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July 2014

## The Laureate, 10th Edition (2011)

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# THE LAUREATE

A network diagram with a central point from which many lines radiate outwards to various names in circles. The circles vary in size, and the lines connect them to a common central hub. The names are arranged in a roughly circular pattern around the center, with some names having multiple lines connecting them to the center, suggesting a higher degree of connectivity or importance. The background is a dark, textured grey.

Analiese  
Grohalski

John  
Withee

Tony  
Cerullo

Katie  
O'Brien

Brian  
Bender

Brianna  
Krueger

Molly  
Zebell

Katherine  
Gillary

Michelle  
Szejbach

Jessica  
Bixel

Kelsey  
Pretzer

Danielle  
Favorite

Nathan W.  
Norton

Valerie  
Smolarkiewicz

Courtney  
Boone

Shannon  
McCullough

Benjamin  
Moran

Dina  
Khalil

Brendan  
McGinnis

Chelsea  
Michaels

Courtney  
Ochab

Derrick  
Rice

Katherine  
Peterson

Ian  
Hollenbaugh

Jessie  
Miller

Caleigh  
Burgess

Candace  
Pine

Allie  
Pines

Jacob  
Smallegan

Jonathon  
Follett

TENTH  
ANNIVERSARY





# THE LAUREATE

2011



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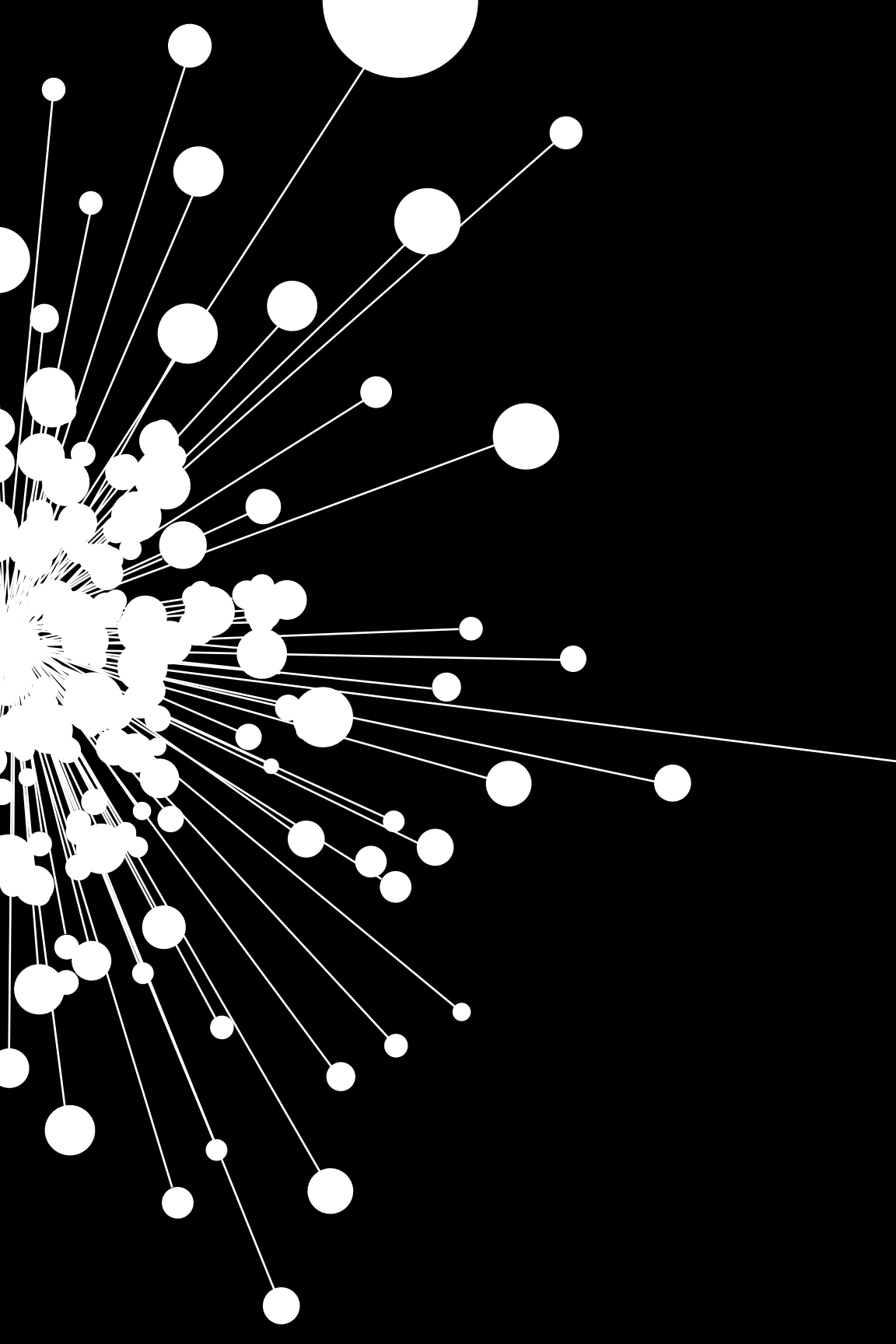
Tricia Hennessy


Justin Lackey and Dave Daniele

Paul Sizer

# Mission Statement

*The Laureate's* mission is to provide undergraduate students at Western Michigan University a place in which to publish their works of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and other creative works. *The Laureate* strives to be a professional and engaging journal that appeals to all.





The tenth anniversary edition of  
*The Laureate* is made possible by  
the generosity of the Lee Honors  
College External Advisory Council.





## Editor's Note

This year marks *The Laureate's* tenth anniversary. As Western Michigan University's only undergraduate literary journal, *The Laureate* provides the phenomenal opportunities for Western's most talented writers and artists to showcase their work. While we began as a journal for written work, we have since expanded to include several forms of visual art, including photography.

Furthermore, the production of *The Laureate* itself is a work of art. The editing process is taken over by students. My four assistants and I, all undergraduates, were responsible for gathering, choosing, and editing all submissions. The design stage of *The Laureate* is also done by students under Paul Sizer at the Gwen Frostic School of Art. In this way, *The Laureate* very much becomes a concrete symbol of student expression.

This year has been about pushing boundaries. Trying to find new ways to reach students, we added a new element to the mix: our own website. When technological networking is such an integral part of our generation, the ability to reach students through the internet is a hugely important facet of our promotion phase.

It has been an honor to work with so many talented people. From my advisors, assistants, authors, instructors who helped spread our message, and designers—all of these people served an important role in the production of *The Laureate*. I want to extend a special thanks to Lee Honors College, The Design Center at the Frostic School of Art, and Western Michigan for supporting this project. Most importantly, I would like to thank Becky Cooper for choosing me to run the project, for answering my questions, and for her enthusiasm.

I also want to thank my assistants for their dedication. We spent many long hours together, making hard choices, laughing together, and putting our entire selves into this journal.

Without further adieu, I am happy to present the 2011 edition of *The Laureate*. This year we received submissions from multiple genres—from poetry, to short and long fiction, to non-fiction, to plays, to photography. I hope you will find some surprises in here. I hope you will find laughter in here. We strive for excellence at *The Laureate*, but we also strive for self-expression. As you turn the pages, I hope you enjoy what we have selected.

Kara Anne Pauley  
Editor-in-Chief

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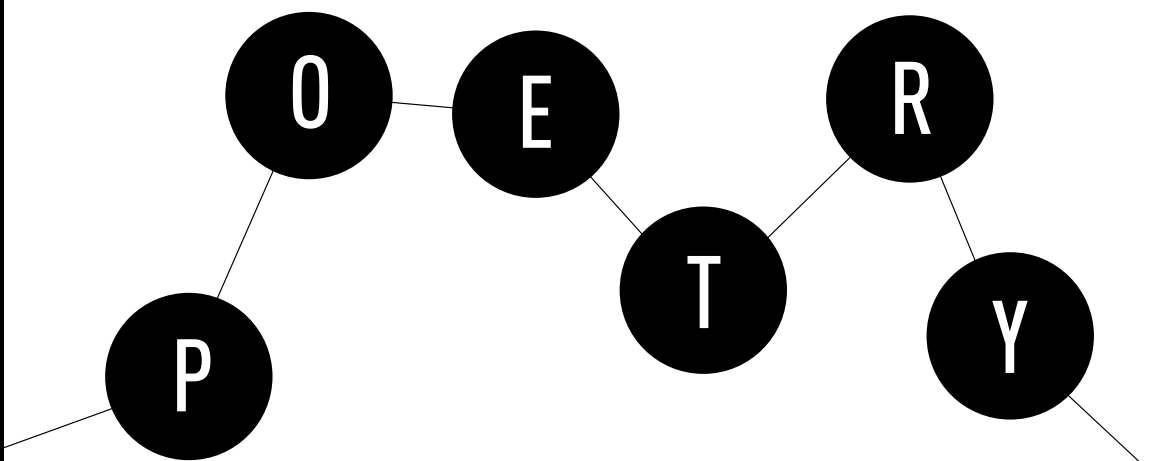
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# On the Edge

*Michelle  
Szejbach*



Shannon  
McCullough

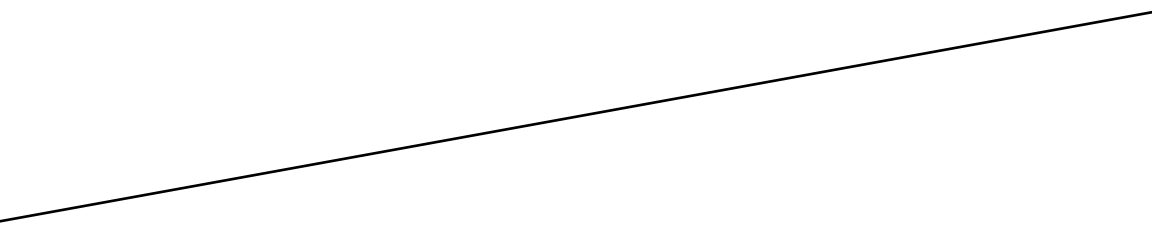
# Red Fox, Barn Owl

1. She sat in the shower,  
his sweat peeled from her chest like moist wallpaper.

The world stared at her between water drops.  
She couldn't feel the warmth.  
Velvet steam, fragile mind.  
On a swing set at midnight,  
stars like open wounds  
etch time on her eyelids.  
She's free from  
his momentum,  
their back and forth.

2. She left his apartment,  
got coffee and drove for hours.

A fox in the middle of I-94  
a fresh smell like skunk.  
Tufts of fur swirl around its mangled body  
as semi-trucks and Ford Focuses speed by.  
She imagines the moment it died.  
Its kits scurry to the other side,  
neck snap, back break.  
Orange and red fireworks  
against the grill of a truck  
towing a livestock trailer  
to the slaughter plant in Plainwell.  
The driver didn't notice.  
He began to weep  
over the loss of his daughter.



3. She kissed his neck, pressed hard  
in the shallow grave between his shoulder blades.

His sanity coughs  
below six inches of regret  
as her lips trace and knead  
over its resting place.  
That spot aches,  
ties in knots,  
waits for someone,  
reminds him that  
he sleeps alone.

4. She heard his heart,  
wondered why he never claimed it.

He told her his chest was empty,  
you can't train a barn owl where to land.  
She lay in his arms  
the first time in weeks  
a walled-in flutter;  
the impassioned beat or  
the imprisoned flap  
of an owl's wings.

5. How long had it been since he felt his heart?  
She told him to stay.

He sat on the edge of his bed  
blew smoke out the window,  
She curled beside him.  
A comma in life.  
Cold hands.



# Wanderlust

*Candace  
Pine*

Porcelain pale hands, slender  
fingers stroking ivory keys.  
Her notes string out  
onto the wind,

chasing him. He stumbles  
out on the cold, empty moor, followed  
by her haunting melody, its song mixing  
with the soft splash of raindrops.  
He pauses, listening to breezes.

The mind is a vast desert.  
She is content to live there.  
He left, again,  
for the unexplored,

so she plays her memories  
into music: the intensity of his hooded gaze,  
the brief touch of his shoulder as it brushed  
against hers, the emptiness  
of the open doorway.



# How To Forgive

*Jessica  
Bixel*

Barter me like mustard seeds. I like it. Bend me over in the water like a real Galilean magician. Turn me into wine. Trade me for a white dress and let me know who you hang it on. I hope her skin smells like late night prayers and honey.



# Maybe Next Time

Cortney  
Boone

Pinned,  
where I want you to be.  
Under my teeth,  
the layers of skin compress.

I bite your eyelids shut.  
Don't watch me,  
grinning,  
spitting out your flesh.

Love or desire still emits  
from the sweat,  
it's coming from your lips.  
I've withdrawn my chemistry.

Still grasping his dripping hair,  
I lead him over the ledge.

*Danielle  
Favorite*

# Lethological Lament

The shadows are not so weak  
in this broken cup of pencil stubs.  
It sits beside my mind like I  
sit beside yours as you  
tread on these words. What day  
did you tame your name? Mine  
flew away as I scribbled pine-shade because  
its wings went un-trimmed.  
Taste the pulse under your throat  
and you'll know what my name sounded like  
as it fluttered off the page.

# Over Coffee

*Jonathon  
Follett*

Jehovah and Lucifer sat at a table over coffee.  
*Have you ever seen a Nintendo 64 game map?*  
*It's a pretty good rendition of eternity.*  
Jehovah said this because there was nothing to say.

*Yes. Three colors fading into the horizon captures a sunset perfectly.*  
(Lighting a cigarette.)  
*You don't need to pretend to be interested, you already know  
what I'm going to say.*  
Lucifer said this because he knows how disappointing  
omniscience is.

Jehovah sipped his coffee and burned his tongue.

# Conversations Between Two Hearts

*Valerie  
Smolarkiewicz*

Taking time  
to breathe,  
to see into my future,  
to realize you are real.

Here,  
in this moment—  
your lips pressed  
to mine.

A frozen memory  
replaying—  
so divine.

Is this love  
that you have brought to me?  
Or is this trust?

No longer in denial,  
I'm well aware  
you need me  
as I need you.

# November 4

*Derrick  
Rice*

It's been years since we  
set foot in the water.  
The war criminals kept our country  
safe while we shivered  
in our living rooms  
and lost our children  
to the desert.

Something had to give.  
It requires an entire country to take out the trash.  
I voted for  
the less insincere  
and the better dressed.  
Remember when everyone was voting for themselves?  
I voted for us.

Shock and awe can only  
sustain itself for so long.  
Fox News long faces—bad news.  
The sun is still burning,  
just like our sons,  
though we forget for now  
and join the global parade scrolling across the screen.

Washington's in Technicolor again  
until you rinse the champagne from your eyes.  
We were so worried  
for tonight, four more years.  
Worry will prevail, I think, but for now  
my brain is smoking cigarettes  
while my heart does the twist.

# Retail Courtesies

*Jacob  
Smallegan*

"Hello, how are you doing today?"  
is a timeless greeting used from one person  
to another, particularly in the realm of  
customer service, it is a phrase that says,

"Hi, I am acknowledging your existence  
not only as a valued customer  
but as a living, breathing,  
emotion-driven human being,  
much like myself (hopefully)."

It is not some well-rehearsed  
and overly used sales pitch  
meant to woo and sway you  
into some retail sales abyss.

So, when I greet you and you fire back  
a robotic auto-response, "Just looking!"  
I might get a little offended.

I wasn't shoving hundreds of dollars  
in merchandise (that you don't need)  
down your throat the moment you  
walked up. Nor am I some modern-day  
mall pirate attempting to swindle and charm  
you out of your hard-earned money.

No no, I simply said "Hello"  
and asked about your day.

Chelsea  
Michaels

# Beach

Her memory is a hazy, hot day;  
the hummingbird is trying to escape.  
Salty sea spray is thick on her tongue;  
the clouds are in her eyes and cotton  
in her ears. Paul Rodgers sang to her  
on Oceana Drive one day. But all she can  
remember is that Paul Rodgers didn't show.  
He looked at her with only one eye open,  
and said he had run forever but ended up backwards.  
The beautiful sand of her mind drifted,  
the sun sent chills down all their spines.  
She cart-wheeled across the waves,  
Sunshine clapped and cheered.  
The bed lay across the ceiling,  
*promenade sur la plage avec moi.*

Courtney  
Ochab

# Tacit Inamorato



Tacit inamorato  
Your incomprehension and bashful habit of  
Your knuckles abrading the coarse grains along  
Your strand lacerates the caveat of  
My conscience



Michelle  
Szejbach

# C.A.C-Ket

A marble podium with a green carpet.  
Purple lolled over the corners, but  
all off-center for the ivory sacrifice of  
the fallen. Thorns rise from the pores,  
with no blood to prove. Mourning isn't red.  
Eight hands, forty gloveless fingers—  
procession of the matriarch over the tiles  
behind a permanent box of sparkling  
cinnamon enamel.  
At least thirty-six feet to follow, covered  
toes lifted or pressed flat. Music sounds  
distant and fake, like a cassette tape.  
Strange faces, stranger tears blur along the  
walk.  
But the hardened wax has already been  
sealed with roses. Those were red.  
Hearts were wound as the knob  
cranked. Forever will the face find peace.  
Witnesses were warned prior.  
A storm, waters churning and disrupting  
annoying calms, ended after eighty-four years,  
most productive in the last sixty.  
Rivers have since branched off, and other  
storms birthed.  
The rivers accept rain indoors.  
Doves and storks already claimed their  
newest addition and wait for others  
close by.  
No malice, mourning is not red.  
Frost trickles along the wires  
and crystallizes majestically over  
glass and stains.  
But there is silence. Black,  
which stretches low and  
echoes off pews.  
Cream blanket, with lace  
added.  
Goodnight.



Brian  
Bender

# Your Father

watched from shore, solving our puzzle. Our tangled swim.  
Our Neil Young under the neighbor's dock—their tired boat.  
He whistled and my palm let you go. Don't let it bring you  
down, you said. It's only castles burning. And then nothing—  
only the sound of submarines.

# A Crystalline Purgatory

*Katherine  
Gillary*

Steadily, I trudge along the snow-covered sidewalk,  
Snaking through campus' labyrinthine trails;  
My head down and hood up.

Frost dances lightly on still green leaves;  
Pirouetting across amber bundles.  
Resilient in their fruitless fight against Winter's chill,  
Summer's skeletons clinging, still,  
To a birch's outstretched fingertips.

Fleeting glimpses of frozen breath die,  
Pluming absently from smokeless lungs.  
The hot bodies ghost through trembling lips,  
Caressing chapped skin turning blue.  
Only memories remain.

Where do they go, when their short lives end?

# A Night's Acquiescence

*Katherine  
Gillary*

Silently, I crept  
Down carpeted spiral stairs,  
My bedtime long since passed.

I wore my sea-foam green nightgown  
And pretended that I was the daughter of a king,  
Adorned in delicate ribbons and ruffles.

Your deep voice awoke me.  
Hushed tones echoed through my dreaming  
And started me on this spy-like quest.

Bare feet padded along the cold wooden floor,  
Bringing me to peek around the kitchen's corner;  
I saw you in the living room.

Legs spread-eagle and dark hair disheveled,  
From sleep or lack thereof,  
You played like a child.

With two new puppies,  
You spoke unabashedly  
In high-pitched gibberish.

Balls of fur happily used you as their jungle gym;  
Soft pink tongues lolling,  
Licking your weathered skin.

Your brow smooth and laugh-lines creasing,  
Your firm hand rubbing upturned bellies,  
Three pairs of eyes looked at you with adoration.

# Death's Party Plans

*Dina  
Khalil*

Would you rather burn  
in Dante's Inferno or  
drown in Dawson's Creek?

Dina  
Khalil

# Spa Session

I found you lying  
in a pile of black dirt like a crippled animal  
that awaits a predator.  
Such meat brings only parasites  
but humors my hunger.

Believe in this body  
as a blank canvas.  
Smother me with the taint you scrape  
from your subconscious.  
Splash on your anxiety,  
smooth out my depression.

Tearing out your stitches  
only to sew you back together again.  
These moments will bring us closer  
like a caged snake with a frozen mouse.

We swoon in the lover's limbo  
where terror eclipses romance.  
Swords are a box of chocolates,  
roses die like cigarettes,  
compulsions to grope each other  
above open caskets  
to crawl into death's shadows  
and beg for our own funeral.

Pushing you towards the sea  
to float amongst the critters dwelling  
in your dreams requires having  
a heart. But, mine is a whore's virginity.  
I search for my soul with an umbilical cord  
that connects to a miscarriage.

# Gargantuine & Harold

Ian  
Hollenbaugh

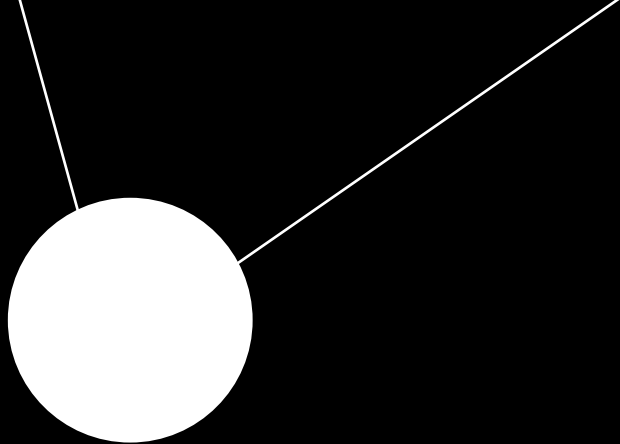
Gargantuine and Harold  
were walking hand in hand.  
“Gargantuine,” said Harold,  
“oh, can’t you understand?  
There’s never been a child,  
so far as I recall,  
one fourth the height that you stand—  
some twenty-four feet tall.  
At half the way to seven,  
it’s really no surprise,  
the world has got its hands full  
with your tremendous size.  
A garden’s but a mouthful  
to your ungodly jaws.  
The mowing of the pine wood  
a somersault may cause.  
To you a mighty sunflower  
is but a dandelion.  
Perhaps you are descended  
of Dawn and great Orion.  
You’re sweet as summer breezes;  
you cannot help your wrath.  
Yet everywhere you go you leave  
destruction in your path.  
And so I speak to warn you:  
When walking down the street  
look low, or your friend Harold  
might squish beneath your feet.  
You love to dance, I know it,  
as any girl your age;  
but wreckage of their village  
puts townsfolk in a rage.  
We can’t be driven out, now,  
from every place we go.  
Your Harold needs to rest a while,  
I’m getting old, you know!  
Gargantuine, I love you,

so please don't take offense.  
It's just, you must use caution  
when being so immense."

Gargantuine and Harold  
were strolling down the way.  
"Harold," said Gargantuine,  
"I have something to say.  
I'm young and fond of laughter,  
and singing when I will.  
I only want the simple joys  
of any little girl.  
I'll watch my step from now on,  
be careful where I sit;  
but if they still won't let me be,  
I'll throw an awful fit!  
I'll stomp on all their houses,  
I'll play with all their toys,  
find candy for the little girls  
and punish all the boys!  
If no one there will love me,  
I'll have to make them pay.  
They'll soon regret their cruelty  
when dolls I come to play.  
They cannot see beyond my height;  
they'll never comprehend.  
And so we must move far away,  
for you're my only friend.  
Dear Harold build a cabin,  
as tall as any oak,  
for you and me to live in peace  
away from fearful folk.  
If run from town and shunned at inn,  
we'll simply make our own.  
As long as there's still you and me,  
we'll never be alone."



And so it was that Harold,  
    with sweat upon his brow,  
built, taller than a mountain,  
    the castle standing now.  
For years the two lived happily,  
    apart from everyone;  
but Harold's bones grew weary,  
    and soon his days were done.  
So harsh a fate so young a girl  
    could hardly comprehend;  
and to this day, the locals say,  
    she mourns her only friend.  
At night she often wanders,  
    heedless of her feet.  
Searching far and wide she goes  
    for some new friend to meet.  
But terror she brings with her,  
    as desperate children do;  
so lock your doors and stay inside  
    if she comes passing through.  
Her name brings fear to hardy men,  
    and none will dare confront her.  
And friends, it seems, Gargantuine deems,  
    could never really want her.



# Wolves Running at Dusk Across an Expansive Desert

---

*Brendan  
McGinnis*

There is a certain permanence  
in the place I have not yet known—

or, I suppose I have known in my own right,  
after slumber takes its pass

echoing a cathartic beauty  
that only be extinguished  
by the actions of our old,  
I long only to live among them,  
with you,  
    love,

out where crazy ghosts  
trail mottled turquoise  
and suck oases dry.

I hope to find contentment,  
a rightfully earned semblance of peace

where the rocks stand red

and the vast howls blue.

Brendan  
McGinnis

## Further Notes

Every place I've been is ruled by a group  
known as freedom fighters; there would be blood  
like an overflowing sink

my unwashed dishes.

The old chair, olive  
like the spot in your pocket and the jar  
in your cupboard, is made of too many fibers  
I only wish I could count.

I waited with you in a cell, a cell like those that scream  
white with static.  
I miss the flavor of my panic, the lactic  
pursuit of one another, it is now always out of place.  
Artificial light is the only thing that keeps us up at night  
sometimes yellow and sometimes grey,  
no matter the source.

A postcard in a womb,  
stamped and addressed and without a message,  
the face is blank (almost), the photograph  
nothing to the recipient. My darling  
is a cup; full but cold, a book not finished  
but forgotten. Madness echoes

with the breathing  
of our solitude, and I wonder  
if sadness washes  
over starlings as they covet darkness.

# Stolen Feathers

*Katherine  
Peterson*

We played together under  
the gleaming grand  
piano. Pretended to  
fly over carpet forests.  
(I pushed you.)  
Taped on prism  
feathers of red, purple, green  
until you broke your leg.  
I drew a black  
sparrow on your  
severed femur.

My stranger came  
home, late one  
night. Slashed through  
darkness with poison  
words. I stared into  
the feathered  
kaleidoscope. Your dart  
pierced ghost  
flesh, a tie-dye  
target on my  
back. I almost  
didn't feel.

He stole  
hearts, tore  
taped feathers. Wings  
stuttered, deflated  
fell at his  
feet. A gruesome  
pinwheel sparrow  
smacked pavement.  
He bent  
and poked it.



# Ride

*John  
Withee*

Help me conquer this pineapple  
with spoons  
piece by prickly piece.

Then dress me in spurs  
and a ten-gallon hat  
and send me out to ride whales  
through the Atlantic.

I promise to holler your name  
when I come up for air.

Take me up an Alaskan mountain,  
hold my sweaty palm,  
take me to ecstasy  
until I shout, "Enough!"

Then burn me at the stake  
until, smiling,  
I ask for more flames.

# Everything is Illuminated

with thanks to Jonathan Safran Foer

*Allie  
Pines*

The cornfield lecherous with fireflies,  
we lay in the glow  
of it all, laughing at Time,

because he didn't know we strung leaves  
through the twisted spires of his clock —

if I could, I'd give you my pulse,  
trust you to poke enough holes  
in my glass jar chest  
so the fireflies could breathe.

We're here, the glow will say  
in one in a half centuries.  
We're here, and we're alive.

# The Color Thief

Allie  
Pines

She doesn't fit in here.  
Her hair looks like Apollo traced his paintbrush across its roots  
and said daughter instead of sun.

Thoughts get caught in her head like spider's legs  
framing her eyes leave webs under her hair,  
but those eyes are like a reflection  
of the Mediterranean.

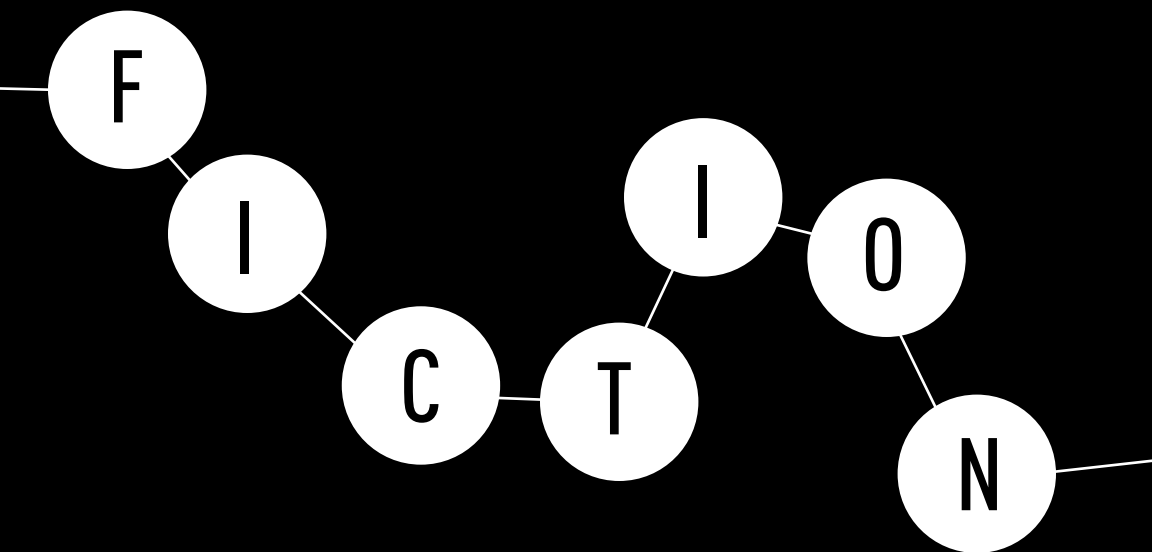
Crash like waves do—  
crash like thunder applauding the lightning  
for its beauty.

Thunder claps her open  
so she knows that her jaw mustn't always be so tightly clenched.

In that moment, sitting across from her on Metro Route 1,  
I wish I were a teacher, just to show her how to smile again—

her cigarette steals the pink from her lungs, and I can almost taste  
the ashes.







# Best Friends

*Brianna  
Krueger*

Nathan W.  
Norton

# There's Only One Apron Left in Aunt Berry's Apron Drawer

There's a revolution going on in my Aunt Berry's basement and I didn't start it. I totally didn't. All I did was find out about it. Well, me and Cheeze, we found out about it. So what are we supposed to do, you know? If I told Uncle God and Aunt Berry, I bet they'd blame me even though for real it was Cheeze who started hanging up the laundry outside on the line, and now I can't find Pretty Penny.

So far, Aunt Berry is the only one who lost stuff. I mean, Uncle God and me lost some socks, but that's really not a very big deal. Aunt Berry lost some big deals. Her really nice silky blue dress that's black if you look at it right. Her I'VE GOT PIE HOPES apron, which is awesome because it's got a pie with wings on it flying through some clouds. Pretty much all her underwears, I guess, which is gross and I'm not going to think about that anymore. And she lost her best jeans too, with the holes in both knees and the patch shaped like a pie sewed awesomely to the butt. I put it on there upside down during my eighth birthday party last year because Pretty Penny dared me to use Aunt Berry's sewing machine. And you don't not do dares from girls, not if you're awesome.

So if you want to know how this thing all got started, I'll go ahead and tell you because it's important to tell people how these things all get started, even though I still haven't told Aunt Berry everything. How do you tell your Aunt Berry you know what's taking all her aprons?

So this is why there's only one apron left in Aunt Berry's apron drawer.

Dead Guy Grim always thought you were  
his favorite. He has many mismatched socks.

After school, me and Cheeze were going to play some kickheadball out back. Kickheadball is this game I made up where you throw or sometimes kick a ball at each other's heads. The whole point is to angle the shot off your noggin just right so you can hit the power lines and freak out the birds squatting there. And then for extra points you can smash the ball out of the air while it's falling with Nine the Basher, which is a golf club I found in the trash one time. It's a little crooked, but still bashes pretty fine. If you're not very good at the whole angle thing or if you can't aim Nine you'll end up hitting Dead Guy Grim's house right behind mine.

Dead Guy Grim is this real tall, real boney guy who looks dead. Not like a

vampire looks dead, but like a mummy looks dead under the toilet paper. I'm not scared of him or anything, but I don't want to play kickheadball with him, that's sure as snot. I mean, the couple of times he talked to me and Pretty Penny and Cheeze he's been pretty nice and it's not like he smells bad or anything, but I just didn't like his smile. It's crooked like that Stupid Shawn Cisco who's always talking at Pretty Penny and waving and giving her Reese's cups at recess even though he's a whole grade up from me and her and Cheeze. I think I like Dead Guy Grim better than Stupid Shawn Cisco. At least Dead Guy Grim doesn't give Pretty Penny Reese's cups.

Sometimes he sets his chair up right at the window facing us in the backyard. He lights up a pipe that looks like a picnic basket and watches while we play kickheadball. We wave just to see if Dead Guy Grim maybe died while we were playing. He stays pretty much stone still. He always waves back, though, and it surprises me every time.

It was a pretty hot April, but not too hot. Just hot enough for me to show Cheeze my awesome new back-heel-flying-roundhouse axe kick without putting on a jacket. I was going to show Pretty Penny, too. She was coming over to see how awesome it was going to be. Plus, it's not like we could play kickheadball without Pretty Penny. She was our thrower—or kicker, whatever. I was the hitter and Cheeze went and got the ball, so he was our getter. That lardo Cheeze always wanted to be the thrower and kicker, but I always told him that throwing and kicking was Pretty Penny's job. I let him hit sometimes, but there was no way he was ever going to be as good as me at hitting or as good as Pretty Penny at throwing and kicking.

Before we could get to that, though, I had to tell Aunt Berry what I was up to. I have to tell Aunt Berry whenever I fart, it seems like. She's pretty cool pretty much all the time, but she's got this thing where I have to be all, "I'm going to Cheeze's with Pretty Penny to watch James Bond and eat Nerds," even though Cheeze lives right across the street, like literally right there. If I tell her, then she's fine. But if I don't, she worries even though she really doesn't need to. I can take care of myself just fine.

Me and Cheeze threw our backpacks on the fake tile floor, on the corner peeling up like burnt paper. I knew where Aunt Berry would be, but I still called for her.

We could hear her voice coming from the kitchen. When me and Cheeze got in there, she was on the phone. Her black and white hair was pulled back with her gold and silver clip, which meant she was in pie mode. À la mode, she liked to say. Ha. Pie joke.

She had an apron on that had blue swirly designs on it, like flowers almost, and a pie with a gun poking out of the crust. The barrel and the pie were both smoking. It said LIVE AND LET PIE.

She was working on some piecrust. The pan was all white and dusty from flour. Aunt Berry had some white dust in her hair too, but flour wasn't really the reason it was white in places. Her hair was getting pretty old. The phone

was getting all floury, Aunt Berry holding it up to her white-caked face like that. Wouldn't that be a surprise next time Uncle God needed to call Tractor Jack's to fix the lawn mower? Aunt Berry forgets to clean the phone off, Uncle God gets flour-ear.

Cheeze farted and me and him laughed at it. Aunt Berry quieted down right then and all I heard was "praying for her." She hung up and was pretty focused on her pie crust all of sudden, making it all perfect and dimply against the pan with her thumbs.

"Hey," I said. "What was all that?"

Aunt Berry smiled up at me real fast. "Hey, hun." And then it was eyes on the pie. "Listen, have you seen Penny lately?"

She never calls me Buzzard Breath because she says it's not my name. Well, yeah, but it's cooler than my name, so I'm like, what's the big deal, Aunt Berry? But I get pretty mad if anybody uses my dumb name, so she just doesn't say any name ever.

"Yesterday at school," I said, "but she's coming over later to see a wicked new kickheadball kick I got. Why?"

Aunt Berry shook her head and kept working the crust. "It's nothing much. Mrs. McVale was wondering if either of you boys had seen Penny lately. Maybe at school today?"

I sneezed from some flour floating around in the air. "Nah, she wasn't there, but I'll see her when she gets here. So me and Cheeze are going to go do some kickheadball, get a head start before Pretty Penny comes."

Cheeze is shorter than me by a lot so he had to grab the counter to get his nose over the top. "You look pretty today, Aunt Sherri."

I gave Cheeze's flabby arm a good whack because that wasn't Aunt Berry's better name.

"Geez, Buzz!" Cheeze rubbed his arm like a dweeb. "I mean Aunt Berry."

Aunt Berry used her sweet and fake canned fruit smile at the pie crust. "Thank you, Chad," she said.

Aunt Berry bumped her rolling pin and it rolled right off the counter. Cheeze moved pretty much the fastest I bet he's ever moved running over to get it.

"Here you go, Aunt Berry," he said. "You want me to wash it off for you?"

"Just fine," Aunt Berry said. Then back to the pie.

I watched Cheeze look at my aunt for a while. Fatty McDweeb. "We'll be done, like, before pie, but maybe after dinner," I said.

Aunt Berry nodded that kind of nod where you're pretty sure she isn't listening and her bottom lip sucked in her top lip. When her bottom lip sucked up the top one, me and Cheeze knew to shut up, at least for a bit. Pie making is careful work if you want good ones. And I never want to stand in the way of a good pie. And I think Cheeze might die or something if he didn't get Aunt Berry pie at least three or four or five times a week.

Me and Cheeze stood there for a second until Aunt Berry was happy with

her crust ridges. I had to get her okay to go play out back or I'd get in trouble, probably. My eyes kept shooting over to the front door. I was so ready to bolt. My new kick was tickling at my toes, ready to pop, ready to go, like a foot cannon. Aunt Berry, though, she just chewed her top lip like it was Juicy Fruit, like she didn't want Cheeze to ever see how cool my new kick was.

Eventually, Aunt Berry stepped back from her crust and put her hands on her hips. She smiled at the pie pan. Totally perfect. If nobody doesn't like Sara Lee, nobody's ever tried Aunt Berry's Black and Blueberry Pie with special white chocolate drizzle—epic.

She looked at me, then at Cheeze and then she wiped some sweat from her head with a flour-covered arm, then on her apron. I thought maybe she should've done it the other way around, but whatever. "Okay," she said, "but I need you to put the laundry in the dryer for me."

I said, "Aw, Aunt Berry, but—"

She said, "Shush. Laundry switch is your job, mister. It won't take you long. Go and do it, then you can go play. Okay?"

I made a noise. "Okay. Come on, Cheeze."

So we headed for downstairs while Aunt Berry got out the strawberries and cream cheese and sugar and stuff to start working on the filling. She was making Strawberry Scream Pie. Awe. Some.

While she cut the grassy parts off the strawberries I noticed a little water in her eyes, like one time when I was littler and I asked why she didn't just use can filling stuff like lots of other moms did. She had looked at me for a while, and when she opened her mouth to say something, she ended up crying instead of talking. I thought I hurt her feelings asking about fake fruit can filling.

"I'm not your mom, sweetie," she said after I gave her a hug.

I told her I knew that. I wasn't a retard or anything. I knew Mom died when I was teeny tiny, right after Dad went to live at jail. So maybe she was crying because my mom was her sister and it was sad to think about her being dead. Or maybe she was crying because of when the doctors told her and Uncle God that they couldn't have any kids, so it was weird hearing me call her mom, even though I didn't really. Whatever. Now I just don't talk about canned filling.

I jumped down the stairs—skip two, skip three, skip two—and landed hard on the floor. I hit my knee on the wall but it didn't hurt. Cheeze waddled down behind me. He wasn't skinny enough to take the stairs like a fighter like me.

"Go ahead and do it," I said. "You like putting in the goop and hitting the button."

Cheeze tugged on the butt of his pants. "Well, Aunt Berry told you to do it."

"Yeah, well, you actually like doing it. And I don't. And as long as it gets done, who cares?"

Cheeze scratched his arm and started making the laundry switch. I leaned against the inside guts of a wall, watching him. Uncle God hadn't finished the basement, so none of the walls were walls yet—just boards. Like the skeleton of

the house. Uncle God hadn't put the skin on.

Oh hey, so if you want to know why Uncle God is Uncle God, I'll tell you real quick. It's because I never see him, ever. After I went to live with Aunt Berry and him when I was three, I never actually saw him before, and then after a year or whatever, I saw him maybe twice or something. Aunt Berry says the factory never shuts down, so he's lucky he gets to come home at all. She says he only gets four hours of sleep a night, so I guess he's got to be really tired all the time. Whenever I go to sleep, he isn't home yet, and whenever I wake up, he's already gone. A few times I stayed up all night to see if I could see him, but those nights, he didn't come home until after I went to school.

I know he lives in the house even though I don't see him, because of how the sink is never clogged and how the light bulbs never run out. Uncle God keeps real good tabs on stuff like that. Oh, and how there's enough money to buy fresh fruit so Aunt Berry doesn't have to use fake can crap even though Aunt Berry doesn't have a job that isn't pies.

I like Uncle God a lot even though I never see him. Sometimes his loud truck that sounds like a dragon snoring will wake me up when he's leaving early in the morning, but it's okay. It makes me feel like he's out there for me for when I need him, even though for real, there's not a whole lot I can't handle by myself.

Cheeze stopped doing my chore and I got pretty ticked. "What're you doing? Come on, there's a kick you have to see."

"Well, I was just thinking," Cheeze said. "What if we put the clothes out on the line outside? It's real warm out and stuff, and it makes your clothes smell like air."

I sagged my shoulders and rolled my eyes and made a fart with my mouth. "Cheeze! That'll take pretty much forever if you wanted to do that. Just throw the stuff in the dryer. That's what it's there for. To dry stuff. Outside is for kickheadball."

"Yeah, I know, but I think Aunt Berry would be happy to have extra money. You know. It could be a gift from me, sort of." Cheeze tugged on his butt again.

I went *pffft*. "Cheeze, how in the frickin frick is using air to dry clothes instead of the dryer going to give Aunt Berry more money?"

"You know, like energy costs and stuff," Cheeze said. "My mom said it saves money like, every month. So it's not getting money, but it's not spending as much. So it's kinda like having extra. I don't know, I just want to do something nice for Aunt Sh—Aunt Berry."

"Whatever, I don't even care. Just do whatever and let's go."

Cheeze stuffed all my clothes and Aunt Berry's clothes and Uncle God's clothes in a basket and took them outside to the line. It was my kickheadball practice line. Not for laundry. I'd go outside to kickheadball it when Cheeze and Pretty Penny weren't around, to make sure I was better than Cheeze and that Pretty Penny knew it. I put chip bag clips on the line and pretended they were birds. It took a real good swing with Nine the Basher to get one of those things off of there.

The line was just some old rope hanging between some little tree in the

middle of the backyard and some big oak tree with furry vines sticking to it all over at the edge of the yard where it turns into Dead Guy Grim's yard. The trees ate up the ends of the lines like some barky mouths sucking in a spaghetti noodle on both ends.

We waited a while for Pretty Penny to show, but she never did. How were we supposed to play kickheadball without her? It wasn't really kickheadball without Pretty Penny. It was just stupid. I finally let Cheeze throw and kick, but he wasn't any good. I missed Pretty Penny. She had a better arm for throwing and a better leg for kicking than Cheeze and you know you can't be a good hitter like me unless you have a good kicker or thrower. Plus, I was really hoping to show her my new kick. Cheeze asked to see, but I wanted Pretty Penny to watch it, not just Cheeze. Maybe tomorrow.

While we played, Dead Guy Grim watched. We waved and he waved back.

Dead Guy Grim does not think he wants to hurt you,  
but he isn't sure. He has many shirts that are not his  
size and never were.

I woke up the next morning and put my shoes on without socks because I wondered if my feet would get less sweaty.

When I got downstairs, I saw Aunt Berry eating a slice of quiche for breakfast. She always says quiche is like pie, but for mornings, but I think it tastes like what pie would taste like if pie was gross. "Morning, sunshine." She pointed her fork at me. "You haven't seen my cutie pie apron have you? It's not in my apron drawer."

I knew which one she meant. It was my most favorite apron probably. It was pink and said CUTIE PIE, EVERYONE'S FAVORITE FLAVOR on it and there was a picture of a little girl with crinkly brown hair and bright bright blue eyes holding a pie. She reminded me a lot of Pretty Penny because she was wearing a poufy yellow dress, which is Pretty Penny's second favorite color next to pink, which is her favorite by a ton. She has a lot of shirts that are pink.

I shook my head at Aunt Berry. "Nope. Got to go."

I couldn't find Pretty Penny anywhere at school that day. I looked for her everywhere me and Cheeze knew where to look. The brick wall corner of the school where we liked to look for broken Cobra bottles and sometimes dirty Skittles wrappers. Inside the big cement tube where we liked to eat the Goldfish crackers all our moms—Aunt Berry, I mean—always packed for us. We even looked out in the woods behind the playground where the teachers won't let you go if you ask. So we didn't ask and we went. She wasn't there. We did find a pretty cool little box that said CAMEL and had a picture of a camel on it, though. It was all soggy from the mud we dug it out of, but I knew it would be perfect for holding money once I dried it out. I got the idea for it holding money because we found a quarter in it, so that was awesome.



It would have been more awesome if we found Pretty Penny instead. I'd give a hundred thousand million quarters if she'd come back.

If you were wondering, my feet got even more sweaty without socks.

Dead Guy Grim has been sleeping on the same bed  
that you have been sleeping on. He has enough sheets  
to change yours daily.

Aunt Berry is a quiet crier, not one of those loud blubberers, so I didn't actually hear her until I got to the dining room right outside the kitchen. I was up pretty past my bedtime sneaking around the house like a spy. Buzz the Super Spy! They can't catch you! Silent as a ghost! Deadly as poison! If only Pretty Penny could've seen me. Buzzard Breath, Super Cool Super Spy.

So I made this totally awesome scamper toward the dining room table and at the end of it, the quietest roll anyone's ever rolled before. Went right under the table, right around the chairs, like I was born to roll. The long tree-colored table cloth almost reached the floor, so there was no way Aunt Berry and Uncle God were going to see me, not Super Spy Buzz. I was listening in, listening to my enemies' secrets. Talk, you Evil Russian Goblin Elephant Poachers, talk with the good guy right in the next room! Ha!

I could see Aunt Berry sitting at the kitchen counter from where I was, but not Uncle God. He was sitting across from her, but the door jam was covering him up. Aunt Berry said something about that little Penny McVale, about her mom and dad and how they were worried bad, since it was almost three days now and since the cops didn't think chances were looking good. Every day without finding her was like a bigger chance of never finding her.

Uncle God has this huge voice, like he's filling the room with sound thicker than marshmallows even when he's trying to be quiet, so when he said it was a shame and she's such a little angel, I could hear him perfect. Aunt Berry said what if something happened to her. Uncle God told her to shush about that—nothing was going to happen, he was sure. Aunt Berry wondered what should they tell Buzzard Breath. She didn't say Buzzard Breath, but you know. She should've. Uncle God said there was nothing to tell right now and they'd tell Buzzard Breath when they had something concrete to tell him and maybe she'd be back sooner instead of later. Aunt Berry said she hoped so and she hoped Pretty Penny was going to be all right. And then they both laughed because she called Pretty Penny what I call her, only while she laughed, Aunt Berry's eyes got like they would if I ever called her Mom.

I slept under the dining room table the rest of the night because I got to smell Aunt Berry doing a little midnight baking like she does when she's upset sometimes. And besides, I didn't feel like super spying anymore.

Dead Guy Grim does not want you sick, so he will

feed you, and he does not want you uncomfortable, so he will wash you. He started with just socks and things on strings between trees.

Aunt Berry couldn't figure out what happened to her EASY AS 3.141592 apron. She looked everywhere and couldn't find it. It wasn't in her apron drawer, not in the laundry basket, not on the line outside. She never found the cutie pie one, either. No EASY AS 3.141592 apron, no cutie pie apron, and come to think of it, where was her TGIP apron? THANK GOODNESS IT'S PIEDAY. That one. Some of her other clothes were gone too, but those weren't as important as aprons.

For Aunt Berry, every day was pieday, only not so much lately. Without her aprons, she was starting to make less and less pies. So pieday was coming less and less. It was like the aprons gave her pie powers. So because she was making pies less and less, pieday was coming less and less, and so I was eating less and less pies, and I was pretty much mad about that.

I was sick of not having Aunt Berry's Six Berry Attack Pie, so I decided we were going to get this whole apron thing figured out. That little tubber Cheeze was a scaredy cat about it and he didn't want to do it. But I asked him didn't he want Aunt Berry to be making pies more? Duh, Cheeze wanted pies. So that got him to help.

To make the pies come back, we had to make the aprons come back. So me and Cheeze were going to be like detectives. Like laundry detectives. "The Case of the Missing Aprons and Other Laundry."

"You know when you have one sock, just not the other one?" I asked Cheeze. "Yeah."

"Well, I think it's like that. The little Thievers that live in the dryer that take the other sock are getting all mad because the socks aren't going in the dryer anymore. I bet they use socks to build houses and for football jerseys, and to make a lot of tinier socks, and probably even for food."

Cheeze crunched his nose. "They eat . . . our socks?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why else would they keep taking them? Okay, so these little Thievers take the one sock—"

"How come they don't take the pair, just the one?"

"Cheeze!" I said. "You're like a baby, pretty much! It's cause they don't even know there's pairs. They take what they need for food and clothes and stuff and just go."

Cheeze nodded and tugged on his pants crack.

"So anyway, these little Dryer Thievers really need the socks to live. Socks for them is like pie for us, you know? They just can't live with no socks and we just can't live with no pie. And when you started putting clothes out on the line, taking away their food, the Dryer Thievers thought it was Aunt Berry who did it, so now they're taking her aprons and her . . . like—"

"Her underwears?" Cheeze asked.

"Those are gone too? Gross. Well, yeah, her underwears, I guess. And you

want to know what else?"

Cheeze's eyes got a little bigger. "What else?"

"If you think about it," I said, "right around the time Aunt Berry started losing her aprons, what was the other thing that happened right around here too?"

"Um. I-I don't—"

"Pretty Penny!" I gave Cheeze a good whack on his shoulder for being dumb. "One day she doesn't come over for kickheadball and the next day, Aunt Berry's missing an apron and some underwears! See? The little guys that take the socks are the same guys that are taking the aprons, and the same guys that took Pretty Penny. There's a revolution going on in the dryer. We can save Pretty Penny, Cheeze. Think about how awesome she'll think I am if we find her when she's lost, just like how Aunt Berry will be totally happy to get her aprons back."

"Aunt Berry will kiss us and hug us all over if we get her aprons," Cheeze said.

"Yeah, I guess." I looked at Cheeze for a minute.

His cheeks got all red and he said, "So . . . w-what do you want to do, Buzz?"

"The thing is," I said, "I bet they're taking all Aunt Berry's stuff from the line outside. I bet they don't like the clothes when they're all wet from the wash, so they wait till they're hanging. I bet they're taking them while we're asleep. So we go outside and we wait for the Dryer Thieves."

Dead Guy Grim wishes you would cry less because  
he likes smiles so much better. He used to only take  
what came out of the dryer.

Aunt Berry told me about Pretty Penny not being around, as if I didn't even know, and I told her it was okay—I was on it. But then she said there was no way she was going to let us sleep outside. Absolutely no chance, not when there might be a bad man out there taking nine-year-olds like me and Cheeze and Pretty Penny. Well, I tried to tell her there wasn't any problem there because it was the Dryer Thieves who took Pretty Penny, not some bad man. And Dryer Thieves I could handle. Like James Bond taking out a room of Russian bad guys, I could take them all out. But Aunt Berry just told me to shush and that I was sleeping inside tonight, mister, and then she called me my dumb name.

I couldn't let Aunt Berry stop us from saving her aprons and Pretty Penny all at once. Sometimes you just have to do what's best for grown-ups, you know? Sometimes they don't even know. Cheeze tried to say we should stay inside and do what Aunt Berry said, but I gave him a good whack on the back of the head to show him who's boss.

I asked Aunt Berry if me and Cheeze could have some one-person pies since we couldn't sleep outside. I asked with a sad face, because if I know anything about Aunt Berry, it's that she'll use pies to make a sad face happy. So she was all

about making us one-person pies.

I don't know who Carl Sagan is, but something he said once is on Aunt Berry's most favorite apron that the Dryer Thievers took, so Aunt Berry only had two aprons left in her apron drawer. One of them said BYE BYE, MISS AMERICAN PIE on it and there was a picture of a lady who looked a ton like Aunt Berry wearing a shirt with ripped sleeves standing in front of an American flag with a bunch of pies strapped on her Rambo-style like they were bullets.

She used that one to make me and Cheeze's one-person pies. Cheeze got Extra Cherry Cherry Cream Pie with Oreo crust, and I got Lemon Lightning with graham cracker crust.

"I always get so messy when I make your Cherry Cherry, Chad," she told Cheeze. She threw the apron in the laundry to be washed and me and Cheeze ran it real fast so we could put it on the line, because it seemed like the Dryer Thievers really liked the aprons.

We waited for Aunt Berry to go to bed before we packed our supplies: Nine the Basher to protect us from aliens or bears, two laundry baskets to catch the Dryer Thievers in when they came, a few bags of Goldfish for emergency snacks, and two Capri-Suns each, because I knew it was going to be thirsty out there.

Cheeze put the laundry up on the line (all Aunt Berry's clothes to really get the Dryer Thievers to come out) and the trap was set. We were ready to catch some Dryer Thievers. I was going to save Aunt Berry's aprons and Pretty Penny all in one night. But we had to wait first, which is always the worst part of anything—especially waiting for pies to get done.

No one ever told me, so let me tell you: the ground is pretty uncomfortable for sleeping. There are sticks and rocks and lumps you don't even know are under the grass, but you can sure as snot feel them when you lay down. So we ended up dragging out all the cushions from the couches in the living room to use for beds. That was a lot better.

We talked a little bit, about what it would be like to have teeth like a shark, or about how it would be totally cool to have scorpion tails, or maybe be able to breathe water like fishes. I wondered if Pretty Penny would like me with a scorpion tail and with shark teeth. Probably she would. It would be completely sweet, how could she not?

We weren't supposed to go to sleep. That was not part of the plan. We were supposed to stay right up the whole night and just pretend to sleep so the Dryer Thievers would think they wouldn't get noticed. I was ready for it, ready for battle if it came to it, if I had to. Actually, I kind of wanted to fight them. I wanted to give them some seriously good whacks for taking Pretty Penny.

She needed me. I missed her a lot. I almost asked Cheeze if he thought she was thinking about me, but I knew she would be. When you're thinking about someone, they think about you too, I think. I think that's pretty much the way it works.

The Dryer Thievers that had her had Aunt Berry's aprons, so Aunt Berry needed me too. I was going to be like a hero, like Batman saving the day, or like Spider-Man—yeah, like Spider-Man. Saving the day with my powers and with my smarts. I was going to save everybody and Pretty Penny would kiss me and Aunt Berry would love me, and Cheeze would want to be like me.

I fell asleep thinking about how that red and blue suit must get right up your butt, like, a ton, especially when you're web-slinging.

Dead Guy Grim thinks you've been good and earned the privilege to sleep without the straps tonight. Goodnight, Penny, and sleep tight.

I woke up really confused. You know how like when there's a loud noise and you wake up and you don't know what's going on? And you know how if you sleep somewhere that isn't your room and you wake up there you wake up going where am I? It was like both of those, but put together.

I got woke up by a freaky girly scream, all high and scratchy. I heard Cheeze yell like that one time before, when a grasshopper jumped on his face while we were trying to find pie or sword-shaped clouds. I shot up like I was on springs and sure enough, there was Cheeze, standing under the clothesline. No grasshoppers, though. He was pointing at Dead Guy Grim's window.

"Cheeze?" I tried to rub a little of the tired out of my eyes.

Cheeze was all white in the face. "Buzz, Buzz, I saw Penny! In Dead Guy Grim's house! I just saw her."

I was sleepy right up until Cheeze said that. I woke up pretty quick. Was she watching us, like Dead Guy Grim sometimes watches us play kickheadball? Watching us sleep out there, trying to catch the thievers that stole her up? She was watching me try to save her. Well, that was good, but she needed to come and throw me the ball so I could hit it and Cheeze could go get it. I needed my thrower and kicker back. Without Pretty Penny, we couldn't really play right. Nothing was right without her. I wasn't right. Was she there? I'd rather not have pies than not have her.

"Pretty Penny?" I looked over to Dead Guy Grim's window. There wasn't anybody there. No Pretty Penny, not even Dead Guy Grim.

I rubbed the rest of the sleep out of my eyes and looked a little harder at Cheeze. "I don't see her, Chee—"

I stopped talking because I saw the clothesline was missing some clothes. My eyes cleared all the way and I saw that Cheeze had Aunt Berry's green sweater and some of her Sunday skirts and her MISS AMERICAN PIE apron all piled in one of his arms. He had a bunch of her underwears over his head.

"What are you doing with Aunt Berry's clothes?" I asked.

The moon was bright, making Cheeze look like a white zombie.

"N-nothing, Buzz," he said. "But hey, look, I saw Penny! I don't know where

she went now, but just a second ago, I swear, Buzz. We got to tell Aunt Sherri."

I figured it out right then. I did my looking, like a good laundry detective, and I found the thief. I was mad. How mad I was at Stupid Shawn Cisco for giving Pretty Penny a Reese's wasn't even a little bit of how mad I was at stupid, fat Cheeze.

"You've been taking Aunt Berry's aprons and all her underwears and stuff?" I said.

"No. Well, yeah. I mean, sort of. They smell like Aunt Sherri. And pie."

"You're the Dryer Thievers?" I watched Cheeze's eyes watch me get Nine the Basher.

"But I saw Penny," Cheeze said. He started crying like a fatso. "I saw her right in there. We have to tell Aunt Sherri, Buzz. Come on. Come on, let's go." He took a few steps toward the house.

"You've been taking Aunt Berry's clothes, and so you took Pretty Penny, too?" A dragon was snoring over in the driveway. "You stole her so you could be the thrower in kickheadball or what? Why'd you take her away?"

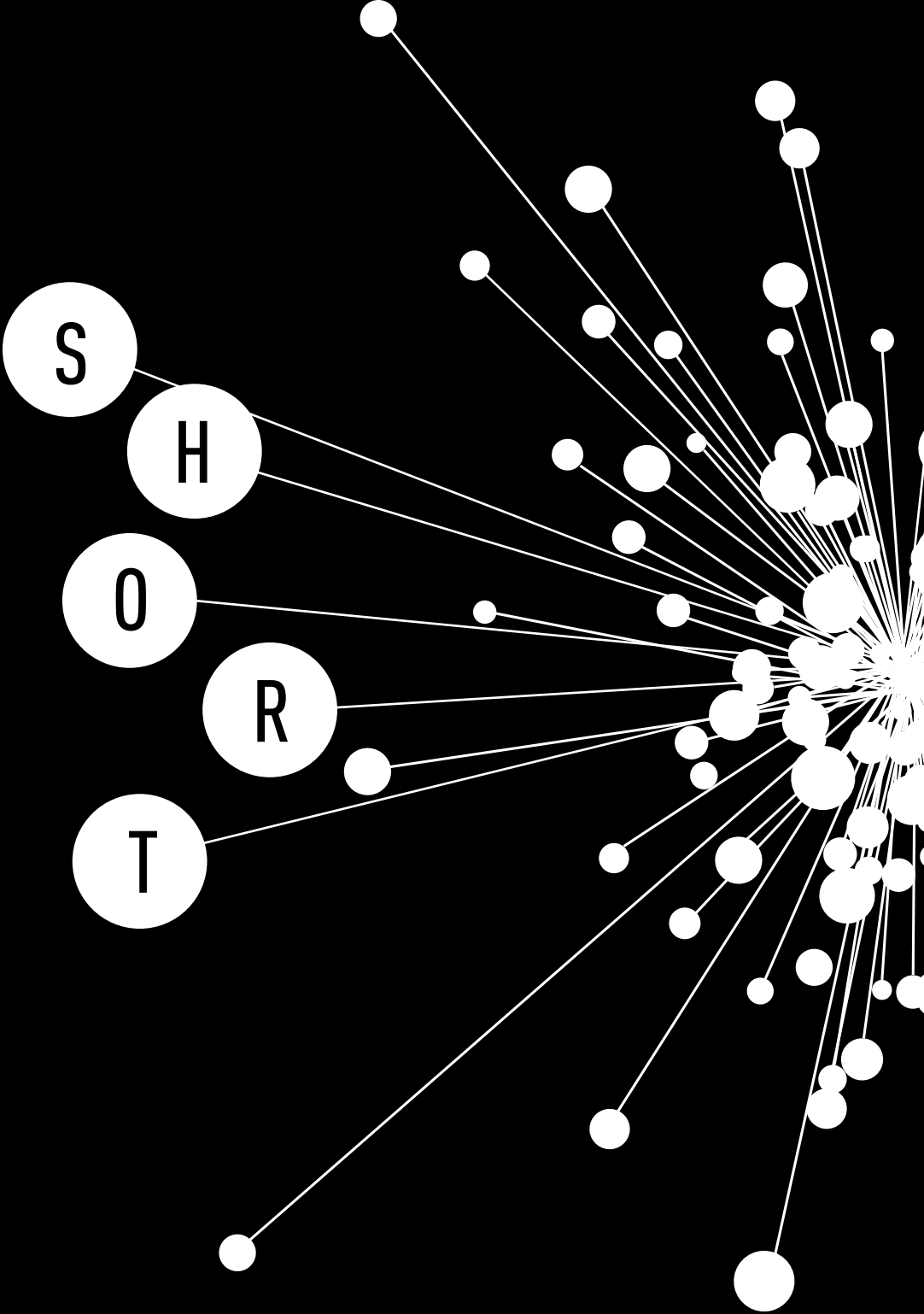
Cheeze was a loud blubberer.

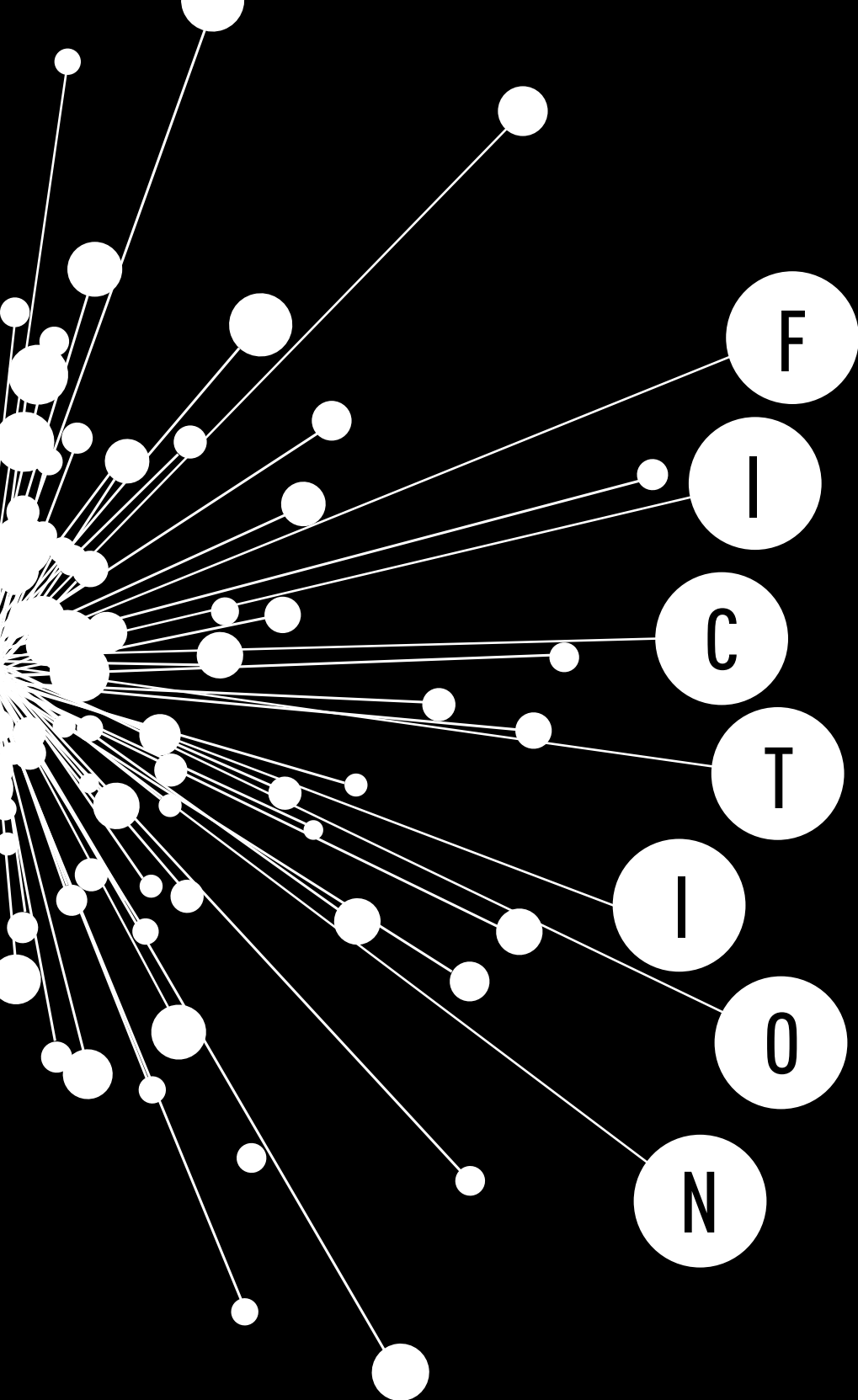
I ran at him and he was too much of a slow chubber to get away. The neck hole of Aunt Berry's MISS AMERICAN PIE apron was hanging down a little and Cheeze tripped on it when he was running, so I caught him no problem, even though it's not like he had to trip so I could get him.

I was like Spider-Man swinging down. I gave Cheeze a good whack in the back of the head with Nine and told him to give Aunt Berry's aprons back. He told me to don't, kept saying don't, and he was blubbering. I gave Cheeze another good whack and then a few other ones. I told him to give me back Pretty Penny and gave him the best whack I had.

I heard Uncle God's big voice say my name and I got grabbed. He's a whole lot bigger than me, so he took Nine away no problem. He kept saying his own name over and over again. I was over his shoulder so I couldn't see his face, but what I could see was Dead Guy Grim's house. Dead Guy Grim was watching in the window with a crooked smile. I waved and he waved back.

So that's why there's only one apron left in Aunt Berry's apron drawer.







*Chelsea  
Michaels*

# Halloween, 1983

"Jackie! Get up!" Linda pulled uselessly on Jackie's arm, her laughter making her weak.

"We have to go!"

The girls slid down a muddy hillside, farther and farther from the party raging in the distance.

"I'm peeing," Jackie wheezed out, one arm gripping her stomach and the other trying to hastily pull down her black string underwear.

"You're what?"

"I'm pissing!" Jackie yelled out from her prone position in the mud. Linda dropped her arm, her hand flying out to steady herself on the soggy ground and the other still triumphantly holding a red plastic cup.

"Don't laugh!" Jackie said through her own tears of mirth.

"I think the cowboy and the ref can see us!" Linda said, peering back up at the house through the trees and bushes.

"I don't care! Just get the grass out of my ass."

"Oh come on, honey, let's get you cleaned up," Linda said, pulling Jackie's undies back up and straightening her black and yellow striped dress.

"Where are my antennas?" Jackie asked, feeling around in the brush.

"They're still on your head."

"Oh, okay. I'm ready."

The two girls climbed up the hill bear-walk style, the mixture of mud and vodka making the trek extremely difficult. They finally reached the driveway, wiping dirt from their hands and costumes.

"Give me another sip of that," Jackie said as she took the cup from Linda's hand.

"Don't you think you've had plenty?" Linda asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I just pissed it all out, didn't I?"

"We have to go back to your place soon."

"I don't plan on going back there tonight," Jackie said, turning to smile at the cowboy and referee coming towards them.

"You took forever, pussy cat," the cowboy said as he slid a arm around Linda's shoulders.

"Girl talk," Linda smiled up at him, her eyeliner whiskers only a bit smudged.

"You ladies ready to go back to my pad? We can watch a scary movie," the

referee said, putting his jacket around Jackie's shoulders.

"Of course!" Jackie said, ignoring Linda's pointed look.

"Great, let's go."

Dance tunes played out of the record player as Linda fumbled around with long fake eyelashes and messy glue. Jackie walked back into her bedroom after hanging up the phone.

"He's gone," she said, picking up her antennas and placing them carefully into her bouncy curls.

"Who?" Linda asked, pressing the fake eyelash over her own.

"My dad died."

"What?" Linda gasped, dropping her hand from her eye. The fake lashes only held on halfway.

"My dad died in the hospital this afternoon. Lung cancer," Jackie said, picking up the lip-gloss and applying it to her already plump lips.

"Oh my god! I never even knew he was sick."

"He's had it on and off for a long time."

"But where will you live? Can you still stay in this house?"

"I don't know. I'll let my aunt deal with all that stuff."

"What about—"

"Stop, I don't want to talk about this right now. It's a holiday!" Jackie said with a smile that looked more like grimace. She looked herself over in the mirror one more time, making sure all her curls were in place.

"But—"

"Don't. Just get ready so we can go."

"You still want to go? Let's just stay here."

"No way," Jackie said sharply. "We're going."

"They've been gone a long time," Linda said, looking towards the dark staircase. The referee had taken Jackie upstairs to show her his records.

"They're fine. Don't worry about it," the cowboy said, tightening his arm around her shoulders. The girl on the TV screamed as a hooded figure held an axe over her head.

"Maybe we should go check on them," Linda said.

"Don't worry babe, they're fine," the cowboy said, leaning in close so Linda could smell all the beers he had on his breath. He started kissing her neck, his scruff scratching her skin.

"They're fine," he said again.

*Benjamin  
Moran*

# Coupled with Sartre: An Existentialist Take on Modern Literary Scholarship

Normally I hate doing these things. I've three small dogs at home that love on me to no end, only requesting a treat once in awhile, and I've turned away from them for an entire weekend for this: the annual gathering of the Society of University and College Kafka Scholars (SUCKS), where I'm to read my long-awaited (or so they tell me) paper linking together the core themes of Beckett, Joyce, Faulkner, Proust, and of course Kafka, to one solitary influence. The conference is to be held at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, a place whose biggest claim to fame is that it was the recipient of the 1971 All-American City Award. Since that time, I'm afraid it has degraded so far as to count our yearly gathering of frustrated-poets-turned-pipe-smoking-intellectuals-in-tweeds (as Herr H. would say) as its most prominent event. It's doubtless the hamlet will greet our parade of pedantry with streamers and kazoos it so awaits the readings of our academic briefs. In the past, such gems have included 'Kafka and You: How The Trial established the modern self-help genre,' 'By What Name Should We Call Thee?: An Entomological Examination of Insect Species in The Metamorphosis,' and the oft-quoted 'The War Within: Reading Kafka as a foreshadowing of the Pop Tart—Toaster Strudel debate.' I cannot begin to express my glee at the prospect of this event.

The positive side to all of this is that the lecture hall is said to have an open bar in place for the entirety of the conference. If there is any proof of God, it lies in the other-worldliness of a well-prepared whiskey sour. Maybe the conference will be tolerable. I'm up in my hotel room now, and there's nothing on the TV except CSPAN II, although even that's beginning to seem a little interesting at this point, after I've nearly cleared out the contents of the mini bar. I'll follow in the footsteps of Oedipa Maas and stumble into my plot with a Kirsch-saturated body.

Fifteen, er, yeah, fifteen minutes til go time. And I'm a little drunk. As in a lot drunk. They positioned us on stage about thirty minutes ago, and I'm having a little bit of a hard time following what's going on. Some colleague of mine is babbling away at the microphone about the significance of the overwhelming absence of animals in Kafka's body of work (wait—does that even make sense? "The Burrow?"), but I'm mostly focused on trying not to fall out of my chair. Old Forester is my friend. Head up. Look forward. Don the intellectual semi-frown of one thinking very hard. "... as a result, Kafka establishes himself as the preëminent modernist focusing on the urban environment." Much applause, much applause. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. At least there's a five minute break coming, time to act at least slightly less trashed.

Paper. Paper. Shit. It was in my pocket. Hmm. Sorta remember it. Hmmm. The people are milling about. Larva-like. "Glass of champagne, sir?" the attendant asks me. Room's at least a fifteen minute walk, and that's sober. "Please." I take the drink and down it in one gulp and return the glass to the tray. Can't hurt.

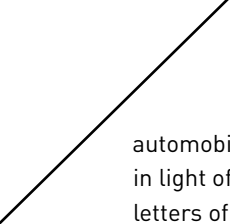
All members rise as I'm announced by some woman, vaguely familiar, who hugs me warmly. A sea of pedagogues flapping their noodley appendages.

"Ladies and gentlemen, beloved colleagues, thank you very much for coming tonight to celebrate the year's advancement in Kafka-centered scholarship. A big thank you to SIUC for letting us use your place.

"I've been at work for the better part of the last two years on the following subject matter, and I hope you will spare me a few minutes of your time so that we can all go back to our rooms and do it all again tomorrow [universal faux-chuckling].

"... recent scholarship in modernism, taken as a whole, and specifically how Kafka fits into that literary body, has long been determined to focus on the lesser details of the corpus of writing, and very little on how they all tie together. I'm pleased to say that I can now put forth a proposal explaining the thematic elements of all these great authors. Colleagues, they all derive their themes from one element: the advent of modern dentistry. It is so clear when examined in the context of the time and the personal notes and letters of Kafka, Joyce, Proust, and other modernists. Faulkner's entire book, *Pylon*, which is largely disregarded, unfairly I might add, is focused, at the sub-dermal level, on barodontalgia in the fighter pilots of World War I. Beckett's discussion of genitalia in a negative light in *Waiting for Godot* relates to, as found in his letters to his mistress, to the then-current belief that homoerotic relations led to expedited tooth decay. Within Ulysses, Stephen's qualms with his mother, if we regard Stephen as a Joyce fill-in, can be explained by Joyce's mother having forced her son to take part in a rudimentary root canal procedure at the age of sixteen.

"... and our beloved Kafka: is he a product of an unsure era? If, as we all can agree, he is the greatest capturer of the universal modernist emotion of paranoia, what was his reasoning for his portrayals? War, famine, the coming of the



automobile? All of these have been thrown around the lecture circuits for years, but in light of this my scholarship, specifically looking for symbolism in the personal letters of Mr. Kafka to his editor, Max Brod, it can be concluded that the paranoia largely stems from an idea that was during Kafka's time being discussed: the fluoridation of public water. All of Kafka's paranoia stems from this alone. And I will leave you with this teaser, colleagues, in hopes that you may look into my book, *The Mouths of the Modernists*, due to be completed this year and released next year from the Colorado State University Press. Thank you for your time, and I appreciate your listening."

Everyone stands and applauds. I bow a little. Perhaps they missed the point.



*Caleigh  
Burgess*

# Gumption

I came across a park bench, though it wasn't in a park. And I wouldn't actually call it a bench, though specimens, of what sort I don't know, were perched upon it. They were human enough but they seemed to twitch and chirp like canaries in line for coalmines.

As I approached, the creatures' tweeting grew more and more frantic. I stepped back immediately and their voices quieted again. Forward: again, a chirp. Back: silence.

I just stared for a moment and then I thought to pluck up the courage to move forward again. I then pondered the phrase "to pluck." Where did it come from? Plucking only brought feathers to mind. These thoughts were twirling around my head frantically when I found myself in front of the animals. They were staring at me as curiously as I stared at them.

"Is courage like a feather?"

Neither answered. They just looked at me with their heads cocked to the side. I wasn't comfortable with their leering.

"You know, you pluck feathers. You also pluck up the courage to ask a question that apparently is considered frivolous by some."

It was then that the bench turned its head to join his gaze with the creatures.

"You've got a lot of gumption coming around here and asking a question like that."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand."

The bench stood up, knocking his squawking former occupants to the ground.

"Figures. You're probably one of them."

"One of what? I don't understand."

"Get out of here, will you?" His screeching intensified. "What more do you want? You have our feathers. You want our voices, too?"

He turned and began to run with his arms outstretched. The featherless wings weren't capable of lifting him into the air, though his arms continued to flap until he became but a dot in the distance.

Molly  
Zebell

# The Thread

"Do you know what this is?"

My mom is holding out a dress. Its cream colored with age, made of silk with a full-length skirt and delicate beads in intricate patterns around the wrists. The silk sways and shimmers as my mom displays it before me.

"I just bought it at an estate sale. It looks like it was made by hand. And it's a wedding dress." She releases the train that she's been hiding in back, which falls delicately to the floor. "It's not dirty at all, not even on the train. It makes me wonder . . . I think it's never been worn before."

The year is 1960 in Benton Harbor, Michigan. In Edna's Sewing Shop, the bolt of fabric waits. Women come up to it, touch it, feel the smoothness of the pure white silk in their hands, and they have visions of what they can create: a beautiful evening sash, curtains for the bedroom, a luxurious nightgown. But they release the fabric and turn away, forgetting the images as quickly as they came to mind.

And then, a twenty-year-old girl with long chestnut brown hair and a delicate frame, like that of a Russian ballet dancer, enters Edna's and walks straight toward the virgin silk. She takes the corners of it in both hands, feels the slippery texture, and gazes at it intently, thinking. Smiling, she takes the bolt of fabric and has four yards cut. "It's for my wedding," she tells the lady behind the counter. "I'm getting married in a month. My momma's going to make me my own dress." The lady behind the counter smiles and carefully tucks the fabric into a bag.

Out of the bag at home, the fabric watches as momma measures the young girl's waist, her delicate wrists, and the length of her slender legs. She traces outlines on the silk, cuts pieces, takes them toward the sewing machine, and carefully pushes them through. A sleeve emerges, then the bodice. And finally, the skirt, complete with train, is hand-stitched to the bodice by momma. Momma tells her daughter to try it on. The skirt flows down to the floor, barely brushing it in front and delicately sweeping in back. The bodice is gathered and tucked into the waist, accentuating the girl's dancer frame. The dress catches a hint of fragrance, like daisies, from the girl's long chestnut hair. "You look gorgeous, my little girl," says momma. "Your wedding will be beautiful." And momma hangs the dress on a hangar, covers it in a plastic bag, and places it in the closet to wait . . .

. . . and wait. But the girl does not come for the dress. The closet is dark.

It smells like dust and musky old clothing. The dress listens. It can hear the girl crying at night into her pillow. It can hear momma telling the neighbor on the phone that the wedding is off. Each day more dust covers the dress in its plastic bag, weighing it down. A heavy wool overcoat and a soft cashmere sweater join the dress in the closet. The cashmere smells faintly of perfume, perhaps from momma. It's been worn before, lived in. But the dress has not. It wonders what it would be like to be taken out, dusted off, in the fresh air, surrounding someone's body.

"I think you should try it on," my mom says. I take the dress out of the plastic and put it on in my room. The skirt dances around my legs as I step out where my mom is waiting. "You look gorgeous, my little girl," she says. "Maybe you should wear this for your wedding someday." As I return to my room to hang the dress up in my closet amongst overcoats and cashmere, I detect a hint of some fragrance. I raise the sleeve to my nose. I smell the pungent scent of old fabric and dust. But beneath them, something more: the scent of daisies.



Tony  
Cerullo

# Literary Short Fiction with a Clever Title

A realistic character with believable problems and flaws walks into a bar. The bartender (who is overwhelmed with sorrow due to his memories of letting a friend die decades before, recently stirred up in him by the receipt of a letter from the dead man's sister), is too distraught to pour a drink. The realistic character with believable problems and flaws, being so grounded in reality, does not know this and wouldn't care if he did. A silence ensues.

Another metaphor scoots in, taking its place at the adjacent barstool. A man in all black, smoking a black cigarette, a black hat perched neatly on his black hair, offers the believable character a name.

"How about 'James?'" he asks.

"No, thank you," says the character. "I know better than to take gifts from obvious devil figures. Besides, no one is named James anymore except in hack stories."

The man in black smirks. "And this isn't one?"

James shrugs and the devil orders a Cosmopolitan.

"So can I interest in you in a plot device, sir?" says the bartender to the devil.

"No thanks," Beelzebub murmurs. "I already am one."

"Very good, sir."

James, noticing with irritation that the devil figure got a drink, asks for a rum and coke.

"And hold the coke," says he, being clever.

"My mother is a fish," says the bartender. Both James and the Devil figure look at him with irritated glances.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" James barks.

The bartender shrugs and arbitrarily begins to wipe a glass with a rag. The glass is already clean, but being a background character, he needs something to do to help set the scene.

Alone with his thoughts, the realistic character remembers a very subtle conversation that he had with the hobo who his abusive alcoholic parents with hidden dark pasts lent his room out to. Their dialogue haunts him to this day, and he still can't maintain a proper erection without the feeling of ragged woolen gloves against his skin and the smell of pork and beans heated directly in the can wafting through the air.

An author-insert character sits in the corner, trying not to be so obvious about it. He drains his martini and saunters up to the bar for another.

"Say, would you care to tell me how wonderful I am?" he says.

"Oh yes," says James, the believable character. "I'd totally hang out with you in high school."

"Thanks," says the author, straightening his pompous red beret. "I crave acceptance."

He looks thoughtful as he steps behind the bar and mixes himself another dirty martini (he's the author, so effectively it is his bar).

"While we're on the subject of my personal wish fulfillment, how about a quirky geek girl to fall madly in love with me?" On cue, a pink-haired pixie girl in a Monty Python tee shirt walks in, humming the *Legend of Zelda* theme. The devil figure finishes his drink and goes, slipping Pixie girl an apple from force of habit.

James, irritated at having been so completely ignored while the author has his narrative masturbation scene, coughs loudly. Because this is a story, this gesture actually gets the attention of the other characters.

"Hey, I thought this story was supposed to be about me?"

The author slips an arm around Pixie Girl and shrugs his shoulders.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I'll be off having improbable sex. Good luck, James."

The author leaves, taking a few bottles with him.

"So what now, sir?" says the barkeep, changing his cleaning from clockwise to counterclockwise.

"I think I'll have a final reflective moment."

"That sounds good sir. Shall I ask you a profound question?"

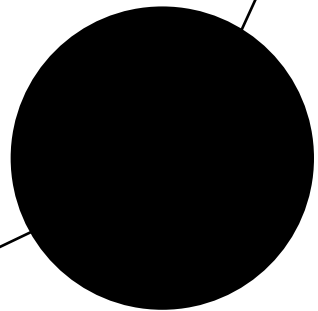
"That would be nice, Barkeep."

"Steve."

"Well, that was never established."

"Very good, sir. How about, 'Will love ever find the heart of humanity?'"

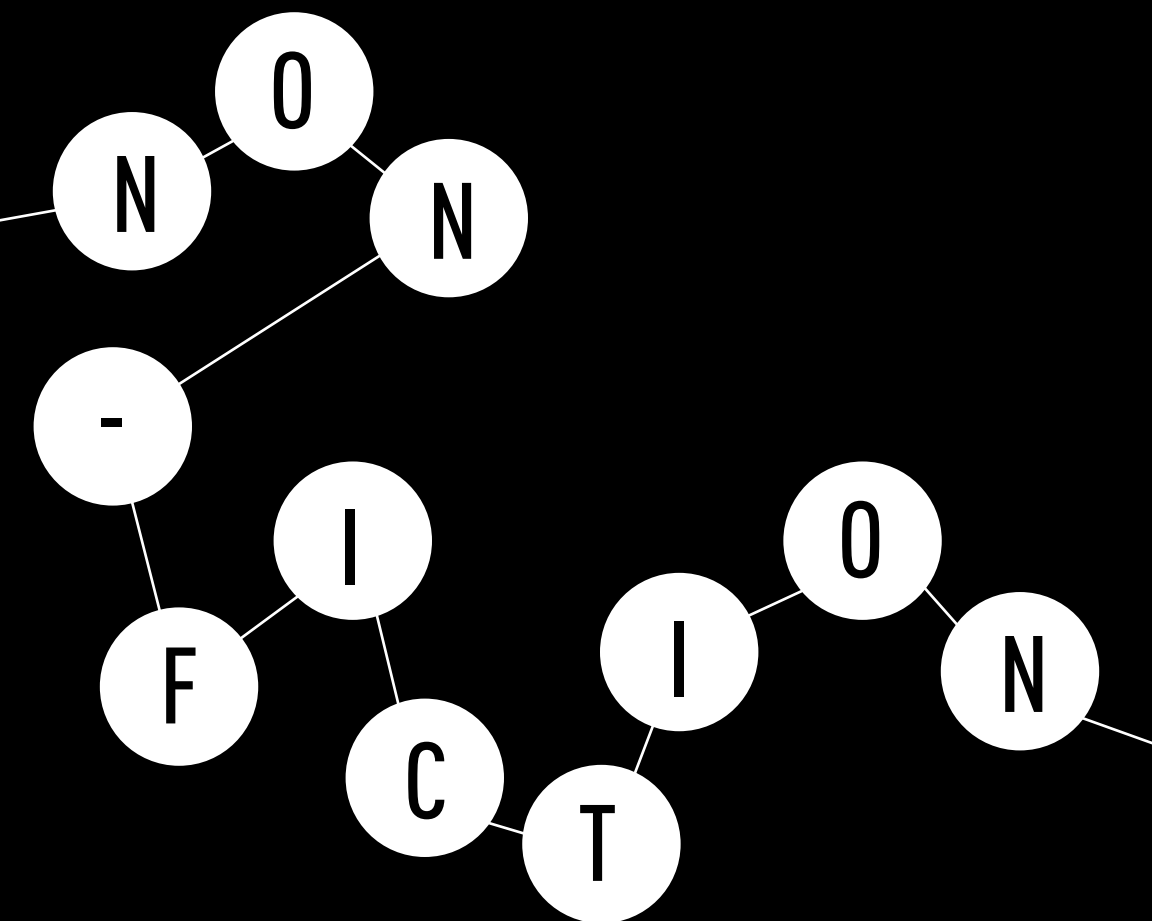
And, from across the smoky taproom, an allusion to William Faulkner appears, and is promptly shot.






# Midnight Calling

*Analiese  
Grohalski*





*AnaIiese  
Grohalski*

# Sunday Mornings Spent

When I was a child, the trees compiled into a forest, a haven instead of the small bit of woods that they were. The moss-covered trunks stretched for miles to my young eyes, reaching high for their Mother Sun but refusing to leave the comfort of their father's land. Hidden in the center of these woods, a river flowed, methodically winding between the polished rocks.

Our goal, my four siblings and myself, was to cross the bridge. There was our side, the side where we ran wild as kings and queens, and the other side of the bridge. On the first tree on the other side a sign hung: no trespassing. It glowed in its red paint, beckoning us to cross the few two-by-fours nailed crudely against a fallen tree.

It wasn't the safest bridge, but what is safety compared to adventure? What is a little water compared to the acrobatics into an unknown, forbidden earth?

Unfortunately for us younger, less courageous siblings, there was a two-foot gap from the end of the bridge to the other side. For me, stuck in the middle, I usually hung back on the rotting oak. I let the sign mock me, even more so when my two older brothers took the leap onto a soft patch of grass.

I would stand on the un-sturdy wood, swaying to the lull of the water, waiting. Waiting to become older, to grow an inch taller so I would be able to follow my brothers and see the bridge from a new perspective.

Well, I grew and I jumped. I ran through the untroddenun-trodden fields of overgrown grass, smelling lilac and clover weaving through the blades. I smiled a smile only a child could hold and danced with the breeze. But I didn't stop growing. I continued to age and soon I forgot the joy of the woods and the creek and the forbidden land. My mind turned to school, sports and friends, which took up most of my time. I began visiting my father's house less and less, until it was just one weekend a month. When I did go, I noticed the woods from the inside the window and I would briefly remember.

The youngest sibling still retreats into the trees almost every day, but the church near our house is expanding. They bought out almost everything from their borders to where the water greets the shoreline of the creek.

On the last day of Thanksgiving Break, my brother decided to wander through the trees and I joined him. The brisk air filled my nose with the decaying of leaves and fire. The oranges, browns, and yellows shattered underneath our sneakers as we approached the woods, as we approached my memories.

It was too open. The covering of large trees was absent and I couldn't understand this new blinding light. Then, I looked around me. The pines and oaks no longer stood proudly, pointedly. They laid along the edge of the pathways, once small and trampled only by little feet now expanded from tire mark to tire mark.

"What happened?" I asked my brother as he jumped onto a stump. The smells had even become more open, less like woods and more like industry. My brother picked up a stick and chopped forcefully at a nearby bush.

"The church." His answer was short, quick and needed no explanation. We continued walking down the paths, too much like a road, in silence. Words would have been inappropriate while paying respects to our once play land. We just walked.

My brother walked and I stumbled, I wasn't as graceful as I used to be. Finally, I tried to find a walking stick for balance but each one snapped with any weight.

"You can't have a walking stick when everything's dead," he said.

We quickly found the creek, and I told my brother I wanted to see the bridge. It was more difficult to get to, hidden by the overgrowth around it, but it was still there. The water had risen so it almost engulfed the fallen trunk, but the two-by-fours still clung onto it. Even though there was much less support to walk on, I could tell it was possible.

I stepped up to my old friend, but remembered how clumsy I had become. I walked like an infant through these woods, but as a child I could fly. Now, I stood near the waters edge and watched the ripples. There was no sign tempting me to cross.

Soon, the cold wrapped around us too tightly and we were forced to return to the shelter of the house. I left the trees, knowing demolition would begin the following Monday. I knew I would never be able to walk in solitude to the creek, feel the bark on my fingertips.

Next time I see that land, it will be a parking lot. The church is taking away my heaven.

Jessie  
Miller

# The Scrabble Tile

It all started one Saturday night. Ashley Spurlock, my college roommate, and I sat on our dorm floor, playing Scrabble. She was a self-described “petite” girl. With golden blonde hair and precisely medium B-cup breasts, she was the good looking roomie, while I was the awkward one—standing at 5’11”, with frizzy red curls and cat-eyed glasses.

Normally, she went out, but the eighteen-degree weather kept us in, finding warmth in flannel, fleece, and mugs of hot chocolate. Lying on our rug, with the board between us, Ashley picked her head up.

“What do you think would happen if I swallowed a Scrabble tile?”

Now, Ashley isn’t one to just ask a question and then forget about it later.

“I don’t know, Ashley,” I said. “Why do you want to know?” I just wanted to finish the game as soon as possible.

“Because it’s small. It’ll fit in my mouth.”

Oh God.

“If you do anything, I’m not cleaning it up,” I paused. “No way.”

“Oh, Emily. It’ll be fine,” she said. “I promise. Besides, what’s the worst that can happen?”

I glared at her. All I could think was, **THOSE ARE THE WORST WORDS YOU COULD POSSIBLY SAY TO ME RIGHT NOW.** I didn’t want to have anything to do with her swallowing a Scrabble tile.

“C’mon,” she said, getting up, “It’ll be quick. Quick and painless.”

“You can’t be that sure.”

Before leaving, she took her time, looking over all of the pieces, deciding which would be the best. “What letter should I choose? Z? A? T?” She fumbled through the stack with frustration. “Oh man, I just can’t choose!”

I quickly grabbed a tile flipped over, so I couldn’t see the letter, and gave it to her. “Here’s your tile. Let’s go.”

She took hold of my hand, dragged me out of our second floor room and we headed to the community bathroom. Smelling of dirty feet and semi-clean shower curtains, the co-ed community shower wasn’t the ideal place for cleaning your body. In fact, one could call it a hazardous place. The tiles were tinted yellow

and sickly green. The shower curtains were originally baby blue, but now had spots that were faded to white, looking like aged polka dots in the clouds. I was never quite sure why we chose to live in the dorm, but I always felt like each year we survived, we were true warriors.

"So," she rolled up her sleeves, fixing her collar. "How should we do this?"

"Why are you saying 'we'? I'm not encouraging this!" I said . . . a lot like my mother.

"You're here, aren't you?" She got me with a verbal bullet. I nodded and she continued to mentally prepare. "Let's see. We have plenty of water—if I should need it," she held up her bottle of water, and pointed at the sinks. "You know . . . gagging."

"Really?"

"Really," she said. "And we have the paper towels for spit rags."

"Just swallow the damn thing already."

She placed the tile on her tongue, dramatically, like her daily birth control pill, and looked at me hesitantly. I shrugged. "No turning back now," I said.

She made a whimpering noise. Then, she closed her mouth, took a swig of water, and swallowed the loudest swallow I have ever heard. Her eyes tensed up as the tile went down her throat.

She drank more water. I wasn't sure if she was in pain, as her face remained neutral throughout the entire process. Going back was not an option. Whimpering wasn't going to help her case.

She coughed a little, looked at me, and stuck out her tongue, as far as it would go. "Look. All gone." She wasn't twenty. She was ten. And suddenly, I was a lot older.

"I see," I said, making sure she wasn't going to hurl on me at any moment. "How do you feel?"

"Smarter."



P

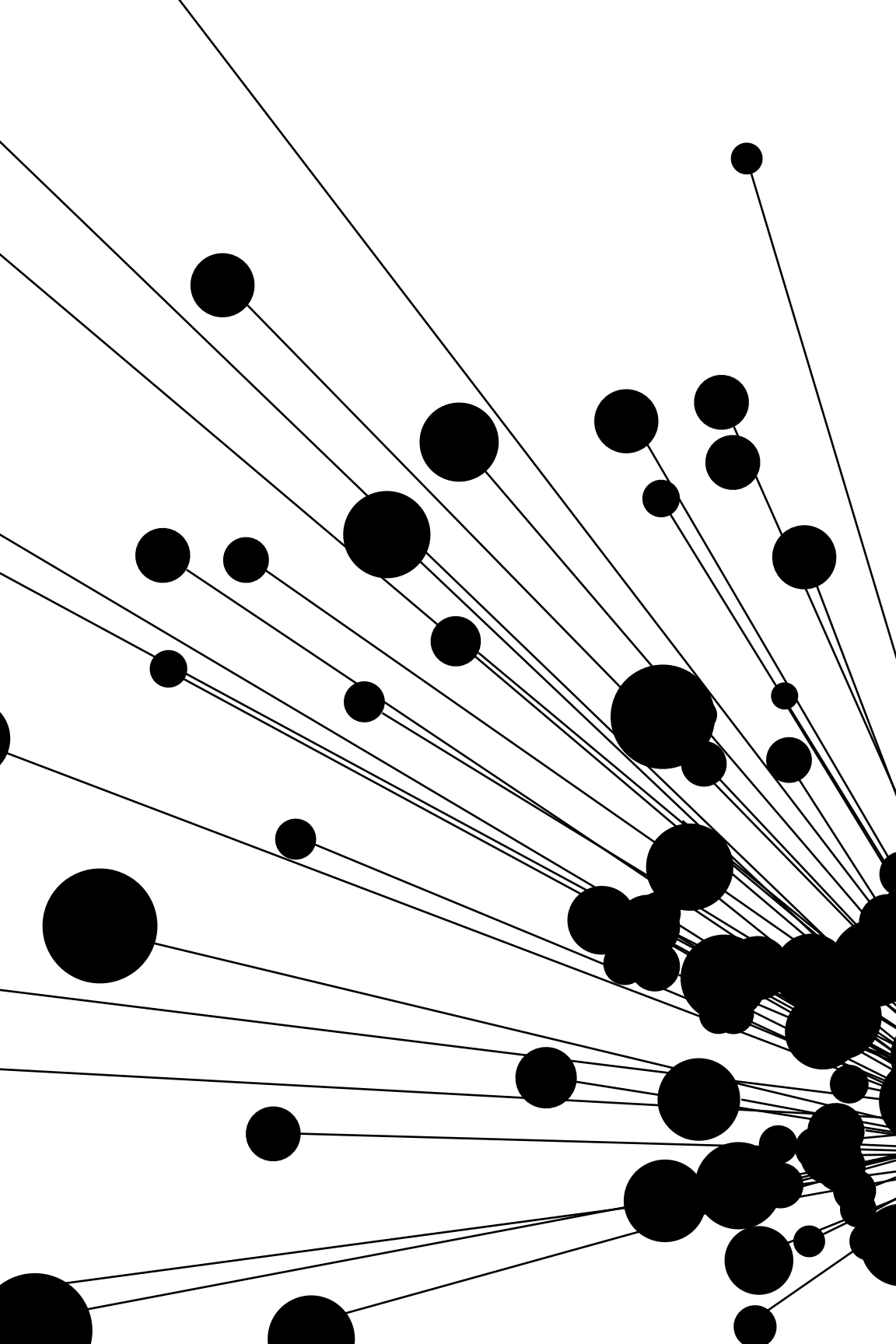
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# The Candelabra

Katie  
O'Brien

*Scene: Minimal setting, there are three distinct areas: Christmas, the hospital, and a reflective space. Christmas is located in upper stage left, and there is a half-decorated tree with few lights. The hospital is stage right; it is a waiting room, a few chairs facing toward the audience. A florescent light is suspended above the area; the reflective space is center stage without any adornment. At the start, stage should be dark except for a few lights on the tree.*

*(GIRL is center stage, standing as lights, except the fluorescents, gradually grow.)*

GIRL:

*(Happily, but with a sense of nostalgia.)*

My sock-monkey slippers always remind me of my grandma, it was one of the last gifts she gave me, during what I later would call the *(with mocking sarcasm, saunters to upper left)* “Tacktacular” Christmas of two-thousand eight. My other gift that year was a candelabra from Better Homes and Gardens with electrical tea-lights.

*(Makes a hand gesture, as if to show how “special” it is. GIRL moves candelabra from behind tree, it is lit.)*

“So you’ll never be in the dark,” she had said. I hated the thing. It had iron leaves all *(as if searching for the right word, twists and gestures with hands)* twisted and looking for exposure. Mom had laughed at it—she was drunk, Christmas reminded her of all the mistakes she had made the main one being me. I hated it until Grandma died.

*(Becoming serious, with a sense of verging panic, GIRL goes quickly to right. As she walks the florescent light buzzes on. She moves one of the waiting room chairs as if it is at the side of a bed.)*

She kept lifting her already dead hands to the oxygen mask, trying to tear it off. The mask looked like it was swallowing her already swollen face. The cousins and I took turns holding her hand down *(reaches out)* and pressing cool washcloths to her body. We had to wait, Jake might get emergency leave.

*(Takes a deep breath, a pause, as if remembering her original purpose, starts to move toward center stage, but doesn't quite get there.)*

The fake leaves on the candelabra weren't very sturdy. They bent when I moved them out of storage, into my room.

*(Regressing, slight exhale, eyes move toward ceiling, between center and right.)*

I didn't know how bad it was until the cousins got there. I saw it on their faces—all of a sudden red and blotchy. I knew it wasn't the light that made them look that way.

Their hands flew up to cover their mouths *(does the movement)* and they turned toward each other for comfort.

*(Turns toward right, there is no one there. Pauses, turns back to audience.)*

I held her hand down while they grieved.

*(Florescent light dims, GIRL overcompensates, moves toward upper left, sits by tree, reaches to touch the candelabra but stops.)*

She *(with emphasis)* always made the same desserts at Christmas: *(gestures, counts them off with hands)* Buckeyes, peanut butter pie, pretzels with Rollo candies on top, and, *(gestures)* not a dessert but it was still always there, pimento and cheese sandwiches. One of the cousins took her peanut butter pie recipe right out of the big book after she died so *(mockingly, as if quoting someone important)* “the tradition could live on.” I noticed how she didn't take the recipe for pimento and cheese sandwiches.

*(Touches candelabra as if by instinct, but quickly draws away. Pause, walks in silence to right as florescent comes on.)*

The hospital staff forced us to go to this waiting room, *(stares at chairs, but doesn't sit)* instead of sitting outside her door in the hallway.

*(Looks up, circles around the chairs, as if avoiding them.)*

The cousins and I kept walking out though. We we're all adults, we knew what was best. When they told us she died *(shakily)* we were a howling mass.

*(Finally sits, looks up briefly at florescent light.)*

They lured us back into a waiting room (this one was nicer), with bags of chips, cookies, soda, and slices of rich chocolate cake. One of the nurses remarked, to a family friend that was there, that *that* was how she got her kids to behave.

*(Reflecting, as if realizing wisdom.)*

Bribe them with food.

*(Gets up suddenly, briskly moves toward center stage.)*

I used the candelabra as a table decoration, when I made Monte Christos for the funeral dinner. The ham kept sinking over the side of the bread onto the hot pan, making *(makes flicking hand gesture)* pops and crackling in the grease. It

was one of her favorite recipes. I was outside the room when mom and the uncles decided to take the mask away.

*(Getting stressed, pacing, doubling back once or twice before reaching right.)*

I took a double dose of my anxiety medication, my hands shook as they neared my mouth I offered some of it to the cousins. They didn't partake.

*(Shrugs, as if it was their loss.)*

*(Back to center, genuine happiness.)*

Grandma was a great cook. Taught me how. While the cousins tried to be boys for grandpa, *(dismissive)* driving the 4-wheelers and snowmobiles, I stayed in the kitchen and learned to cook from her. Mainly desserts. After it was over we went into the room one by one to say goodbye.

I didn't want to go, I didn't want to see. But they said she looked peaceful, more peaceful than she had in years. She didn't even look sick anymore.

*(Looks off to the side toward right but doesn't move. There is a sense of paralysis. Pause, comes back.)*

I know this is cliché, *(laughs, as to self, moves to upper-left)* but she always wore *(with emphasis)* horrible Christmas sweaters. Bright red with decorated trees and miniature bells, Santa's edged out in gold glitter puffy paint, sequined angels, *(pauses, like it's unbelievable)* even matching earrings. She had a tacky sweater for every occasion. We've decided to do a "tacky sweater Christmas" in her honor this year.

*(Shift, walks to right.)*

If we actually decide to have it at all.

*(Sits in "bedside" chair, speaks to bed.)*

Her lips were blue. That's all I remember about my goodbye to her.

*(Becomes more frantic.)*

I was panicked because her lips were blue, and lips aren't supposed to be that color blue. They aren't supposed to be blue at all. I kept waiting for her hands to move, so that way I could hold them down. I tried to run out of the room but I couldn't. They were blocking the door, and her lips were blue.

*(Finally looks up toward audience.)*

And that used to be my favorite color.

*(Starts to calm down, walks as trying to find peace to center.)*

I wanted to paint my room blue, but it didn't go with the mantle where the candelabra would later sit, complete with electric tea-lights. It still has the tag on it, I was going to take it back, but I never had the time.

*(Looks down for a slight moment.)*

I wasn't sure what to say the second to last time I went in her room *(slowly, begrudgingly, as if not wanting to relive this moment, GIRL moves to right, stands by "bedside" chair)* to say goodbye. I had put on too much chapstick, Burt's Bees, I remember *(touches lips self-consciously, remembering)* and so when I kissed her forehead it felt sticky.

*(Moves back, as if fleeing, to center, heartbreakingly.)*

She used to play a game called "makeup" to get me to go to sleep. We'd pretend that she was a beautician and I was a movie starlet.

*(Poses.)*

And she'd get me ready for the big premiere.

*(As she describes the game, mimes putting on makeup: pressing on blush, smearing on lipstick, smoothing eyebrows, etc.)*

She'd trace out my features with her hands, as if she was putting makeup on me. I'd always ask her the colors, now I know that even they were tacky, Candy-Apple red, Fire Engine red, charcoal.

*(As if coming to a long-known realization.)*

Lots of red.

*(Pause.)*

I got there the night before the cousins did.

*(Right.)*

She was still in the ER and not in the regular rooms, her nurse tried to take her dentures out. She was still conscious then, and tried to bite his hands. We promised to give her teeth back. We never did.

*(Forcing positivity, moves to upper left.)*

She was so proud when she gave me the candelabra. I wasn't allowed candles in my apartment, so she was pleased when she found the tea-lights. She was so sure that I'd like them.

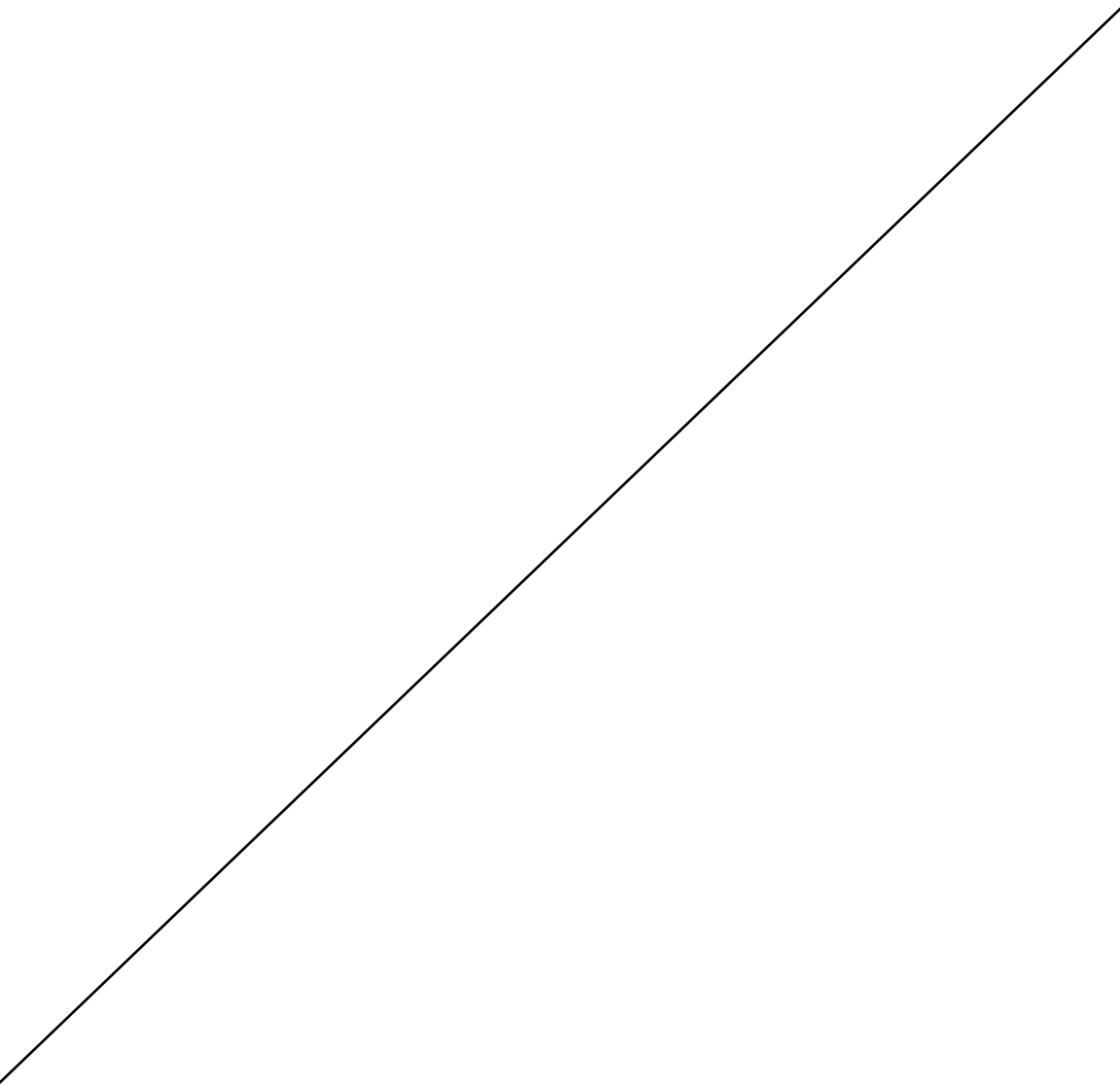
*(Lets her guard down.)*

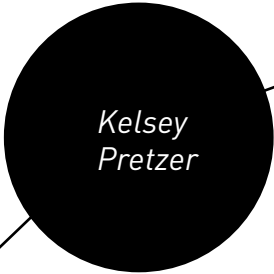
Christmas was always a disappointment for me.

*(Walks away carrying the candelabra, hunched over to center. She sets the candelabra down, straightens up and forces herself to go on, nostalgic.)*

When she'd cook, she'd hum Elvis under her breath—her favorite. I only knew the choruses *(sound effects: Elvis's "Always on my Mind" plays slowly in the background)* and I'd sing them as I stirred ingredients with my hands *(mimes the mixing movement)* in that green plastic bowl she always used.

*(Stops, mournfully.)*





Kelsey  
Pretzer

# An Entirely Different Business

*Scene: PALADIN sits behind a desk, a sign over the top of it reads NAME EMPORIUM: IPA CERTIFIED. He is in an emerald green business suit, modest but loud at the same time. Two men and a woman are in line. The woman has a baby in her arms. ALL are wearing extravagant, outrageous outfits with bright colors and gaudy accessories. The first man exits.*

PALADIN                Next!

KILLIAN                I'd like to change my name, please.

PALADIN                That's usually why people come see me. What can I do for you, exactly?

KILLIAN                I want to keep the name but I'd like to change the spelling.

PALADIN                You're in the right spot. I am IPA certified. [Sees KILLIAN'S confusion.] Don't worry, don't worry. It just means I have the International Phonetic Alphabet at my disposal so I have a few more letters than the rest of you. What's your name?

KILLIAN                Killian West.

PALADIN                I have just the letter. At the end of your last name we're gonna add an 'e.'

KILLIAN                Westie?

PALADIN                It's still pronounced West. That extra 'e' is really prestigious. Doesn't change the name but subconsciously changes the meaning. People don't mess with extra 'e's.

KILLIAN                Killian West-extra-e. I already feel more important. Can I practice my signature?



PALADIN                   *(Slides KILLIAN a piece of paper and pen.)* Knock yourself out, kid. That extra 'e' is gonna take some getting used to. Don't intimidate yourself by trying to perfect it too fast. It's gonna make you a well-rounded, logical person. Now you've got expectations to live up to.

KILLIAN                   *(Writes his name, admires it.)* That . . . is a strong name.

PALADIN                   'Course it is. Wanna work a few more letters into your first name?

KILLIAN                   Can you?

PALADIN                   *(Looks at the signature.)* Well, let's see . . . you spell it K-I-L-L-L-I-A-N? What if we add a 'y' between the last 'i' and the 'a'?

KILLIAN                   Killy-Anne?

PALADIN                   It won't be pronounced any differently, but that 'y's gonna make you exotic because no one's ever seen a 'y' like that in a name like yours. You know what it means? Your name?

KILLIAN                   I'm pretty sure my father said it means fierce.

PALADIN                   And a fierce name like that with an exotic 'y' will have the ladies tripping over themselves to get to you.

KILLIAN                   An extra 'y' can really do all that?

PALADIN                   Are you kidding? Your name is all that is ever really yours. It's what defines you as a person. It's what makes an individual spectacular. Trust me, there's something intriguing about people with 'y's in their names because it's not a common letter. You want to be intriguing, right? *(Before KILLIAN can respond.)* Well this 'y' with the 'e' we just added to your last name is gonna make you an unstoppable force! It's practically yelling, Watch out world, here comes a success!

*(The woman with the child, ADDISON, speaks up impatiently.)*

ADDISON                   Whatever happened to, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"?

PALADIN            Do you know how many different variations of roses there are nowadays? Too many to not give them individual, unique names. Know why? Because everyone's looking for the next best thing. With all these people trying to be the latest and greatest, you've got to be bold to keep up. Why are you butting in anyway? You're in the same line as he is.

ADDISON            To name my child! The hospital doesn't do it anymore now that names are a business all their own, so I've gotta take a half a day off of work to wait in your line.

KILLIAN             Do you have a name in mind?

ADDISON            Christian. Christian Scott.

KILLIAN             Strong, handsome name. Is he named after anyone?

ADDISON            My ex-fiancé, Christian, and my father—

PALADIN            [*Butts in.*] Scott, perhaps? You sure I can't offer any . . . better suggestions? As a professional, of course.

ADDISON            Suggestions?

PALADIN            Sure, he's a handsome baby . . . wouldn't want a kid like that growing up just average, would you? Here at the Name Emporium, I guarantee your kid will be extraordinary. I can guarantee this guarantee because my names are the best. If you've got one of Paladin's surnames or last names—original or second generation alteration—you're the upper echelon of named folk.

ADDISON            Did you just hear yourself?

PALADIN            'Course I did. I say that speech six times a day, at least.

ADDISON            Then do you hear how ridiculous it is?

PALADIN            The business of names is a ridiculous one, missy, but it's the only thing everyone needs besides a coffin. How would you be remembered without a name?

ADDISON            It's not you that should be remembered, it's what you do that people should betaking a second glance at.

PALADIN            Oh sure, if you're talking long run.

ADDISON            Life's not exactly a short run, is it?

PALADIN            Maybe not, but a good name sure would make it an easier run to run, don't you think?

ADDISON            I think a name is nothing more than a way to politely distinguish one person from another.

PALADIN            And what's your name?

ADDISON            (*Proudly.*) Addison Miller.

PALADIN            GAH! How boring! How safe!

ADDISON            (*Offended.*) I like my name.

PALADIN            Don't we all once we get them perfect? How many people tell you that you look like an Addison?

ADDISON            Quite a few.

PALADIN            (*Pretends to be surprised.*) Oh, did I just make a point? What if you renamed yourself Ashley?

ADDISON            I wouldn't.

PALADIN            Why?

ADDISON            I already have a name.

PALADIN            Exactly! It's yours. You don't want anyone else's because you like the one you got. It's you. My job is just to help those people who don't like what their parents named them find a name to be proud of. I'm helping people find themselves. You should be thanking me for the extra letters I've given to this community! It's why we're great! (*Calms himself back down and composes himself.*)

Now, are you sure I can't help you spice up your very plain existence?

KILLIAN I think you have a beautiful name, Addison.

ADDISON Thank you . . . glad to know someone appreciates modesty.

PALADIN (*Playing along, humoring her.*) Ohhhh. Modesty is what you were going for? Well, now everything makes perfect sense! Modesty can work in a surname, you know, if you pair it with an extravagant last name.

ADDISON For example?

PALADIN For example: Weste. Modest first name plus that extra 'e' last one shows that you know you're better than the rest of us but it'd be rude to rub it in our faces. Essentially who you are now in theory . . . but with a last name like Weste . . . or whatever, really, it's just an example of course . . . then you'd be that precocious person in fact.

ADDISON (*Begins to truly consider what he has to say.*) So—

PALADIN Ah-ah-ah! I do believe I'm with a customer right now. You'll have to wait your turn. (*To KILLIAN.*) Is there anything else I can do for you today?

KILLIAN How much would the 'y' and the 'e' cost me?

PALADIN Thirty flat. You could even work on your middle name as well . . . one more letter free before the price goes up. What is it, your middle name?

KILLIAN Robert.

PALADIN You wanna throw an 'o' on the end for no extra charge? I mean, if you're gonna reinvent yourself, you might as well go all the way. Right, Addison?

KILLIAN Killiyan Roberto Weste . . . what do you think, Addison?

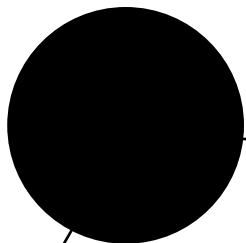
ADDISON (*Considers, but not quite convinced.*) It's a bargain, no denying that.

KILLIAN                   *(Puffs out his chest, tries to impress her.)* Well, then I'd be stupid not to add it.

PALADIN                   My sentiments exactly! *(Fills out a form, hands it to him.)*  
Congratulations. You are now the proud owner of a new 'y,' 'o' and 'e.' The 'y,' like I said before, is gonna make you exotic. The 'o' is a romance vowel. That's gonna fix your sex drive, mi amigo. And the 'e' is just regal. *(To ADDISON.)* The kind of name that you're not afraid to settle down with, am I right?

ADDISON                   It is a pretty secure name.

PALADIN                   That's my job, you know. I help shape the future. I'm more important than you are in a child's life. Practically family, if you think about it. Call me Uncle Paladin. I name people names you can trust. Names you can love. Names you can get behind. If you ever decide to get behind a good, strong name, Addie, come on back here and I'll change yours for a heck of a deal. And any kid of yours in the future. A child is so easy to conceive, but a name . . . that's an entirely different business altogether.



# Chain

*Brianna  
Krueger*















WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY