
April 2015

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Recommended Citation

Lanphear, Stephanie (2015) "Perception," *The Laureate*: Vol. 14 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol14/iss1/21>

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PERCEPTION

Stephanie Lanphear

Senior year. Last day of school. 2004.

His last chance.

Biting the inside of his lip, Jude reached down and shakily smoothed out the front of his dress shirt, unaware of the way the tails hung out the back. He then ran his hand through his curling, untamable brown hair—as he always did when he was nervous—and straightened his glasses. Behind him, parked in the dusty driveway, was his mother's silver Acura, which he'd used to take the short trip across town to the VanDam ranch. In his pocket the keys felt heavy, as if tempting him to yank them out, jump back in the car, and drive away.

Yet as his stare trailed across the drive, the sight spurred him into remembering why he'd come in the first place. The landscape beyond was lined with wooden planked fencing, pasture, and horses. Further still, the fields stretched on to the horizon, bordered by trees and basking in the late spring sunlight of northern Oklahoma. Like a white beacon commanding the flatness all around, the VanDam house rose up out of the dust, seeming to loom and judge in its three-story presence. Its shadow slowly skulked closer and closer the longer Jude stood simply doing nothing, and its gradual creeping spurred him into moving up toward the front porch.

It was a grand old farmhouse, well kept despite its age. Supposedly Craig VanDam had purchased it some thirty years prior, slowly fixing up what had once been a decrepit, sagging structure until it was the blossoming pride of the present day. Crisp white paint, clear windows, all the shingles intact. Not nearly as ignored as some of the houses closer to town—the ones that sometimes stood hidden in the trees, only peering out past the overgrowth when someone happened to look. The property, too, mimicked the attitude, quite as though it'd been pulled out of a picture and pasted atop the dirt. Not a single thing seemed out of place; not a single blade of grass dared step out of line.

Jude felt like quite the intruder by comparison, as if every fragment of dust that flitted across his ill-fitting dress slacks dominoed into another until he'd disturbed the entire scene. The dust, like a cat, raised its head to see what was the matter when a bulky form happened to walk into the path of its sunlight.

But he was already at the screen door, once again straightening his shirt and hoping he appeared presentable enough. The VanDams were the up and up sort of people after all. It'd be appreciated that he looked nice, right? That was what he was thinking. Usually his Sunday best was reserved only for church, but today...

Today was different.

Placing his fist to the doorframe, he steadied his breathing before allowing

himself to knock. The sound of his knuckles against wood nearly made him jump despite how he'd initiated the action—which spoke volumes on the state of his nerves.

"Coming!" a voice called from inside, Jude's eyes widening as the realization that he was actually there, actually doing it, splashed over him. He felt cold and hot all at the same time, his fingers flexing at his sides as he blinked and gritted his teeth.

Was he really getting sweaty palms?

He wiped them on his pants.

"Hello!" the same voice greeted as a slim form scampered up to the door. Dirty blonde hair falling down around her elbows, Jude recognized her at Berretta VanDam, the younger of the two teenagers living in the house. It took her a longer second to recognize him however, seeing as there was a good four-year age difference between them. She'd likely only recognize him from the one time he'd been over before—two years prior, to work on a biology project.

Not possessing in the trait of shyness, she pushed the storm door open, her face no longer crisscrossed with the tiny squares of the screen. She had her older brother's watery blue eyes, and a similar splash of freckles over her nose.

"You're..." Her eyes narrowed, surveying him critically—as critically as a thirteen year old could. "You're Judaea Marino, right?"

"Uh, yes." He nodded, his own gaze darting only quickly to the side, nerves once again getting to him. Gulping, he settled them well enough to look back at her.

"You're my...brother's friend?"

"Well," Jude tried to find a better descriptor, but couldn't think of one. He wasn't even sure he'd call them acquaintances. Retired lab partners maybe? Like colleagues? "I was wondering if he was here," Jude moved on. "I'd like to speak with him, if that's okay."

"He's upstairs," she shrugged nonchalantly, stepping back into the house while also holding open the door. "You know where his room is?"

"I think I remember," he replied.

He remembered exactly where it was.

"Okay, just take your shoes off," she issued as he stepped up and in. "Mom doesn't allow shoes in the house." The door closed behind him, Berretta still watching as he bent down and slipped his loafers from his socked feet. Placing them delicately beside the door, he then allowed himself to look around, the smells and sounds of the house both familiar and foreign.

Like the outside, the inside was kept in formal condition. Crisp and spotless, a palette of biscuit and white. Even the carpets matched, which were kept meticulously

clean by the mother of the house. Staying at home as she did, Mrs. VanDam was the cookie-cutter ideal of a housewife, ever dutiful in her actions and dedicated to her children while also eradicating every bit of filth any of them managed to drag in. Her husband, by contrast, took his action outside the home, out in the wilds, and so fulfilled the other side of the equation.

"So..." Berretta was staring at him suspiciously, Jude realizing that he'd been looking around far too long. "Like I said, Colt's upstairs..."

"Yes, of course," Jude nodded politely. "I'll just... go talk to him." He tried to offer her a small smile, but it came across as more of a cringe. Despite this, however, he skirted his way over to the stairs leading up on the left, his hand falling to the white, finely painted banister as he pulled himself up. The stairs wore a thin, worn carpet, dampening his footfalls as he climbed.

Behind him, hands going to her pointed, skinny hips, Berretta stared after him, questioning. Supposing her brother's friends were none of her business however—they were prone to running around the house without invitation most of the time—she soon turned away and headed back to her own activities, Jude left alone as he reached the second story of the house.

Throat somewhat dry, he bit the inside of his cheek again as he first looked down to the right and then left. Glaring, pane-divided windows stood on each side of the hall, allowing for light to filter in through the bars. He wondered, quickly, if maybe it would be possible to sneak out one of them. But after a quick evaluation, he established that the windows didn't open, his chest twisting as his stomach got sick all over itself.

No. This was it. His last chance. He couldn't chicken out.

He was nearly there.

He pushed his feet slowly over the carpet to the door at the end on the right side of the hall. It was closed, which left him in a momentary state of panic. He'd have to knock again, which was horrible. But the alternative, that of the door being open, didn't seem like it would have been much better, so he reasoned that he was simply letting his nerves get the better of him.

With great trepidation and several trembling, panicked breaths, he allowed his fist to tap lightly on the door, announcing far too loudly that he was there.

"Door's open!" was the call that came from inside, Jude actually flinching away at the sound of it. "You're early!" So smooth and certain; completely unaware. For a moment, Jude's flight instinct seemed to kick in, spurring him to run. Maybe even break free and fly out through the window if only to save himself what he'd

ridiculously thought was a good idea.

Instead, it seemed to induce in him a sort of shock, his whole body going stiff as his logic slowly seeped through and dryly convinced him that shattering one of the VanDam's windows probably wasn't the best course of action he could take. What he should do, he eventually realized, was answer. Because if he didn't, his presence would surely be investigated—which would be even more humiliating.

"Uh, um," his voice stuttered, "I'm not—I'm not who you think... I am..." Hopefully his disjointed explanation had gone through. He didn't gather a response however, instead—his ears seeming hypersensitive—he listened as something inside the room slid across the floor. A chair, maybe. And then there were heavy footsteps, the sound of the doorknob being twisted nearly enough to stop his breathing.

Finally the barrier between them was pulled away, the curious expression peering down at him seeming to mimic the same one Berretta had cast him earlier.

"Jude?" that smooth voice asked, the boy in question wanting only to melt away into nothing. But those watery blue eyes kept him locked in place. Framed by blonde eyelashes, which sprouted out like the teeth of inverted Venus fly traps, the eyes seemed to twitch back and forth as they peered down at him—clearly confused. And for a moment, Jude could offer no explanation for his presence. He was too mortified, instead temped to focus only on that symmetrically blessed face. High cheekbones, sloping lips, freckles dusted over the bridge of his nose. Bright, sharply cut blonde hair. Really, he was quite feminine in a lot of ways, the only thing really saving him from possessing a girlish image being his physical prowess and attitude.

Colt VanDam, though not the horns of the school jocks, was definitely the charisma. He attracted anyone and everyone with seemingly little effort, his civility toward those even "below" his social stature allowing him to walk the halls of their high school with little in the way of vindictive jealousy or dislike. He wasn't buddy-buddy with those outside his circle by any means, but he was one of the few that, when power was abused, stepped back and simply watched instead of placing blows himself. Which didn't make him a saint, but showed in him a kind of sympathetic restraint that many like him lacked.

"What are you doing here?" The question slowly sank into Jude's head, the way those blonde brows furrowed allowing for a kind of acceleration in his mindset. He cleared his throat, forcing words to come.

"I... I needed to talk to you," he coughed out, his own body feeling gangly and inadequate before the masculine athlete. "Before graduation, I wanted to." He sounded pathetic and ridiculous, he knew that, and his cheeks stained with pink

as he considered the fact.

"Oh," Colt sounded honestly surprised, pulling his bedroom door open a little further. "Well... come in, I guess." He shrugged, not nearly as perturbed by the circumstance as Jude. Turning away, he pulled back into the room, Jude watching through wide eyes.

Though Colt's facial features might be seen as soft, the rest of him was hardly so. He'd grown up on a ranch after all, his wide strides—legs seeming to naturally bend out due to hours on horseback—gave his gait a heavy, intentional kind of step. His broad shoulders seemed to flex in every movement he made, his well-toned physique the result of hard labor and playing nearly every sport their school had to offer. His blue and tan letterman only added to the stereotype. One he flaunted willingly.

Blindly, maybe.

"I was waiting on some friends," he explained, his head turning over his shoulder as he spoke again, his movements pausing when he realized that the absolutely terrified Jude hadn't followed him in. "That's who I thought you were." His tone echoed of awkwardness, Jude realizing that he was the one instigating it and, thus, sprang into action a little too hastily. Jolting into the room, he reached up and grabbed at his own skinny elbow, eyes surveying the bedroom quickly.

It was similar to how he remembered it, echoing of the rest of the house. White walls unadorned because tape and tacks would injure the paint. Tan carpet, two windows imbedded into one wall. They were paned similarly to the ones in the hall—unable to be opened, or unwilling. To keep the cold from the air-conditioning in. The bed was made, well kept, and the dresser and desk matched, as if they'd been purchased as a predetermined set. The corners were clear of clutter, closet doors firmly closed without the threat of anything bulging from behind. The only thing seeming out of place, which Jude noticed when he glanced up, were the strings hanging from the ceiling tiles, paperclips hooked at their ends.

There had once been a conglomerate of model airplanes hanging down. They'd been meticulously painted and put together, done so by careful hands with the aid of directions likely coming along with their boxes. Colt had explained it'd been a habit he'd inherited from his father, proud of what he'd considered artwork. As it was, however, they were all torn down, Jude's attention falling from the clips that had one held them to the desk. The bodies of the planes were placed carefully there, lined up in an orderly fashion. And stacked up behind them were the wings—removed from the central pieces. Or rather, by the looks of it, ripped violently away. The only jagged, misshapen surface in the room were the ends of those wings and

where they'd once connected to their other pieces.

Colt cleared his throat, Jude looking over as his attention went to the windows. A narrowed, thoughtful expression overcame Colt's face before he then focused on Jude. He looked at him for only a moment before peering shrewdly to the door. Walking across the room, right past his intruder, he closed it, making sure it was thoroughly latched.

It didn't take a genius to figure out why.

Looking down at the floor, Jude's face flooded further red, his thoughts flitting quickly to what Colt's friends would think if they found him there. At least with the door closed, there'd be warning of someone coming in.

Time enough to hide or something.

"So," Colt addressed him again, Jude pushing his lagging feet to the bed before he sat down on the edge of it, "what's up?" The other boy placed himself backward in his rolling desk chair, arms folding over the top as he stared expectantly.

"I didn't mean to intrude," Jude muttered, his hands folding in his lap nervously. Colt smirked a little, amused.

"You're not," he assured easily. "Like I said, I'm just waiting for some friends is all."

"Right," Jude took a deep, shaking breath. "I'll try not to take up too much of your time then."

"Sure..." Colt actually chuckled a little, but Jude didn't hear it over the sound of his anxiety.

"I came here because there's something I want to tell you," he started, his voice somewhat shaky. "I've wanted to tell you for a long time actually." Colt raised his eyebrows questioningly. "And I figured that, since we're graduating, it couldn't hurt to be honest."

"Is this going to be one of those 'I hate you' speeches that the nerds always tell the popular kids in the movies in the end to get some kind of revenge?" Colt was abruptly suspicious. "Because if it is, I'm so not cool with that."

"It's not," Jude assured him quickly, his blue eyes wide as he shook his head. He tried to ignore the generalization that had just so flippantly been placed upon him—that of "nerd," whatever such a term actually meant. In all honesty, it really only confirmed his status as someone Colt's friends beat up on regularly. Throwing him into lockers, jeering and taunting during class, actual beatings whenever he ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time—expected, Hollywood stuff.

All Colt's friends, yet not Colt himself. Colt had never once laid a single finger on Jude. Not one.

Not even to help him up afterward.

"It's quite the opposite actually," Jude continued to answer Colt's question. "I'm not here because I hold some kind of... grudge against you, or something." Still his sweating hands fidgeted and slipped in his lap.

Colt's blue eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Do you remember that biology project we did during sophomore year?" Jude asked abruptly.

"Yeah..."

"It started then and I... I just want you to know the truth. I don't want to hide it anymore." Jude took a deep, steady breath, closing his eyes momentarily. He gathered his thoughts, put them in order, and was thankful that Colt remained silent while he did so.

But it didn't matter what words he considered, there was only one way to say it. He just had to get it over with. "I..." Jude opened his eyes again, catching Colt's. "I'm in love with you."

There, he'd said it.

It was over. Done.

No going back.

And what he got in return was a long, torturous, pregnant silence.

At first, it almost seemed like Colt hadn't understood what he'd said. That watery gaze narrowed further, mouth falling open slightly. He stared at Jude as if the words were taking eons to sink into his skull. Like there was some kind of language barrier between them.

But it had to get through eventually.

Standing abruptly, Colt nearly knocked his chair to the floor as he did. Jude jumped, but didn't get up from the bed. Rather, somewhat fearfully, he stared up at the "I'm not gay," Colt immediately claimed, though Jude couldn't say he'd expected anything more. He'd just wanted to be honest. One of those things that if he hadn't gotten it off his chest before he'd left, he'd have regretted it forever.

"I know that," Jude replied quietly. "I just wanted—"

"Then why are you telling me this?!" Colt asked harshly, Jude nearly shying away from him. "Why are you even saying anything? You should have kept this to yourself!" Still his reaction didn't shock Jude. They'd grown up in a small Oklahoma town. People being uncomfortable with the thought of homosexuality wasn't exactly new.

"I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable. I was just—"

"Uncomfortable?!" Colt was extremely pale, eyes wide, and Jude wondered if

perhaps he should have just forgotten the whole thing. Like his nerves and anxiety had issued he should have in the first place. Maybe jumping out the window would have been smarter. "You think that you coming into my house and telling me that you're... What was even the point? I'm not a *fag*, so I don't know what you thought you were accomplishing!"

Jude's blood ran cold, his own nerves seeming to slow and freeze.

Abruptly, a cold, unfeeling kind of cloudiness overcame his anxiety.

"You're right," he agreed, Colt still visibly keeping his space. "I shouldn't have said anything." He'd known he was hoping for the impossible when considering that Colt might return his feelings, so he hadn't allowed himself that luxury. But he hadn't imagined it totally far-fetched that the other boy would be open-minded.

Maybe it was just time he left this podunk town.

He was going to make something of himself.

And he was never going to come back.

Colt and his family could keep their prejudices and their labels and their ignorance. First loves were never meant to be.

"I'll leave." He stood. "I know we don't know each other that well, and you probably hate me for what I told you." Colt was still staring at him with those wide, apprehensive blue eyes. "But you don't have to worry about it anymore. I just wanted to tell you to get it off my chest. I'm going to school out of state, and I'm not coming back, so we'll never see each other again. Don't worry about me bothering you any more with my *faggy* tendencies."

Pausing to stare at Colt for just a little longer, he eventually had to walk away. And the whole time, he could feel his heart breaking. He'd known this would happen. That he'd be rejected. But still it hurt. Still it stabbed him all over and fisted his lungs until he felt like he'd never be able to breathe again.

Never be able to break free.

But he did. He left the VanDam house. He walked out Colt's door, down the stairs, and out into the sunlight. He went home, he planned his future, and he never turned his head over his shoulder to look back.

He never saw the way those blue eyes watched him, sunk with confusion and unease.

How they flowed with doubt.