lines with bronze and copper death. Let them come, our warriors are ready. Ten-thousand men against overwhelming odds. A count to never be recorded; never known by history.

A man screams in his cage where we leave him to die. He tells us the Romans are coming. "Foul pigdogs, you'll die like the rest. My men will save me," he shouts moments before I cut open his belly with a quartering tool, his blood staining the ground clay-red. He had enough energy to insult me. I am almost impressed at the Roman resilience. If I were a soldier in the Roman ranks, I would have the energy to curse and spit, too.

I will die today. The Romans will come for my camp and slaughter my men. As a leader, I will die in battle. That I am willing to do.

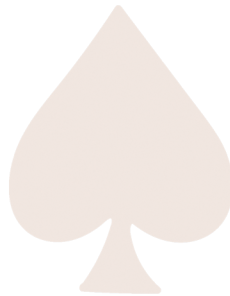
A trusted advisor told me to avoid the conflict.

"Fight another day," he said. "Save yourself and your daughters. The Romans will flog you. Your daughters will be raped."

He is right. I should take his advice. Stay away from the battle and live another day. But I won't let my men die alone. Not in this slaughter. A leader in life; I am to be a leader in death as my father had been before me.

I lift a golden cup to my lips, imagining I am a Roman queen. Does such a thing exist in their backwards, barbaric world? I sup on the sweetest nectar of the deadliest herbs. I add the adder's bile for good measure.

Suetonius will come to my camp, and I shall be dead. My army will fall, and I will fall with them. An honorable thing that the Romans will not understand. I have slaughtered tens of thousands of men. I wear their captain's helm as a wreath of victory as I am blessed by a queen's quick death. I am Boudica, Queen of Icenii. May the Romans die, by gibbet, fire, or cross.



The Lookout

Tierney Privett

Arthur Meynell was not a man who enjoyed society. He held no love for small talk or the smell of burning rubber that permeated the air in the city. No, Arthur preferred wide open spaces, to be lost amongst the trees with only the ever-present drone of cicadas to keep him company. Here, hidden away in the woods, he could breathe for the first time in his life. Arthur was only in his second season as a lookout, but already he knew it was something he could see himself doing for a long time.

Adjusting to living off grid in the middle of a national forest had taken some time and there were things he missed about town living: hot showers and reliable internet topped his list. But he found that he was getting along well on his own.

The days were long. He was expected to wake up with the sun and be on the radio for a standard business day. But really, he was on call all the time. Sure, there were other towers in the forest, but the nearest was a few dozen miles away so it was important that he kept his eyes peeled for anything.

Last night he needed to hike several miles into the forest to shut down an illegal bonfire party. He was glad he hadn't needed to get the authorities involved. Arthur didn't have to call in fires nearly as often as he thought he would when he started here. There was only one big wildfire in his zone last year and none so far this season. He knew that wouldn't last, but his job was to make sure that fire wasn't caused by a careless camper or other human error.

Arthur clattered noisily down the wooden staircase leading out of the lookout tower. His boots hit the metal platform below with a dull thud that echoed in the quiet of the morning. He grabbed the thin, narrow metal ladder and slid to the ground below, pulling the panel at the base of the platform shut behind him. With his pack slung over one shoulder and his radio clipped to his utility belt, Arthur pulled the burgundy flat cap away from his forehead to wipe sweat from his brow. He scratched absentmindedly at the scruff of the unkempt salt-and-pepper beard he had been growing in.

Arthur breathed in the mountain's crisp morning air. The slope his tower sat on smelled richly of the greenery, and the asters and marigolds spread across the slope like a blue and yellow galaxy. The mountain top was nothing like the sharp, acrid scent of burning factory oil and wet concrete back home.

As he slipped the padlock of the door open, the hinges shrieking and metal scraping, Arthur ducked to step into the cramped little shed. He pulled the cord to the single light bulb clipped to the wall and then knelt to dig through a few drawers, grabbing a new first aid kit, some climbing rope, and a spare pack of batteries for his flashlight and radio. On his way out he grabbed a small hatchet and slipped it into a strap on the back of his pack.

Arthur turned to the west, double-checking the brass hand-held compass in his palm and cross-referencing it with his map before shoving both into a side pocket of his coat. Today was supply day and he had a good five-mile hike to the drop point. If he wanted to beat the midday heat, he'd need to pick up the pace a bit. Setting a brisk, measured pace, Arthur ducked down through a thicket of brambles and began his trek to the drop point.

The narrow path, nothing more than a deer trail, wound through the pines and firs that shot high up into the air with needle laden branches. They were smaller than the other trees in the forest with thin, dark purple-brown bark. Arthur rocked on his toes and plucked a couple of berries from a yew and popped one into his mouth. Carefully, he pulled the red, cherry-like flesh clean and spat the seed out, mindful of the seed's toxicity. The other lookouts stationed here before him had taken these trails often, marking the way clearly with strips of green cloth. He glanced at the trail mark and tugged on it gently, tightening the knot more securely as he went.

Arthur had been on the move for nearly two hours when he heard them for the first time. At first, he thought he'd been hearing things, that maybe he'd been out here alone for too long. But the longer he walked, the clearer the sound of twinkling chimes and laughter became. The sound made the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end and goosebumps rise across his skin.

Arthur jerked back, his mouth falling open as a quiet sound of shock escaped him. There, on the other side of the clearing, was a pearlescent blue flash of light that was gone in the blink of an eye, laughter and the tinkling of bells trailing in its wake. He took several steps forward, ready to give chase, when he remembered the first few days of the job.

The old man who'd trained him, who'd lived in the lookout before him, was a little strange. He carried a walking stick taller than himself and wore a giant, floppy green hat that hung low over his perpetually alert eyes.

On Arthur's last day of training, he'd taken him by the shoulders and murmured

You need to know that not everything is as it seems out here.

in a hushed tone, “You need to know that not everything is as it seems out here. It’s a beautiful forest we’ve got, and there are some truly special things waiting to be found out here.” He then paused, seeming hesitant. “Not everyone out here will be happy you’re here. You must be careful where you wander, always pay attention. Heed the warnings, mind your business and you’ll be fine.”

For weeks, Arthur had been shaken by the man’s words.

He stayed up late into the night, glancing over his shoulder constantly whenever he left the tower. But as season passed, undisturbed, he’d left that conversation in the past, too.

Now, Arthur hesitated, hand reaching back to brush the handle of the little axe strapped to his pack. Soft, airy laughter and the chime of a dozen tiny bells followed him through the forest. Arthur picked up his pace. If he could get to the drop point, he could gather his supplies and make his way back to the tower. Keep his head down, do his job, leave the weird shit alone.

Only the closer he got to the drop point, the louder they became. The laughter faded away, but the bells grew even more shrill, echoing off the trees and bouncing around in his skull. By the time he stumbled into the meadow where the supply drop was supposed to be, Arthur had a headache like never before. Arthur stepped into the clearing, pale pink-purple fireweed crunching underfoot. Suddenly, the bells fell silent.

Uneasily, Arthur scanned the clearing for the drop box, but something was off. There, towering over the box, digging through it violently was a creature of nightmares. At first, he thought she resembled an elderly woman, but as he looked harder, he noticed something wrong. Her limbs were too long, her skin too pale. Her hair was oily and matted. She wore a simple gray nightgown that billowed in the wind, the gown’s edges tattered. Blood dripped from her fingertips as she dragged the rations from the drop box.

Arthur stepped back and then blinked his eyes furiously. This must be a nightmare. The woman hummed absentmindedly to herself, rocking back and forth as she dug through his supplies. Arthur took another step back, and then another, unsure of what he should do. For a moment, she was silent and still until a dark giggle spilled from her lips. Her head tilted to the side, meeting his gaze.

Arthur tripped over a branch and crashed to the ground as she turned to look at him fully. She had empty eye sockets, a blood-covered chin, and a grin that stretched her features. With another bone chilling cackle, the woman’s cheeks ripped open under the strain, exposing sharp, too long fangs lining her mouth. The woman took a step forward and then released another ear-splitting screech that echoed through the forest. She threw herself at Arthur, her gnarled claws hungrily grasping for him.

Arthur scrambled away desperately as she darted toward him. His back hit the rough bark of an unmoving tree trunk. She hovered over him, one clawed hand gripping the trunk above him, digging in. She grinned, an eerie hum clicking wetly from her throat as she leaned in.

The sound of the bells returned faint at first but then grew louder. The woman cocked her head to the side, a growl rippling into the air between. Arthur glanced around desperately looking for a way out when the woman hissed and darted away from him, lunging across the clearing.

Arthur scrambled to his feet and looked off in the distance. She was surrounded by a dozen tiny blue lights. The lights whipped around her as she screeched angrily. She began shaking herself frantically as the lights converged on her.

Seeing his chance, Arthur bolted from the meadow. He kept up a dead sprint for the entire trek to his tower. Occasionally, he glanced over his shoulder, hoping that she was not behind him. Nothing. Just as he's turning back around, he slammed face first into a looming pine. Arthur ricocheted off the tree, pain exploding behind his eyes. He crumpled to the ground. The last thing he heard was tinkling laughter and the chime of a thousand bells. There was a rush of wind and warmth, then everything went dark.

Arthur woke with a sharp cry. He shuddered in terror and glanced around frantically. He was in his tower, sprawled across the floor and the sun had set. If it weren't for the fresh mud caked to his boots and the pulsing agony in his skull, maybe Arthur could have convinced himself that what happened in the forest was all a bad dream. Instead, he sat up, leaning his weight on his shaky arms as he stood and checked out every corner of the tower. Nothing. He collapsed into a chair behind his desk and stared out the window at the blank night sky. Beyond the tree line, past his supply shed, a flash of pale blue was there and then was gone. The soft chime of bells drifted away on the wind.

"Heed the warnings," his mentor had said. The lights, whatever they were, had been trying to warn him about the woman in the meadow. Had they really saved him? He didn't remember anything after he hit the tree, and yet here he was safe and sound high up in his tower.

Arthur got up and made his way to the door, flicking the bolt lock shut and grabbing the old shotgun he'd inherited with the tower. He normally didn't bother to load the damn thing, but tonight, he thought he would. Arthur dropped weakly into his desk chair. He cranked a dial on his radio and looked out over the treetops for anything out of the ordinary. Arthur reached down and pulled the shotgun into his lap, loading it with shaky hands. He gripped the gun tightly and turned to stare at the door. There would be no sleep tonight.

A Love Story

Birdie Wardlaw

I feel a sort of darkness
and it pushes and pulls at my light.
Stick a pendulum through the hole in my brain,
coax it out and trap it tight.
Tie the darkness to a rowboat,
getting lost in a meridian sea.
Watch it off, sit on the sand
and cry all sorts of unearthly things.
It plagues my flesh with wanting.
Tearing free with a saccharine twine,
tie the twine back to the rowboat
and I hold it out on the line.
When the unearth and the darkness meet,
they fall into each other,
gripping on with a torrid scream.
With their backs up against another
as I watch, I am breathless.
Never has there been a love as deep
as the unearthly things I have cried
and the darkness that I keep.

Vow of Devotion: *Epilogue*

Laine Andrews

The night sky burned with the fire, a slow, collapsing flame bleeding orange into the bruised blue of dusk. The ground trembled, distant explosions still echoing like dying thunder as the empire that they'd both served and destroyed crumbled behind them. The building's bones of steel and concrete gave way to the blaze. The wind carried the smell of smoke and rain-wet earth, but James and Evelynn barely noticed it. They were too still, too worn, too lost in the impossible reality that the war was finally over.

Evelynn sat half-buried in the tall grass, her breath shallow, her ribs aching with every inhale. Her body was a map of bruises and dried blood. The once-black leather of her suit was torn and singed, her hair wild with smoke. For the first time, the air didn't smell like orders or metal. It smelled like rain and smoke and freedom.

James dropped beside her, close enough that she could sense his pulse. His armor was scuffed, one sleeve torn where shrapnel had grazed him. For the first time, he wasn't wearing his mask. It lay discarded in the grass between them. The mask was a symbol of who he had been, the ghost of the monster he was forced to become. His face was smeared with ash, but his eyes held the same sharp blue that had once hunted Evelynn. He now looked strangely gentle. He exhaled a low, shaky laugh that wasn't really laughter at all. More disbelief. Relief. He had lost everything. They both had. Yet, somehow they survived anyway.

For a while, they didn't speak. The silence between them was heavy, yet peaceful. The kind of silence born from survival. From the understanding that words couldn't capture everything they'd endured.

Finally, she let out a laugh of her own. "I really thought I'd die in there."

"You almost did," he said. His voice was rough with exhaustion.

Evelynn turned her head toward him, a small smirk on her lips. "You're

awful at comfort. You weren't doing much better."

"We weren't meant to make it out," he said. His words were matter-of-fact, not unkind. "Not people like us."

Evelynn's eyes flicked to him. "I wasn't trying."

James looked at her. He saw the same exhaustion he felt, her bruises, trembling fingers, but underneath it all existed that same unbroken flame, the one that first drew him to her even when he was supposed to end her life.

"You wanted it to end?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know how to keep going," she said. "If I came out of there, then what? Who am I if there's nothing left to fight?"

Something in him cracked. For a moment, he didn't breathe. He knew what she meant. He reached for her before he could think better of it. His fingers brushed dirt from her cheek.

Evelynn didn't flinch. Didn't pull away. She gazed at his face. No mask now, no lies, no mission. What appeared before her was the man behind the blue eyes who had haunted her since the first time she saw them glint through a rifle's scope. Her breath hitched, and for a moment she looked almost afraid; not of him, but of what she was feeling.

He leaned closer, his voice barely a whisper. "Tell me to stop."

"I've never have before," she whispered.

James kissed her. The kiss wasn't gentle. It couldn't be. There were years of violence and silence between them. But the kiss felt like the last chance anyone ever gets. His hand cupped the back of her neck while hers tangled in his torn collar, pulling him closer as if proximity alone could prove they were alive. The world around them blurred: firelight, wind, the last faint crack of falling steel.

When they broke apart, foreheads pressed together, Evelynn laughed shakily through the tears she hadn't realized were falling. "You're bleeding," she said.

"You look worse."

The banter faded and the quiet night pressed in, replaced by the weight of everything they'd survived. She looked back at the burning skyline, where years of orders, blood, and obedience turned to smoke.

"I used to dream about a place like this," she said quietly. "Somewhere green. Somewhere no one yelled orders." Her voice faltered. "But I think I was more afraid of peace than war. War was simple. You live, or you don't."

*I was more
afraid of peace
than war.*

James leaned back on his elbows; eyes still fixed on her. "Peace is where you have to feel things."

"I don't know if I can." She swallowed hard.

For a moment, James didn't answer. "When I was a kid," he said finally. "I memorized constellations through the cracks in the roof. I thought maybe they'd get me somewhere safe one day. But now that I'm here? I don't know what to do with it. With any of this."

Evelynn turned toward him and memorized his features. "We made it anyway."

"We did," he said. There was something painful in his words. "But I don't know who I am without orders. Without a mission. All of it."

Her fingers hovered near his hand, uncertain whether to touch him.

"Maybe we're allowed to figure it out."

"It might break us."

"So would going back to a life of surviving."

Silence overcame them again. It was not peaceful. It was sharp and honest.

His voice was rough when he spoke. "You're the first thing that makes sense. And that terrifies me."

"Good," she whispered. "Me too."

They stayed in the tall grass for a long while, two fugitives from the ashes, holding on to something neither of them had ever been allowed to keep: their humanity. The field around them was quiet now; the only sound was the wind moving through the grass and the low hum of flames dying in the distance.

Evelynn tilted her head toward him. Her voice was soft and hoarse as she spoke. "Do you think this is what freedom feels like?"

James looked at her. His chest ached in a way it never had before. He wasn't sure if it was the smoke, or her voice, or the way her eyes reflected the fire like twin pieces of a dying star. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I've never been free before."

He turned to watch the ruins of Noctis crumble, the fire devouring every shadow, every secret. Flames burst through the glass windows. He watched the once impenetrable building collapse in on itself.

"All my life freedom was just another word they used to chain us. 'Fight for freedom.' 'Die for freedom.' But this." He gestured toward the open field, the night, her. "This feels different." His breath caught.

Firelight painted Evelynn's face with gold and shadow. For a moment, he forgot how to breathe. He reached out, his gloved hand hovering

hesitantly before brushing a strand of soot-streaked hair from her cheek. She didn't flinch. Instead, she leaned into his touch.

"You make me forget what I am," he whispered.

Evelynn smiled faintly. Tears glimmered at the edges of her lashes. "You're not what they made you, James. You never were."

Her words touched something deep inside him, something raw and trembling. For the first time in years, he felt human. He leaned closer, his forehead resting against hers, their breaths mingling, uneven and soft.

"I don't deserve this," he whispered.

"Neither of us do," she said. "But we fought for it anyway."

He let out a shaky laugh, his lips brushing against hers as he spoke. "Stubborn."

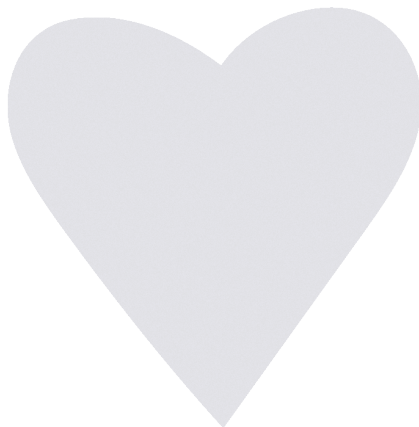
She managed to smile. "Don't forget dangerous."

Dawn crept over the field, golden against blood and ash. Evelynn shifted closer, head against his shoulder, but even then, her voice shook.

"What if we don't know how to live like this?"

James's reply was barely audible. "Then we learn. Or we fail. But we do it together."

Not a promise. Not a fairy tale. Just the truth. For the first time, they weren't running toward war or away from death. They were walking toward something neither of them had ever known.





Janet Saidi Interview

Genavieve Hudson

Janet Lewis Saidi is the author of *The Austen Connection*, a public-humanities and journalism project that connects Austen's literature to pop-culture and current events. The project has been featured in publications such as *Electric Lit*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and at national and international conferences such as the Jane Austen Society of North America. A professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, Saidi teaches writing, editing, and producing. Her work as a producer has appeared on NPR, the BBC, PBS, and in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Genavieve Hudson: Your novel, *Jane Austen: The Original Romance Novelist*, explores the influence that Jane Austen has had on modern culture and writing. What is Jane Austen's most significant impact on literature?

Janet Saidi: Part of the impact is technical: She innovated and pioneered realist novels, a technique scholars call *free indirect discourse*, where the narrator of a novel takes the reader right into the consciousness of a character, while writing from a third-person viewpoint. It's the default narrative position today but Austen made it a thing.

Another big impact, I have to say, is Romance! She weaves so many serious themes and reflections of her world into a courtship/romance plot. When we look backward from the romance genre today to Austen, you see so many influential tropes and themes animating romance novels that originate with her novels: enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, fish out of water, alpha male, rags to riches, and more. This combination impact that she's producing of *realism* and also *romance* in the novel can be confusing. Which is Austen doing? The answer is, I think: Both!

G.H.: What is your favorite Jane Austen novel and what elements make it your favorite?

J.S.: *Persuasion* is probably the biggest achievement. It's a masterpiece, and I feel the novel's treatment of themes like *time* and *consciousness* are innovative in ways that are still being revealed to us. My other favorite is *Emma*. It's Austen at the height of her powers, but mainly it's just so much fun. The arguments alone, between Emma and Knightley,

depict debates of her time that are heavy-going but also reflect debates of our own time on class, gender, stereotypes, and status. And the arguments of *Emma* carry all that weight, and help us work through issues in the story, all the while managing to be funny.

G.H.: Why do you think Jane Austen's novels resonate with so many people, particularly women?

J.S.: Jane Austen understands what it feels like to be marginalized. To not be seen, not heard, and to be disenfranchised from the channels providing wealth and status in society. Austen's stories force an examination into these structures and force us to feel what the characters are feeling. The stories provide a masterclass in empathy. They resonate with readers because they move us and transform us. But there's another fun answer to your question of why Austen's novels resonate and endure, and that is: the *happily-ever-after*. We know, whatever we're traversing to get there, that we're going to arrive at an HEA. That brings us pleasure, anticipation, and joy across boundaries of place and time.

G.H.: How has being on public radio and/or podcasts influenced your journalism and your writing?

J.S.: Reading and writing about Jane Austen as a journalist and radio producer has had a huge influence on my approach! What we do on public radio is to convene and foster dialogue about important topics. This engagement approach is a joyful, freeing, and rewarding way to approach dialogue and engagement around the stories of Jane Austen. My Substack tagline is, "*I'm a public-radio journalist who's assigned myself the Jane Austen beat.*" That mission for convening and fostering dialogue has only strengthened since the Substack started, as our world and our society seems to have become even more divided. Classic literature can be a powerful thing to gather around. And the stories entice us out of our contemporary dogmas and divisions and provide a way for us to contemplate and discuss human experience. And have fun doing it.

But all that to say that once I had started re-reading Jane Austen, during the lockdown, I couldn't resist getting people on Zoom to learn what I could, and recording that exploration, in posts and podcast episodes. It made it a natural progression - but anyone can do it!

G.H.: How do you conduct research for your writing? What is your process for taking this research and applying it to writing your own work?

J.S.: So far traveling for library research hasn't been in my budget, but a terrific number of primary sources are online. Organizations like the Jane Austen Society of North America

and Jane Austen's House in Chawton host digital resources of Austen family letters and depictions of material culture items from Austen's life. There's a resource called Reading Jane Austen that recreates the massive library of Godmersham Park, an estate owned by Austen's brother, with books and even the complete catalog of books Jane Austen would have been surrounded by on her long visits there.

The most important resource for me was the Deirdre Le Faye complete collection of Austen's 161 surviving letters, and also Le Faye's biographical collection, *A Family Record*.

As far as the writing routine, I tend to read deeply - the letters, and important biographies and literary histories - and annotate in the early mornings. Most of my essays and book chapters exist in the margins and back pages of the things I'm reading, as ideas come. And then, if it's a Saturday, in the afternoon I go for a swim, get coffee, and do the actual writing in a caffeinated rush.

G.H.: There is a big community created by and around Jane Austen, as the Skylark 250th Jane Austen event exemplified. Where do you see this community primarily, and how do you connect with them? How do you see people building community around literature and literary figures, such as Jane Austen?

J.S.: Yes, the Skylark event was so much fun, and it's been a joy to connect with people IRL around Jane Austen at bookstores across the country. It's the independent bookstores that host a lot of the community and conversation. My book tour included independent stores like Harvard Book Store in Boston, Charm City Books in Baltimore, Love's Sweet Arrow romance bookshop in Chicago, and Left Bank Books in St. Louis. It was amazing to co-host discussions about Jane Austen with readers and booksellers, and authors and scholars, in these amazing bookstores.

G.H.: How does your background in radio and broadcasting influence your journalism, your writing, and your reading of Jane Austen?

J.S.: I love this question because I have an entire (imaginary) TedTalk on *Reading Jane Austen as a Journalist*. Actually, it's a talk I've done a couple of times recently at the Columbia Library and at the Kinder Institute's summer symposium. It's basically this: When you read the novels as a journalist, you see that Jane Austen's stories are always raising two very journalistic double-questions that animate every single novel: 1) What is the truth and how do you know what you know? And, 2) Who has power and how are they using it?

My favorite example is from Jane Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*:

Elizabeth Bennet is constantly navigating, inquiring, and considering various sources of information to help her make the key decision of the novel, about who is telling the truth, Mr. Wickham or Mr. Darcy. She spends nearly the entire scene of the Netherfield Ball weighing evidence, conjecturing and deliberating, and navigating competing sources.

This is not surprising when you realize that Austen is writing amidst the revolutions and inquiries of her eighteenth-century world. But the questioning is always there, hiding in plain sight - it's one reason Austen is also considered influential on the mystery genre, and it makes the stories even more fun!

G.H.: How did your time in London inspire your writing? Has travelling and experiencing different places greatly influenced your writing?

J.S.: I did spend the better part of a decade living in 1990s London. And I was a grad student in literature for some of that time. But I was wearing black and reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and Modernist literature. I was into Virginia Woolf, and the innovative writers in Paris like Gertrude Stein. Like a lot of people back then, I saw Jane Austen as only about courtship and marriage, which was something I wanted no part of! It's only later, more settled and living in San Diego, that I picked up *Mansfield Park* and thought, "Oh, this is about a group of young people and the things they get up to, acting terribly to each other, on a grand estate. That's kind of a cool jumping-off point for a novel." So, then I made my way through the novels, and relished them. But the entire time I lived in England, I never even went to Jane Austen's House! I plan to remedy that this summer when I'm teaching MU Journalism's London program.

Living and working in London though enhanced my understanding, firsthand, of some aspects of living in the UK. I did a lot of hiking, or what the British call *walking*. Anoraks, corduroys, tea thermoses, it's a whole thing. One time on a day-long trek we made a turn and it seemed like the grand edifice of the historic Chatsworth House just appeared from nowhere. It's my favorite memory, and it's a feeling that is captured in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* film when Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet gasps and then laughs at the overwhelming beauty of the landscape and of the grandeur of the house, which is Chatsworth standing in for Pemberley.

G.H.: Outside of Jane Austen, what writers inspire you and your work?

J.S.: It's hard to know where to start. Looking at the pile of books on my side table right now: There's a pile of *New Yorkers*, which is the kind of long-form narrative journalism that has been an inspiration to me over the decades; there's a novel by Elinor Lipman, whose contemporary romcoms are in the Nora Ephron school and are always a pleasure; there's one literary history book, *Dinner With Joseph Johnson* by Daisy Hay, which is about

an important intellectual circle in 1790s England, which also is the intellectual backdrop to Jane Austen's teen years; and then there's a straightforward history book, *Empire of Cotton*, by Sven Beckert. There are also a couple of contemporary novels that I may or may not get to, Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*, and Kennedy Ryan's *Before I Let Go*, both are being discussed a lot in the Substack and the bookstore circuits right now. That's typical reading for me—usually an in-depth history or biography on the go alongside a contemporary novel or romcom. I love it when a contemporary novel or a romance novel reflects themes in history and society. A perfect example of that is the recent sensation—both a series and the novel, *Heated Rivalry*, which my cool daughters recommended to me. Romance and pleasure provide a scaffolding to help us get to broader societal issues, together, which feels so important and so rewarding.

G.H.: What are the greatest challenges and rewards from your newsletter and podcast, *Austen Connection* and what advice might you offer to people who want to create their own newsletters and/or podcasts or who want to do something similar?

J.S.: Something really cool about Substack is the idea that the posts and essays become secondary to the community that builds up around them. This is what's happened with the *Austen Connection* - each post has a few thoughts, but the Main Event is the commenting and dialogue that the post ignites. By the end of last year's read-along we were regularly getting more than 100 comments on posts. People from across the world were making friends around the stories of Jane Austen. It was exciting and rewarding to be a part of that. We describe the *Austen Connection* as a community around classic literature and story, and that really is the reward and the joy of doing it. It's a lifeline, I feel like.

The challenge is the amount of work it is! Each post I make - even if it's supposedly just a summary of a few chapters of an Austen novel - takes about 7-10 hours of work, *not* including the early-morning reading and annotating. From the draft writing, to editing and factchecking to curation of questions and links, selecting art and photos - it's hard to hit Publish in fewer than 8 hours. And that's a full day's work over a Saturday and early Sunday morning. So, you must love it. The podcasts, while they perhaps look easier and more fun, are even more work! That's in the ballpark for 10-12 hours of work, and it's back-straining audio editing. Again, very rewarding, but you must absolutely love it to do it.

For anyone interested in starting a Substack my advice would be to choose the thing you're passionate about, and perhaps a subject that also links to other related things you're also obsessed with. That way you have a lot of flexibility, and you can play in a sandbox of topics and see where your focus naturally lands. A Substack can take shape as you go. The topic of Jane Austen seems very narrow, but as I explored Austen through essays and posts I discovered links to history, feminism, classic literature, philosophy, politics, and of course also romance and pop culture.

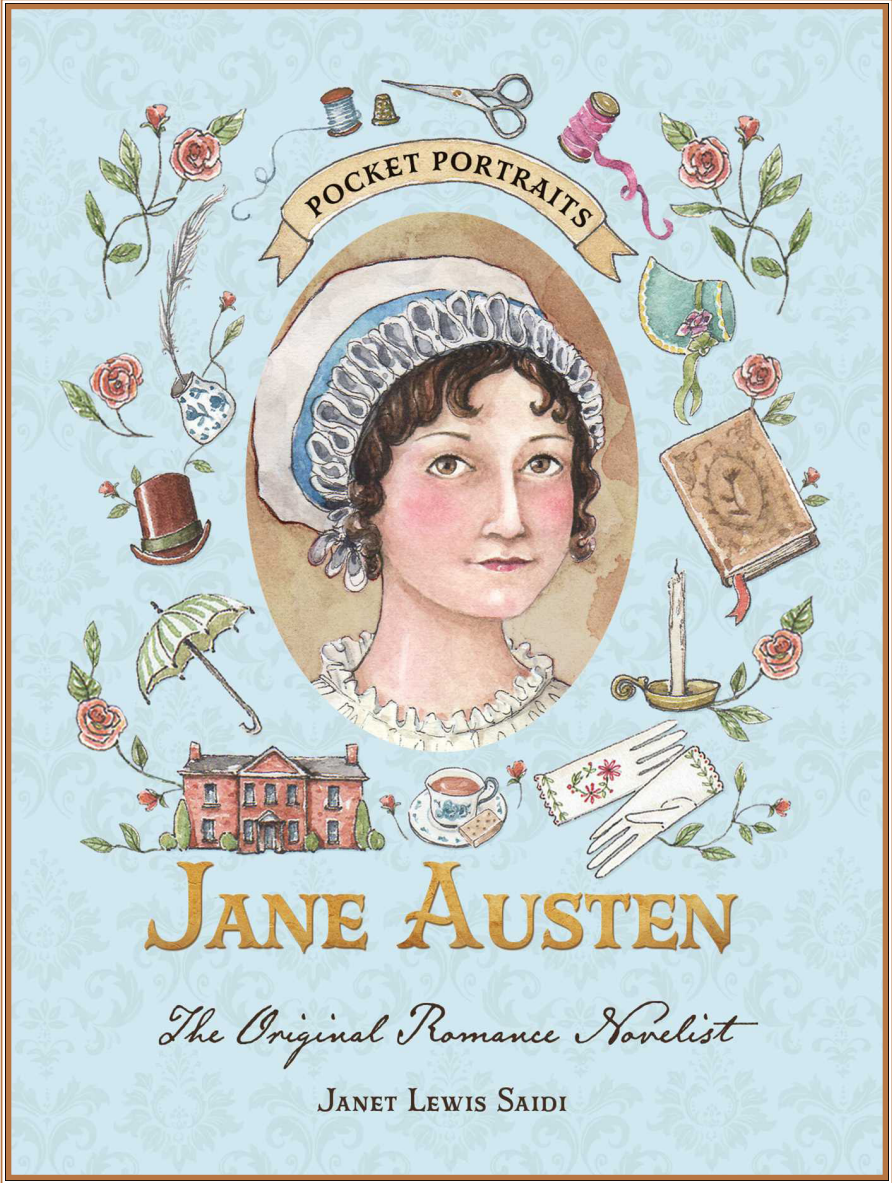
Logistically, it's helpful to block out times to read, times to write, and Substack-production times—for me it's always a “Saturday project”—to produce the work. You can write a few essays and posts before publishing anything; to get in the groove and make sure you like the way it's all fitting together.

The Substack platform itself makes branding, the web design, and the back-end setup super easy, it's fun. You learn a lot just by writing on the platform. Mostly: Go where your inspiration takes you and have fun with it.

G.H.: Why do you think Jane Austen decided to create such character-centered narratives? How do you think this impacts readers of Austen's works and how do you think they affect the books themselves?

J.S.: Love this question. Jane Austen's characterizations are just brilliant. Even scholars tend to talk about these characters as if they're real people. And the reader communities share the joys and frustrations of Austen characters as if they're people we know. We're fiercely protective of Anne Elliot and Elinor Dashwood; we're insulted by the entitlement of a Mr. Wickham or a Caroline Bingley; and we're laughing at Mrs. Bennet and Miss Bates. And the feat of technical brilliance is that when these characters speak, they all sound uniquely like themselves. With these characterizations Austen invents the novel of natural realism as she goes. So, these complicated characters—even the funny ones, are complex—introduce a level of nuanced portraiture to the art of characterization and to the art of the novel itself. The technical brilliance, you might say, surpasses anything else being written alongside her; she's probably drawing from Shakespeare for inspiration when it comes to complex characterization and voices. But she did this sort of pioneering innovation in the first drafts of her first three novels—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey* - by the age of 23!

Essentially, I think she was a genius and she deployed a rich imagination and followed her instincts - so what we're left with is six novels full of people we feel like we know, even 250 years later.



JANE AUSTEN

The Original Romance Novelist

JANET LEWIS SAIDI

you should check the fridge

Ollie Ubaldo

you wish that you could crawl into your mind.
this way, you could ask whoever is sitting in the back of your skull,
clawing at the nape of your neck to pretty please stop.
you'd offer them a gift of some kind,
ask politely, shake their hand.
instead, you check that the fridge is closed.

you never close the closet door, so that your clothes can breathe.
you never wear a shirt, so you remember that you have a body.
you never look to the left, so the fridge doesn't taunt your vision.
you can't help it and check the fridge.

if you lay on the floor, you can feel your heart beating against the rug.
you can feel it crawling out, tearing tendons, spilling onto the fibers.
you can feel your teeth sitting in your jaw, bone and molars pushing
against the back of your tongue. and you can feel that
the fridge is still open, so you check the fridge.

the little scuffs on the wooden floor look like bugs.
when you brush them with your shoes, your thumb, they're just stains.
but if you stare at them long enough, you can see them wiggle.
you can see them squirming, larvae beneath your skin, begging
to check that the fridge is closed.

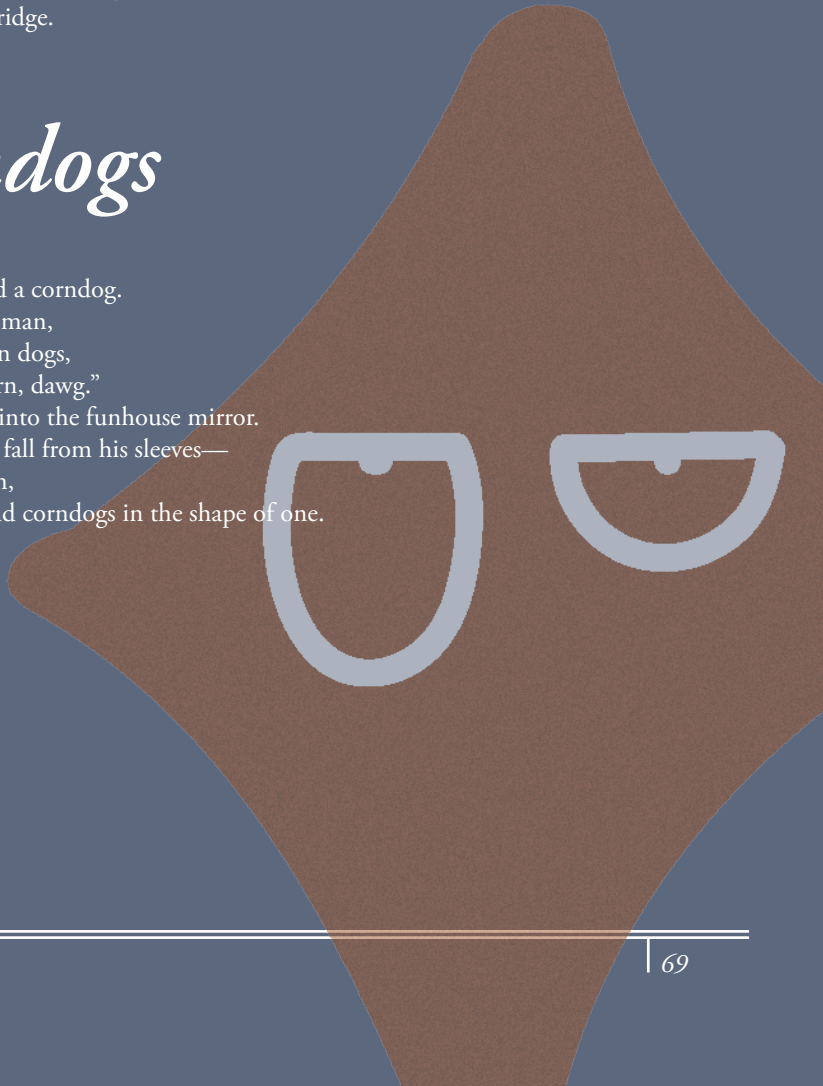
you're less inclined to cry when you know it's closed.
you cry quieter when your mouth is full of gum.
gummy tendons, gummy skin. you should check the fridge.

so you check the fridge. you don't bother dissecting what's inside.
of course, it's closed. you check the fridge, and then you lay down in bed.
you check the fridge. it's closed. you swallow and lay back down. you
need to check the fridge. it's closed. you check the fridge. it's closed.
the door is locked, and you check the fridge.

you wish that you could crawl into your mind.
this way you could work out whether it's your shorts or your skin
leaving hives on your thighs, corroding through your stretch marks
and down into the bone. you could search politely, offer a gift for answers.
instead, you check the fridge. it's closed.
you check the fridge.

corndogs

i go to the fair,
and i am offered a corndog.
i tell the young man,
“i don't like corn dogs,
but i do like corn, dawg.”
he suplexes me into the funhouse mirror.
wooden dowels fall from his sleeves—
for he is no man,
but ten thousand corndogs in the shape of one.





Genavieve Hudson, *Pierce My Soul*, 2026

For Obstinate and Headstrong Girls Who Find No Pleasure Like Reading

Genavieve Hudson

As an elementary school student, I once wrote a story in computer class that had been influenced by the great writers who inspired me. I wrote about a man-eating monster on an island with a siren who lured its victims ashore. My mother recalls that my teachers showed her the story, perhaps concerned about my murderous designs. At a young age, I knew that through language my future would explode open.

By my sincere powers of observation, I believe I am qualified to conclude that I have accomplished as an authoress something marvelous in the proving that women are capable of the art of literature.

Third Grade was when novel-length books appealed to me. I read passionately, voraciously The Familiars, The Man Who Loved Clowns, Survivors, and many others. I had to devour words on the page. Book after book, word after word, it was a hunger that was never satiated. It was an art I had to learn; it was a craft I had to study.

One of my first works of art, as we might refer to *Susan*, found itself without a publisher. In 1803, a year rife with publishing struggles, I needed the council of my father and dear brother, Henry. By council, I mean campaigning, and by need, I mean of men. The shame was not mine but of my era, a time during the reign of King George III, and then, King George IV.

*I wonder if there is such a thing as a “soul book.” Like a soulmate or a soul pet, a soul book alters your state of being. And a “soul author” shapes and influences your own work. The first Jane Austen novel I read was *Pride & Prejudice*. To her, I owe my love of writing. I read the novel in high school, a time when I was questioning love, relationships, sisterhood, and romance. My*

sister was the one who talked me into reading it, and, when I did, I had never felt so invested in a story. Jane Austen wrote how I talked, not by language or word, but by voice, reason, thought, longing, and form. Pride & Prejudice gave me a character I admired in Elizabeth. Sense and Sensibility gave me a character I related to in Marianne. And Persuasion gave me a character to love in Anne. So on and so forth.

As it were, Henry had suggested I declare myself within the pages of *Susan* as a novel written “by a lady.” Then by his lawyer/agent, Seymour, *Susan* was sold for £10 and never published. After a concerning length of time, I wrote to the publisher, a Mr. Crosby, regarding the publication of my novel. I signed my letter with a coy pseudonym, M.A.D (Mrs. Ashton Dennis, a jest at declaring myself married and mad, two things I am not) to one Mr. Crosby, in 1809. The letter was received and returned, and I departed with Mr. Crosby forever. If I recall, in Mr. Crosby’s return letter, he used the phrase “empty-headed female,” a title I believe my dear brother Henry found unfitting of my character and manner. My efforts in my art are vast and ardent, much against the ideal mind of an “empty-headed female” if such a one exists. As it were, *Susan* was later rewritten and renamed *Northanger Abbey*.

Could Austen have any idea of the world she was helping to shape? Her novels, studied in literature courses, analyzed by feminists, tell the stories of women, stories often only allowed to be told by men. Did she know the power and legacy that would follow her in signing Sense and Sensibility?

To misfortune, I had much familiarity. Only with *Sense and Sensibility*, one of my lengthier publications, was I first able to use my name. I signed it, in full, the name of Jane Austen. I hoped for a future alongside the inspirational and controversial likes of Wollstonecraft, Ann Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, and Charlotte Smith, to whom I find great literary enjoyment. Nor did I know that, with the simple fact of my name, written and attached to a piece of literature, would alter, forever, my future as an authoress.

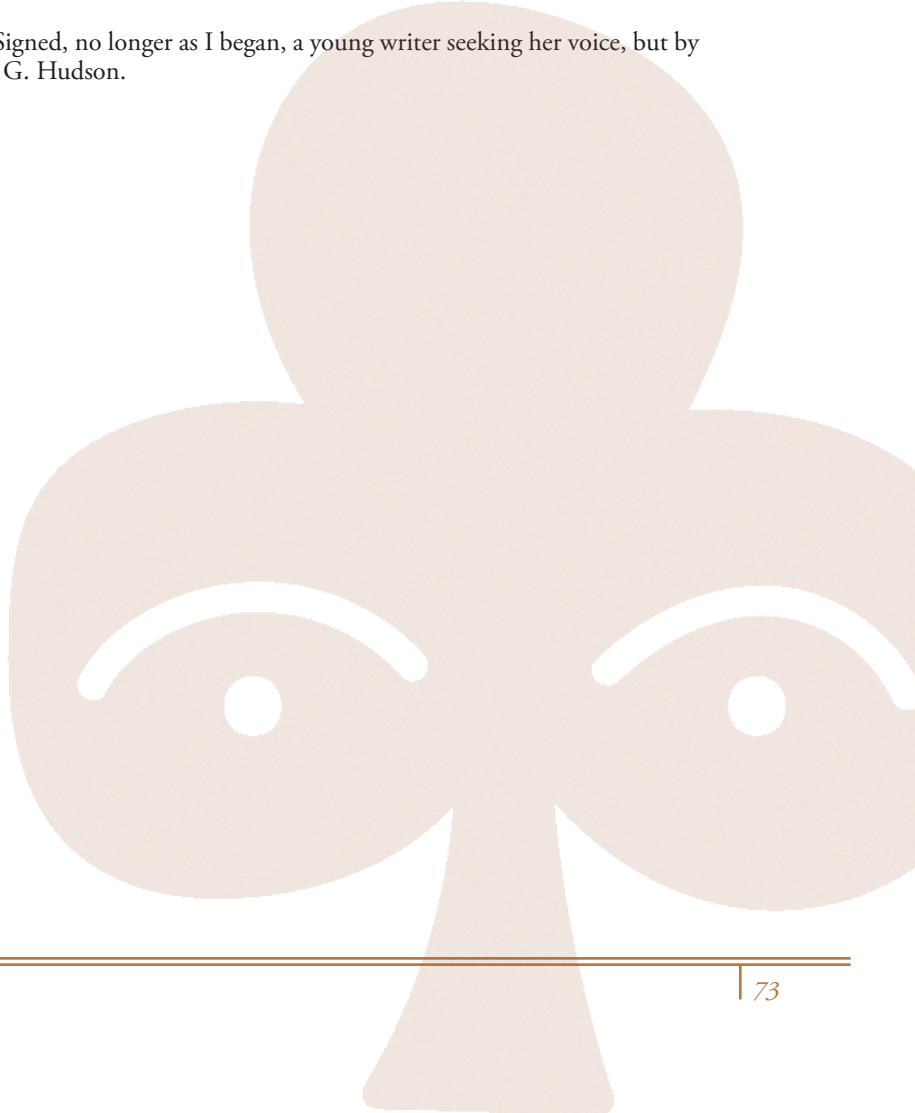
In my soul, I’ve always known my purpose and aspirations. Perhaps I am a secret held in a gentle embrace by the universe. Perhaps my soul is its own galaxy, held together by the burning passions of stars and novas. Perhaps I’ve always known the reason to which my entire being was formed. Or perhaps I know nothing at all. Perhaps life really is a quick succession of busy nothings.

*Perhaps my soul
is its own galaxy,
held together by the
burning passions of
stars and novas.*

I would urge you to do as I have done, and make full claim of your title, not sign yourself away as “a lady” or as “M.A.D.” Name yourself as you are, just as I have done in all my publications since *Sense and Sensibility*. Perchance I had not signed any of my publications, would you, in future, know me or my writing? I encourage you to use that as your evidence of the import of name, the significance of that which you title yourself to be, and the nobility of your cause to credit yourself in anything earned of your virtuous and creative labors, no matter the cost to your repute and no matter the protests of the men whom surround you.

-Signed, no longer, as I began with my first few publications and punning letters, by one “M.A.D,” nor “by a Lady,” but by a Miss J. Austen.

-Signed, no longer as I began, a young writer seeking her voice, but by a Miss G. Hudson.



at the bodega

Jubilee Forbess

there is a bodega sandwiched
between
the end of the street and the next one.
i walk there in the snow,
white sheets covering the city.

my shoes crunch on the streaky pieces of ice,
shattered chunks of dying slush and dirt.
i am too hungry to not enter, push the swinging door open and pull the
hood off my head.

there is a new guy.
there is always a new guy behind the counter, though they are all patient
and kind.

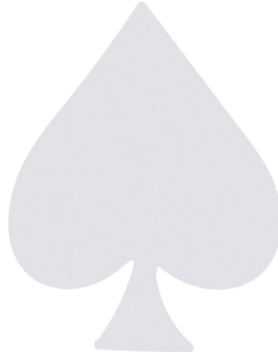
 sometimes
 i pretend.
 imagine a story
in my head about what it would be like to work here with them.
but i don't work here, i just came for the wings, soda, and hushpuppies in
a Styrofoam box
that i carry home,
bundled baby in my coat, away from the cold.

i am grateful for my bodega.
it keeps me warm and fed.
my friend introduced me to it.
would i have found it on my own?

i didn't want to go in because i saw the neon sign
advertising vapes and wasn't interested until we went together.
but that's okay: friends always teach each other things, if they pay attention.
at the bodega, where i bring everyone now,
i balance coins in my hand.

i slide them to the new guy—whichever new guy—
 (old guy, earrings guy, guitar guy, and so forth)
and i buy a jar of juice, a bag of chips, chapstick.
i could go to a bigger store. but i like
that there's no self-checkout here.

i know
no matter how much they push for less of it,
people find connections, community, continuation of communication.
progress doesn't mean, or shouldn't mean, erasure.
don't read too much, between the lines.
i am at the bodega in the snow.
i fold cash into
the hands of the man outside. his girlfriend is a vegan, i've learned,
he needs a little extra, to buy dinner from Shnucks.
and i don't mind.
in return, he fist bumps my gray-gloved hand.
"boom," we smile, "stay warm out there!"



Don't Read Beat Poetry to a Dead Horse

dear dead horse,
am i prolific or compulsive
am i magnetic/charming or repulsive
do you recoil at my poetic meter
maybe it's bad, so you turn on the heater
to drown me out, to beat the noise,
to kick me out of a club for boys.
mimicking is hard, so i don't do it very much.
why would i set fire to every keyboard that i touch?
i am engaged by the way i don't engage with what i love,
instead sticking to the margins of a rubric from above.
in another life, i sit at a table with grizzled men
i fold my hands serenely and i regret every amen
but in this world, in this box
i don't look back on just-turned locks.
and, dead horse, if i read Bukowski to you
would your body come back from pale blue?
as i see you lying on the road
flat, demolished, as a toad,
could i necromance your pallid frame
with broken men who played the game?
or would you stay still, in truth's cold stop,
how many lines reverse the chop?

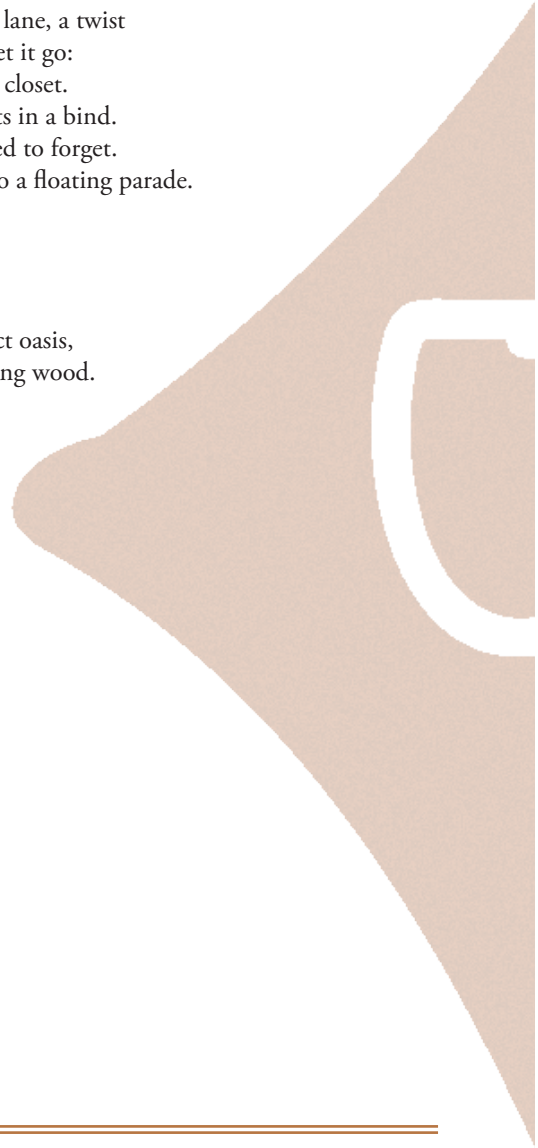
dear dead horse,
on the dead sick road,
lying there, like a stone-dead toad, I pull you up
with words outside my own,
do I want you alive
or do I want to bring you home?
i love you in a way that means i have never met you.
i hate him in a way that means i've only ever related to his words.
and isn't it ironic? and who would understand? am i a pretentious
and wicked fool trapped in the polished body of collected force?
i can't be a beat poet.
i won't beat a beat poet.
but i can beat a dead horse,
and i hit it hard, again and again,
as i flip open to a page
pour Jack over Jack
Michelin and Kerouac.
start at the beginning
and bring it all back.

Sauna Body

I slap bare feet into the hottest room,
one ten-toed ham in front of the other,
already feeling the pearls of sweat
roll from nostrils to lips, down the valley chin,
and into the canyon neck. In the sauna,
I sit on the wooden bench and ignore
the wet echoes of butts before mine.
I guess no one bothered to put down a towel,
but neither did I, so I neutralize the annoyance,
by humming to myself a song of deep complacency.
There is an old bucket beside me, ladle poked
up like a singular finger, lazy water almost
offering itself as sacrifice in fire's pit.
I know you're not supposed to do this,
but I wonder how long I could stay.
My face is already melting off,
as I pull at the end of my swim trunks
and let a little more heat cook me up.
When I am in the ocean,
I pretend to be one veggie
bobbing up and down in a soup.
Now I am a steamed carrot,
with soft edges and a middle that squishes
if you poke it with a fork. At least my hair is dry,
I think, at least the door doesn't lock. I had a friend—

(In, like, first grade I had a friend named Nicole. We got in her sauna at her birthday party. All the older kids were warning us that it would be too hot to handle and we chalked that up to the fact that they just didn't want us there. But ten minutes later when her dad pulled us both out, dizzy and almost in tears and still trying to hold hands, We decided the older kids were right. We weren't ready for it. Nicole's father passed away this year. I wonder who pulls her away when the going gets too tough. When the sauna is too hot.)

How many minutes has it been?
Surely I haven't lost track of time this badly.
The timer on the door says it's been five minutes.
In five minutes, well, look what you've done.
It's a thinking box, a time out spot. I think the coals
spur an open mind, a trip down memory lane, a twist
in consciousness. I've never been one to let it go:
old friends, new places, worn clothes in a closet.
It being high school, run-away love, hearts in a bind.
It being everything I've known and wanted to forget.
Stupid sauna. You've turned my brain into a floating parade.
It's supposed to be good for you.
You're supposed to lose some weight.
I slap bare feet out of the hottest room,
one ten-toed ham in front of the other.
The cold pool stretches out like the perfect oasis,
a plentiful fountain in the desert of burning wood.
Run, jump, touchdown.
I feel my body chill.
After five minutes, my brain will freeze
until I step back into the sauna
and thaw that turkey out again.





Stalemate

Alena Harper

It's on the eighth day that James finally snaps. The twine of his mind pulls so taut bits of fuzz from the fraying go flying.

On the first day James was delighted to spend time playing chess and catching up with an old school friend. Ernest's home was clean, classic, and colonial. The floors, a polished hardwood that might've compelled James to toe off his shoes if he hadn't glanced at Ernest's own Oxfords neatly bowed on his feet. Ernest led him deeper into the house, to a room James supposed you would call a parlor. A purposeless room, which one takes pity on and decorates sparsely with tables and chairs so at the very least it holds an illusion of use. So, they sat in chairs anxious to be sat on, with a chess set displayed between them on a preening table.

It'd been so long since James had properly sat down to play chess, longer still since he had played a game of chess with Ernest. He was pleased to find that Ernest's nervous tick of tugging at his hair—as though the tension in his scalp is what whispered his next move to him—hadn't changed. It was nice to hear him talk about his travels across Italy, how he rode gondolas in Venice, said a quick prayer in the Sistine Chapel, and ate pasta every second of every day. The sorts of run-of-the-mill things anyone would do if they visited Italy.

That's the sort of man Ernest is. He doesn't wander; he watches. He doesn't gamble; he guards. He doesn't have affairs, he has acquaintances. He's also sure as shit not a storyteller. He goes to Italy for a month and comes back to say, "They really know pasta over there, James. You ought to visit sometime." And in the strangest way James loves that. It's nice to listen to him talk about nothing really at all. So nice, he doesn't notice that first

day when the sun had sunk, nor when it inevitably buoyed back up. The first day passed and James was none the wiser.

On the second day, James' thoughts hummed like an old air conditioner, "Hmmm . . ." A passive pondering. Like when your elbow itches because a picture frame is tilted up to the left three degrees off. A puzzle your subconscious tries to solve.

"Do you like puzzles, Ern?"

"It's your move, James."

"Right. Sorry. Right." James moved a knight forward without glancing down. He'd known his next move for the past ten turns.

"I do."

"You do what?"

"I like puzzles."

"Oh, right. What kind?"

The rhythmic clacks of chess pieces and the dry drawl of Ernest's monologuing on crosswords turned James' itchy elbow and humming thoughts into subliminal static.

On the third day, an anchor hit sand in James' stomach.

"Are you hungry?" James asked.

Ernest flinched at that. "No," he said. "Are you? Should I. . ." He paused, his eyebrows swooping downwards, reaching to kiss in the middle, like lovers reunited. His fingers twitched at the edge of the table, as though recoiling from the very notion of standing up.

"I'm not really hungry either." James said. "We can eat after the game."

"Okay." Ernest nodded, his hands stopped twitching, but his brows remained smitten.

On the fourth day, they mostly sat in silence. They'd discovered it only takes three full days to reminisce about one's life. At least three days until you run out of all the safe-to-bring-up material, that is. James and Ernest spent the fourth day thinking about every secret they'd ever kept. Counting them like coins in a pocket. Parsing through the tally, wondering which pennies can be flattened into cheeky souvenirs, which dimes you can let drop into a wishing well, which quarters will weigh down your wallet until the day you die.

The fifth day began the escalation of James' restlessness. After a day of silence, James' mouth suddenly couldn't stop moving. Poking at Ernest. He

didn't seem to mind. James minded that Ernest didn't seem to mind.

"Remind me what your favorite color is," James poked.

"Hmm. . . Maybe coral?"

"Great color. Coral. Lots of things are coral."

"What about you?"

"Hm?"

"What's your favorite color, James?"

"I don't have one."

"Oh."

Each time a conversation died, James resuscitated it—sacrificed air in an attempt to save his sanity.

"Do you like plants? You look like you'd have a green thumb." James poked.

"How so?"

"I don't know, you... I just thought you might."

"I guess I like plants, yeah."

"Cool."

"Do you?"

"They're fine."

"Right."

After each lull, James felt a bitter pang in his chest. Similar to the time he'd given a girlfriend a necklace and proceeded to fumble clasping it for two minutes straight. She'd eventually had to say, "Here, just let me."

Utterly useless.

"If the pasta was so good in Italy, why haven't you moved there?" James poked.

The sixth day, James was determined to end the game. By legal rules, the game should already be long over, a stalemate. A pawn hadn't been moved or captured in far more than fifty turns. A pawn hadn't been moved or captured in five days. But Ernest hadn't called it, and neither had James, and he certainly wasn't going to call it a draw now. He had to win, otherwise what was this all for? James hardly looks at Ernest that day, focused on the board, the remaining pieces, and chasing after the king.

After the sixth day of purgatorial defeat, the seventh was spent with James squirming like a worm trying to escape the hellish sun. Cool grass in sight, but every ridge of his being forced to drag across coal-hot concrete to get there. His hands strained against the table, his feet kicked the carpet,

and still he failed to push his chair even a centimeter backwards. He didn't make it to the cool grass.

It's the eighth day that James snaps. The twine's taut, the fuzz flies and James snatches the king piece dangling in Ernest's hand and puts it right in his own mouth. Ernest's hand continues to dangle, stupidly. His other hand loosens his grip on the strand of hair he's been tugging before he says, "What the hell, James?"

James doesn't respond. He can't really, not without conceding the king piece currently trapped on his tongue. The stinging metallic taste of which is beginning to itch his tastebuds. He moves to pocket the piece safely in his cheek, which puffs out from the shape. He swallows down only the saliva that's built up. He doesn't want to swallow the piece.

"What are you going to do? Swallow it?" Ernest says, hands still froze stupidly in place.

Now James thinks maybe he wants to swallow it. He shrugs up his eyebrows in consideration. Ernest takes it as a threat.

"Stop—stop this. Spit it out, you'll choke." He says, his hands finally thudding back onto the table, but making no move to stand. No move to really stop him. James gulps down some more saliva. "For God's sake James. Please."

James spits it out. His fingers pinch the middle of the king, delicately, in the way one is "delicate" with a slobbery rope they are holding out of reach of an eager dog. He knows he can't hand it back over. That would be gross. But he's also not particularly inclined to wipe it off on himself. He looks to Ernest hoping to find an answer to this dilemma but instead finds a horribly stricken expression.

"Are you okay?" Ernest asks.

"I'm fine. I didn't swallow it," James says and scoffs.

Ernest sighs like he's about to say something else.

James interrupts before he can. "Actually, no. No, I'm not fine. I don't know why. What's? Ernest, something's wrong right?" He didn't mean to make that sound so desperate. Again, Ernest opens his mouth, but James is quick to amend. "I mean. Obviously, something's wrong. I know that. I'm—I think I'm just sick of playing chess is all." Finally, James decides to place the king piece down on the edge of the table, he stares down at his

The twine's taut, the fuzz flies and James snatches the king piece dangling in Ernest's hand and puts it right in his own mouth.

pants as he wipes off his fingers. Keeps staring down even when Ernest finally speaks up.

“What’s wrong?” His voice wobbles on the second word.

“Are you fucking with me?” James’ eyes snap up.

“Nevermind, let’s just finish the game, James.”

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong? Ernest, we haven’t moved in eight days. Haven’t eaten. Haven’t slept. Haven’t pissed. In eight days. What’s wrong?”

“Let’s finish the game.” Ernest reaches out for the damp king, but James snatches it out of reach before he can get to it.

“No. We’re talking about this. Are you not losing your mind?”

“James, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but let’s—”

“Bullshit.”

“James.”

“Ernest.”

“James, please, if we finish the game then we can—”

“We’re never finishing this damn game, Ern.”

Ernest sits for a moment and tugs at his hair. He hasn’t reached out again for the king piece.

“You don’t want to?” Ernest finally asks, meeting James’ eyes.

“That’s not—That’s not the point.”

“But you could have ended the game whenever you wanted, put your own king in check, why haven’t you James?”

“What does that—You haven’t either, so I don’t know what you’re trying to get at.”

“I know why I haven’t.”

“Okay.” James doesn’t know what else to say to that. He’s finally getting the tug back from Ernest that he wanted, but he’s starting to think he doesn’t actually want it anymore.

“Why are you here, James?”

“You invited me.”

“I’ve sent you invitations before with no response. Why now?”

“I don’t know. . .”

“I think you do, though.”

“Why did you invite me?”

“I wanted to play chess.”

“You wanted to play—” James cuts himself off with a half-laugh-half-scoff. “Is that it? You wanted to play chess? You want to play chess forever?”

“Yes.” It’s the immediacy of Ernest’s response that startles James, perhaps more so than the answer itself. “With you, James, yes.”

“Oh.”

“Are you lonely?”

“No—I don’t—Why . . .”

“Cause I am. God, I’m so fucking lonely. I live here alone, James. I’ve got at least four bedrooms, just collecting dust. Do you know how that feels?”

“I’m not really in a place financially—”

“Bad. It feels bad. Worse than bad. It’s this...” Ernest makes a small clawing gesture, one hand over his heart, the other grasping his stomach. “It feels...” James realizes belatedly that Ernest might be about to cry. “Do you understand? You’ve felt it too, right?”

“Ernest . . .”

“Please tell me you understand. Please, just let us finish the game.” Ernest wipes at his eyes and tries to pack away his emotions, like sitting on an overflowing suitcase, trying to get it to re-zip. James wishes Ernest had kept the suitcase shut to begin with, but here they are now, and maybe he’s tired of shoving his shit away too.

“Ernest, I do. I think I do.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, it feels . . .” James can’t put into words exactly how he’s felt the past few years, so he puts his hands over his heart and stomach mirroring Ernest. “God, is it obvious? How’d you know that I . . .”

“I didn’t. I was just trying to think of the last time I felt not alone.”

“With me?”

“Playing chess, with you, before...”

“Right. Okay.” James straightens his back and gestures to the board, “You still wanna...”

“Yeah, I’d really like that.”

James grabs Ernest’s king, dutifully wipes it off on his pants, before placing it back on the board where it had been before, “You’re not gonna concede, are you, Ern?”

“No. Are you?” Ernest picks up his king and moves it perfectly out of check once more.

“No. I won’t end the game if you won’t.”

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



Laine Andrews is a 22-year-old writer from Muskogee, Oklahoma. Yes, a true Okie from Muskogee! She is a senior at Stephens College, majoring in English with a minor in education and a member of Sigma Tau Delta. Her work explores identity, feminine rage, and survival, blending tenderness with defiance. Her novel-in-progress, *Vow of Devotion*, wrestles with love, loyalty, and the choices that define us. She is also working on two poetry collections, *Soft Rage: A Woman's Reckoning* and *Revolution*. When she's not writing, she can be found on campus with her Dalmadoodle, Ryder, who faithfully attends classes alongside her.



Kadence "Jo" Douglas is a junior creative writing major from Fort Smith, Arkansas. Her work was accepted for presentation at Sigma Tau Delta's annual national convention. On campus, she is the editor-in-chief of *Stephens Life* and president of Spiritual Susies. This is her third year being included in *Harbinger*, and she is excited to share her prose.



Allison Easter is a junior English major with a minor in business from Ashland, Missouri. Her short-short, "By Gibbet, Fire, or Cross," is her second publication in *Harbinger*, and there will hopefully be more to come. In her free time, she reads historic and fantasy fiction and a proud owner of two Siamese cats.



As a junior creative writing major, Jubilee Forbess is excited to help present the third edition of *Harbinger*. Her work in this magazine includes a few poems and a short non-fiction piece about candy. Jubilee is the president of Stephens' chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and will be reading her creative work at the national convention (for the second time). She likes to watch movies and listen to music with her friends and family.



Harbinger Editor-in-Chief, Alena Harper, is a senior creative writing major graduating in May 2026. This will be her third year published in the magazine, and second year on the staff. She enjoys reading and writing fiction and poetry that is surreal and mystical with a sense of humor. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and will present her creative work at the 2026 national convention.



Genavieve Hudson is a senior majoring in creative writing with a minor in women's studies at Stephens College. This is her second time being published in *Harbinger*. She is the Vice President of the Stephens chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the 2026 poetry editor for *Harbinger*, and a board member for Poets of Infinity and Spiritual Susies. She has been accepted and presented at the 2025 and 2026 Sigma Tau Delta Conventions in Pittsburgh and New Orleans, respectively. She loves everything about Jane Austen and her soul book is *Persuasion*.



J. Hunter is a sophomore creative writing major who writes for *Stephens Life Magazine*. They are a member of various clubs on campus, including Black Women Enlightened, Spiritual Susies, and Poets of Infinity. They can be found outside of class reading, listening to Hip Hop and RnB, and watching video essays. This is their second publication in *Harbinger*, and they look forward to more in the future.



Camri Jones is a psychology major who decided to take a creative writing class for the credit but ended up enjoying it. She is intrigued with what lies beneath the surface of people; the fears, the rituals, and the other selves that people don't always show the world. This fascination with what lies beneath the surface of people is what she expresses in her writing. In "The Girl in the Mirror," Camri enters the fictional voice of Marilyn Monroe to explore the conflict between public and private selves, and the girl who hides behind the spotlight. This is Camri's first published piece in *Harbinger*, and she hopes it won't be her last.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



Cordelia Maltsbarger is a junior communication design major from Columbia, Missouri. Cordelia is a graphic designer who was more than eager to accept the role of layout designer for *Harbinger*. She is the Executive Fundraiser for Creative Ink, a student-run marketing agency at Stephens College, and outside of graphic design, she enjoys theatre and art.



Daz Murray is a junior health sciences major from Kirksville, Missouri. This is their first time being published in a magazine, and they are super excited to contribute to *Harbinger*. Outside of collaging, their hobbies include swimming, kayaking, reading, and playing with their cat, Goosebumps.



Sarah Phillips is a junior English major from St. Louis, Missouri. This is her third-year publishing in *Harbinger*. Her poetry has also been featured in *fifth wheel press's* blog. She is a writer and copyeditor for *Stephens Life* and Vice President of Spiritual Susies. As a member of Sigma Tau Delta, she was invited along with six other classmates to present her work at the 2026 national conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.



Tierney Privett is an aspiring author and a senior English and creative writing student at Stephens College. They plan to pursue a career in publishing or library sciences. "The Lookout" is their first *Harbinger* publication. Tierney is from Ravenwood, Missouri and currently lives in Columbia, Missouri with their cat and their partner.



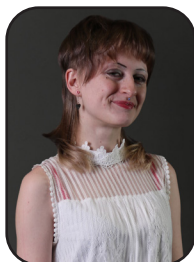
Lydia Sheehan is a December 2025 graduate of Stephens College with a BFA in creative writing. She is currently home in St. Louis, Missouri. When not working or writing, Lydia is petting her dogs or enjoying live music and live theatre. Lydia is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, set to present her poetry collection at the 2026 conference in New Orleans. She is a former *Harbinger* intern, and this is her second publication in the magazine.



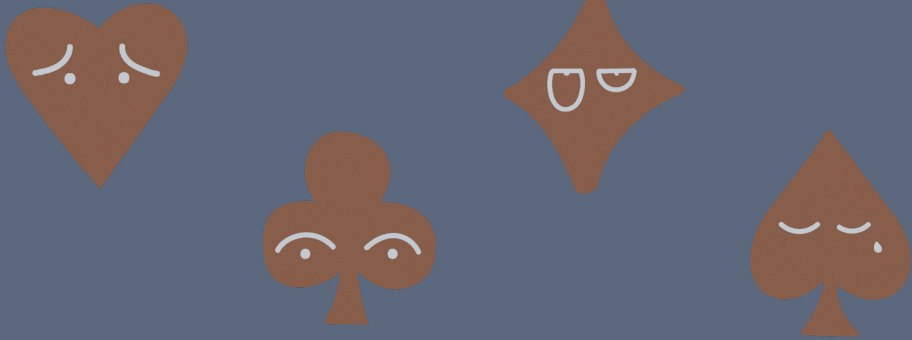
Miah Sickler is a junior majoring in English-Creative Writing. They are a member of Poets of Infinity, Sigma Tau Delta, and a member of the *Harbinger* staff. This is their second year working on the magazine and featuring in it.



Ollie Ubaldo, a creative writing major and member of the *Harbinger* staff, was recently inducted into Sigma Tau Delta. When she is not writing, her usual activities include drawing her friends as ponies and sleeping on the floor. Her work has been featured both in the previous year's edition of *Harbinger* and on her mother's fridge.



Birdie Wardlaw is an early childhood education major and creative writing minor with a passion for creative arts. She works at Stephens College Children's School, helping children explore nature through hiking and other activities. She enjoys blasting music in her dorm room while scribbling ideas for her creative work. This is her first time contributing to *Harbinger*, and she hopes to continue publishing her future work.



Artist's Statement: The cover of this year's *Harbinger 2026: Playing Along* was created to invite viewers into a moment of playfulness before revealing a deeper, more contemplative meaning. Inspired by the idea that we are all just “playing along” during unsure times, our team chose playing cards as the central motif. The cards represent chance, risk, strategy, and participation, a reminder that life often feels like a game where the rules are unclear, and the outcome is never guaranteed. The design initially presents itself as lighthearted, inviting the viewer in with familiar, cheerful imagery.

Yet beneath that surface lies a more vulnerable message. Within the card, a hand reaches toward a balloon drifting beyond its grasp. The balloon symbolizes hope, optimism, and possibility, but also fragility. It floats delicately between being held and being lost, echoing the emotional complexity of striving for something meaningful in a world that can feel quite heavy and unpredictable. Through this contrast of playfulness and quiet tension, the cover reflects a shared human experience: continuing to reach forward even when the future feels uncertain. Ultimately, this piece serves as reassurance that, even in moments of melancholy, we are all trying our best—still hoping, still participating, and still in the game.

Sophie Stober, Abigail Leake, & India Davis

