

# Harbinger

2010



GIRLS LIKE US

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

Speer Morgan, Editor

*The Missouri Review*

First place winner in the  
2009, 2010, 2011, and 2013  
Literary Arts Journal Category.  
Second place winner in 2015.

Sigma Tau Delta

English Honor Society

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

Jen Woods, Editor

Typecast Publishing

Imaginatively designed and packed with superb writing, *Harbinger* is always a pleasure to behold.

Andrew Leland, Editor

the *Believer*

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

Gabriel Fried, Poetry Editor

Persea Books

Stunning work in a stylish package.  
You'll want to devour it.

Laura McHugh, Author

*The Weight of Blood*

# Harbinger

2016

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jər]

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



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**Editor-in-Chief:**

Maya Alpert

**Prose Editor:**

Jamie Warren

**Poetry Editor:**

Shelly Romero

**Social Media Coordinator:**

Heather Beger

**Marketing Coordinator and  
Editor of Special Projects:**

Rachel Cooper

**Assistant Editors:**

Corina Castillo

Haley Coburn

Racheal Rhea

**Graphic Designer:**

Kitiara McGuire-Stiggins

**Advisor:**

Kris Somerville

**Acknowledgements**

**English/Creative Writing Faculty:** *Judith Clark, Kate Berneking Kogut,*

*Tina Parke-Sutherland & Kris Somerville*

**Special thanks to:** *Nancy Andrews, Casey Baker, Elizabeth Daniel-Stone, Carol Davidson, Tom Dillingham, Cynthia Erb, Josh Huber, Trebbe Johnson, Stefin Kohn, Alice La Prella, Mary Melick, Leslie Miller, Julia Muller, Jacqueline Perkins James, Donald Pittman, Amy Sand, Barbara Searles, Amanda Stockwell, Chelsea Wherry, Janna Wright*

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Correspondence should be addressed to:

*Harbinger*

Box 2034

Stephens College

Columbia, Missouri 65215

harbinger@stephens.edu

website at <http://www.stephens.edu>

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# FOREWORD

## GIRLS LIKE US

In 2008, five-year-old Asia Newson co-founded Super Business Girls, a homemade candle company. She now enjoys the title of Detroit's Youngest Entrepreneur and donates part of her proceeds to charity. That same year, twelve-year-old Tavi Gevison launched *Style Rookie*, a fashion blog that was soon drawing in over 30,000 readers each day, propelling Gevison to success in writing, acting, and activism. Out of humble beginnings, each girl rose to international fame, using creativity and passion to promote their ingenuity and altruism. Individuals like Newson and Gevison are an inspiration to millennial girls and women; they are young and intelligent—a testament to what every girl is capable of. They're girls like us and women we'd like to be.

The phrase “girls like us” evokes multiple meanings within the pages of *Harbinger* 2016. It speaks to the journey from girlhood to womanhood, the physical and emotional milestones many women experience. First kiss. First period. Last rites. In Rachel Cooper's “Womanhood” and Victoria Patrick's “Menarche,” two young women have drastically different experiences with their first periods, exhibiting the complexities of reaching womanhood. The title also reflects our authors' and artists' dual sensibility—an acknowledgment of both childhood and coming of age. In Jonné Pratt's poems, she explores the intersectionality of black womanhood through reflections on childhood and adolescence. The phrase “Girls Like Us” is inclusive, representing our diverse voices and unique modes of expression.

Girls like us are daring, creative, and intensely passionate. In an age where technological innovation is valued above literary and artistic creation, publications like *Harbinger* foster the development of meaningful and intentional expression, displaying the absolute necessity of the arts. As creative individuals, we are drawn to exploring the dynamics of our culture, the intricacies and eccentricities of the

natural (and unnatural) world. Our theme suggests a mindfulness of such dynamics and an awareness of who we are as women, students, and artistic citizens.

Like Newson's and Gevison's creative endeavors, *Harbinger* represents the strength, talent, and tenacity of young women. I am proud to present the 2016 issue. It truly embodies the spirit of girls like us.

Maya Alpert  
2016 Editor-in-Chief





# GUILT 5 (FIFTH GUILT)

By Livvy Runyon

And I was born into warmth.

Think of the grandest tree  
anchored tall in a sunlit forest  
and that's my Mother.

Imagine a steadfast stone  
worn smooth by swift waters  
and that's my Father.

To these monuments of life  
and peace, I was birthed  
and words were soft  
and kindness softer,  
and days were long  
and patience longer.

And my small body held  
high in my mother's branches,  
sure on my father's surface,  
howling wolves could not touch me,  
darkness brought no fear.

Raised up with selflessness,  
a lesson of integrity  
no earth could ever teach.  
Suffering brought not  
blame or hate,  
but, eyes closed and heads bowed,  
whispered prayers.

Someone  
somewhere in the ether smiles  
upon my lowly soul.  
Behind me,  
like deep, still waters  
like flames burning high  
like seasons turning endlessly,  
I am loved.



# HAITIAN NIGHT

By Livvy Runyon

This evening we sit all together  
on the porch as the sun drips away  
and leaves us in care of the moon.

By the light of a single candle,  
we laugh and move with dusty feet,  
our tall shadows dancing against the wall

like the small orange flame that flickers on its wick.  
We hear the neighbors sing in the dark,  
in the distance, the music of the night.

Before the moon is highest, we ebb  
to rest our heads close and hum soft to the baby  
the song of his people, the sound of his home.

On this island the roosters crow  
all through the night declaring the dawn  
while we slumber to the rhythm of voodoo drums.

We live by the tide of the earth  
and flow like water round the weight of day  
to slowly etch our way through stone.

And oh, we are rich, like kings on a hill,  
and still, like deep cool waters hidden  
behind a mass of tangled vines, we thrive.

# GONNA LIVE IN THE WOODS

By Livvy Runyon

I'm gonna live in the woods,  
no one to bother  
me as I sleep in trees  
and whittle sticks pointy  
to seem menacing to the birds.

Gonna live in the wild,  
no voices in my head  
just me and my bare feet  
walkin' on ground  
ain't no one ever walked on.

Gonna cast all my cares  
up into a windy sky  
like a kite I'm letting go of,  
so try as they might  
no one got a hold on me.

I'm gonna live in the forest,  
natural house of solitude  
where a girl can just be and be  
and the deer wouldn't think  
of judging just how much I get done.

Gonna leave this all behind,  
life of others' expectations,  
and it'll fly away like a deflating balloon  
through the atmosphere and across the clouds,  
and I'll sit amongst the leaves and

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# OCTOBER SO FAR

By Livvy Runyon

Fury at a white-haired woman with a slick tongue.  
She embodies the world.  
The Man, The Man, The Man  
a drumbeat in my ears, my steps.  
Unquenched anger dies a slow death like fire,  
bowing its head low to the ground, but lingering  
in the depths of the coals, concealed,  
hiding, waiting...  
to be poked, prodded like a snake you thought was dead,  
to release the first sparks of a second round,  
to breathe once again and grow,  
climb the sky and consume.  
Who can douse what has so long lived  
with embers that never stop glowing?

I want to be grace.  
I want to be grace, but I am fire.  
Fire built on the bank  
of a cool, turquoise pond.  
Close enough to desire,  
to long to submerge myself deep,  
float to the bottom and rest.  
But to enter still waters  
would extinguish my flames,  
turn my coals to ash.

So instead, on the bank, I settle,  
wave and crackle at my glassy reflection,  
flick my coattails in the night air.  
And over my scorching shoulder, I see  
a distant orb  
that shines against the navy sky.  
And it shines like me, but softer,  
and it's still like the water, but deeper.

My red-hot body writhes,  
and the pond releases the day's heat from its surface,  
but that white rock keeps watch,  
silently lording over us  
its mastery of tranquil fury.





# ANGLES OF WITTGENSTEIN

By Tiffany Corley

“It wasn’t until I started reading Wittgenstein that the full responsibilities of precise communication came into focus,” Rathers says in his curious New Delhi accent.

“Interesting. How so?” He peers out the window, pointedly laying his first finger across his chin like *The Thinker*.

“Well... for instance, before Wittgenstein I would have said falling leaves sound like raindrops.” His face was grim. “Now I know that is a lie. Falling leaves sound like raindrops particular to the moments just after it has rained. It’s in the technicalities, you see. The gathering of water at the end of the leaf, the heaviness of gravity against itself, moving the leaf toward the ground.”

Blerrie hell, what nonsense. He churns his hand slowly through the air, fingers splayed as if holding a glass of fine wine.

“It’s the slow decay of time on the bond that holds it there.” He laughs, quite pleased with himself, a faraway look in his eyes.

“It’s only the climax of the ‘sound’ that can be heard once the drop has fallen. We’ve forgotten to acknowledge the process!”

I wonder if he says these things at the dinner table. Having met Mrs. Rathers, I’d say unlikely.

“Of course, if you wanted to be technical about it, the truth of the sound depends on the size of your eardrum. Perhaps, to an Indian nectar feeder, falling leaves sound more like water vapor transmuting into liquid at dew point” and on and on. He’s paying me, so I let him talk.

This isn’t what he came for. It started out as a savage attempt to save his marriage. He’s sunk his teeth into the “therapy,” if this could be called that. I realize how much like a caracal lynx he is; sleek features, smushed nose, accentuated canines that catch on dry lips when he smiles. Like the caracal, Rathers has been forced into town by a sandstorm. He takes advantage of the opportunity to browse in the open-air abattoir of my office, decide which philosophic morsel to taste first. Before he’s had his fill of one, he is off to another, compelled

to pack his bloated abdomen before I come out with a whiskbroom and shoo him away.

I look down and sigh, audibly, but he doesn't miss a step.

THEY PAY, I LISTEN  
AND NO ONE GOES  
ANYWHERE. I USED TO  
TRY, AND LORD KNOWS  
I DID MY TIME, BUT  
WHEN FACING THE  
IMMINENT RAPTURE OF  
RETIREMENT IT'S HARD  
TO CARE ANYMORE. I'M  
LITERALLY COUNTING  
THE MONTHS.

“It's too easy these days to go on being vague and generalized in our daily language, to hide from each other behind the common courtesies marriage affords...” Of course I can see right through him. For all his knowledge he puts none of it to practice, the banco walls of his intellect picked away by the Sahara storms of my rhetoric, grain by grain until he's forced to rebuild. He erects them between us fast as he can manage, to keep me from getting to the meat of the matter.

I wait for him to be done, then: “And what is it that you are hiding behind? What is your part in the breakdown of communication between you and Moravia?” It's a game I play, for I am the strongest of the beasts and he knows it. He attempts to keep the upper hand by tossing half-eaten bones my way, cliché quotes common in my field that, to him, must seem contemporary and profound. None of it has anything to do with the question. When he sees I'm not impressed, he concedes and points fingers. Typical.

“Well, I—I do hide from the parties and rigmarole. She drags me to all of it, as part of her witless entourage of ‘Will you take another drink?’ and ‘Let me take your coat!’ She only asks that I come here because it will get her points at Safari Club dinners. Once her posh female friends hear that she's ‘sent me to therapy’, they'll call her a woman of the age . . .”

I could see it now; surrounded by mink coats and champagne

glasses, Moravia's diamond-drop earrings bob as she nods solemnly, like a martyr, before requesting sorghum beer in a haughty voice, even though she knows it's not sold in East London. So it is with the therapy. She knows Rathes won't make heads or tails of it so she demands that he go. I yawn and look at my watch. I'm too brazen these days, but so far it's gone unnoticed. Especially with Rathes.

The metronome stops, and I straighten my tie. My medallions of advice are all admittedly way over his head and a final blow to his ego. In this field you learn to insult people with a voice so caring they mistake your sarcasm for compassion. I'm the master of that. I have to be. No one wants to hear the truth or use it to get better; they're too busy starving themselves from all that is truly beneficial for them, like responsibility.

It's a delicate art, but humans are narcissistic. They pay me to listen to them talk, which they do quite well. After a while the words all mix together and I don't know if I am coming or going. Neither, of course, do they. They pay, I listen and no one goes anywhere. I used to try, and Lord knows I did my time, but when facing the imminent rapture of retirement it's hard to care anymore. I'm literally counting the months.

Rathes clears his throat and stares at the ground as he rises, face flushed, feeling that he's lost the day. The sandstorm has passed. He'll slink back to the den none-the-wiser, to a meal as cold as the hands that made it. He'll brag about how he psyched the psychologist and Moravia will roll her eyes as she passes the leftover bredie. God, how their tedious lives wear a groove in me! Hearing lackluster life stories too long makes them a part of me. You can't hang them in the closet after work or gulp them down with any amount of wine.

My joust with Rathes has put me in a bad mood.

"Betina, please call my four o'clock and reschedule," I ask my secretary, whose disapproving looks lengthen by the day.

"Ms. Kokinos? She called earlier, asked to push her appointment up

30 minutes.”

“Not today. Set her up for tomorrow.”

“But... she’s in a state right now, Dr. Theron.”

“I’ll see her tomorrow, first thing,” I say with a cheery voice as I walk out the door. What audacity! Presumptuous woman.

The afternoon air is neither warm nor cold. The waning sunlight is somehow nondescript. People on the street are faceless and busy. The street is clean and looks like every other street connected to it. Had I not been born here, I might’ve thought myself lost in a land of mirrors.

I stop at Checker’s for something harder than my usual Riesling, choose an 18-year-old Glenfiddich single malt and nothing less. It’s been just that kind of day. The young woman behind the counter frowns and calls me by name. She seems familiar but I can’t place her. Her skin is lovely and olive, her eyes green, her dark hair in ringlets that soften her full face, giving her the appearance of one of Mucha’s girls. Quite lovely indeed.

“Have we met?” I ask politely. She gives me a hard look and purses her lips.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Her brow raises, and she stares me straight in the eye. “Demeter? I was supposed to meet with you tonight.” She looks down at the Glenfiddich, slides it into a paper bag and shoves it toward me roughly.

“Ms. Kokinos, of course! Forgive me! It’s been awhile since you’ve come to see me.” My mind races through excuses as I take the bottle. “Unexpected meeting with the fellows tonight. Did Mrs. Du Plessis set you up for the morning? I told her to bump everyone back so you could be first on the list.” The girl snuffles and goes about making change. She reaches out her hand.

“Fifty-nine rands return, Dr. Theron. Have a lovely evening.” The bitter twist of sarcasm makes her mouth a scar. Obviously she didn’t buy my line. I am embarrassed to say the least.

“I will see you first thing tomorrow, Ms. Kokinos.” She holds my gaze for two seconds and then turns her back to me, organizing the shelves of cigars.

While walking to my flat I recall the contents of her file. A well-behaved child and avid church-goer, Ms. Kokinos got pregnant by a one-night stand that she wasn't entirely approving of. Her parents, strict Greek Orthodox, cast her aside when they were tipped off that she'd had an abortion in secret, which she deeply regretted later. Her church demanded ten years of penance before she was allowed to take Communion. I feel sorry for the poor girl, but there is little I can do to quell her feelings of having betrayed her family and church. The abortion was her choice, after all. She grapples with suicidal thoughts, but fear of the flames of damnation keep her tied to Earth. Early on in her sessions I decided that she was not harmful to herself or others, so I let her cry and she goes home.

Brushing all thoughts of her aside, I head for the numb quiet of my flat and a snifter of scotch on the rocks. The evening blurs through reruns of *Arende I, II* and *III*. I drift in and out in a mindless haze. Ms. Kokinos's face ghosts across my vision.

She's dressed in black with one breast exposed: Anouilh's *Médée*, holding a red-blade in her hand. Both vengeance and sorrow can be seen on her pale lips as she burns in the flames set upon her by her own chariot dragons. I stand to the right of the stage: Jason, holding her lamenting Corinth handmaidens back from their attempts to save her. She had killed my children, and I wanted her to suffer.

The cold light of day comes through the clouds, encapsulating her blackened form, raising her spirit to the heavens. The cold light, freezing my loins.

I wake in a pool of Glenfiddich and ice; my glass has fallen over as I dreamt of Ms. Kokinos. I close the blinds and change clothes, putting myself to bed. She doesn't come to me again.

Morning, and Ms. Kokinos is thirty minutes late for her appointment. My head hurts terribly, and I chide myself for having had too much to drink. Part of me is relieved that she's not here, the other is burdened by guilt, wondering if there's more to the dream than what I had made of it. Images of her red eyes and blushed nose cause me to realize she'd been crying at the store. Obviously she was in need of me, and I was selfish for having snubbed her.

Try as I might, I cannot keep my mind from running over possible outcomes with no evidence: her slight shadow leaving the liquor store with a bottle in hand, heading home in the dark of the night. Locking her door behind her, she sits on the sofa, pulling the 40-proof Glenfiddich from the paper bag in her hand. This morning they've found her there, the bottle empty, her delicate body unable to process that much alcohol.

Demeter, that was her name. Demeter, goddess of the harvest and all good things. She was so young, so pure. She'd been done wrong and was ousted for it. I was her only friend, the only one who ever listened. I was the only one she had, and I had let her down.

Every experience she's ever shared floods back now, and I am as shocked as if it were the first time hearing it all, the day her mother slapped her, drawing blood, for dropping white linens into the dirt. The father who looked the other way as her mother abused her, mentally and physically, all the years of her youth, all the while pretending to be the perfect parents. The priest who made multiple advances and finally took his fill of her in the empty baptismal pool. He threatened her when he found out she was pregnant, and she'd had no choice but to get rid of the baby. She lost her good job at the Ivanovich's hardware store and was forced to take the liquor store job and a small, filthy flat at the end of Devereaux Avenue.

The weight of her world presses down on me from every angle, and Rathers' droning voice fills my mind.

"My God, the fool was right," I whisper to myself. Rather,

Wittgenstein was right.  
Demeter's true beauty  
wasn't her body or her face.  
Technically, her Médéen  
glory lay in the indomitable

strength she had managed to attain despite losing everything. It struck me that, were I to lose as much as she, they'd need more than a psychologist to bring me back from the brink. I ponder whether or not that strength is even within me.

The intercom buzzes and I push the button, fearing the worst. To my fright, Betina speaks the name in a sober voice, the most beautiful name of all the goddesses who perished so long ago.

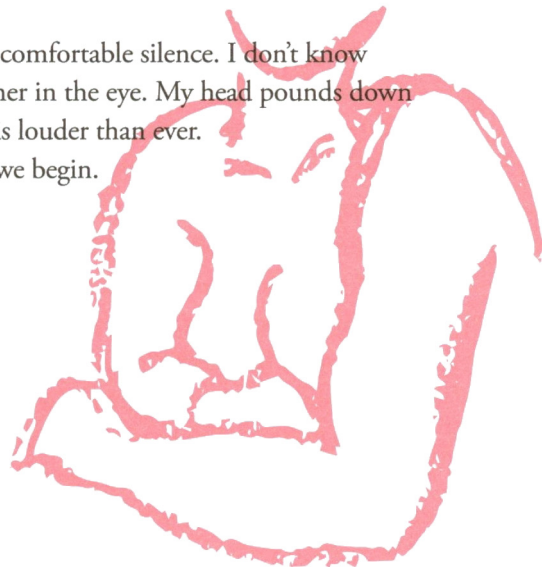
"Ms. Demeter Kokinos has just arrived."

My finger hovers over the button as the metronome slows seconds to minutes, and days. After years I bid Betina to let her in. She's dressed in a golden tunic and jeans with golden sandals on her small, well-manicured feet. I see her in all the glory of the morning sun and realize just how young she is. Practically a babe-in-arms, still fresh with the dew of early youth.

Demeter sits on the chair in uncomfortable silence. I don't know what to say, for I can barely look her in the eye. My head pounds down the seconds, and the metronome is louder than ever.

She hands me her money, and we begin.

MY FINGER HOVERS OVER THE  
BUTTON AS THE METRONOME  
SLOWS SECONDS TO MINUTES,  
AND DAYS.





# SLUG ON THE DRIVEWAY

By Jamie Warren

when i was nine  
we sprinkled salt on an unlucky slug  
who happened to be traversing the black concrete  
of my best friend's driveway.

it began to shrivel  
and we shrieked, as children do  
for the cup of water  
we'd prepared beforehand.

her younger brother  
doused the slug's dark body  
with the detached gaze of a surgeon  
or a coroner.

the slug stopped shrinking  
and the froth that had bubbled up in place of screams  
drained into the summer grass  
of my friend's front yard.

the realization dawned on us as the sun set:  
how easy it was to erase the evidence  
of the small evil we'd done  
for a moment the world lacked consequence.

tonight i lie on my back  
insides boiling, courtesy of this acidic sadness  
and i imagine myself a slug  
at the mercy of gifted children.

# ARMY BRAT

By Jamie Warren

army brat  
cake in hand  
toothless smile behind pudgy fingers.  
that's how you know someone loved you  
or at least knew how to throw a party.

you stare back at the camera with blank blue eyes  
not that anyone'd be able to tell  
only the memories are preserved with color  
and those are lost in minds decomposing.

and that's how you know you're old  
the mid fifties baby  
with dad in the navy:  
entire childhood resigned to several fat albums of faded black and  
white photos.

but don't forget  
secret snow day in the carolinas  
*let's stay home from school, sweetheart*  
*but don't tell your father.*  
*you'll never see weather like this again.*

but here you are  
shoveling snow in missouri  
far from your silverspoon beachhouse in seattle  
*where did you grow up?*  
*moved around a lot.*

ancestors buried in cemeteries thousands of miles away  
not spain or hawaii or greece or rome  
but clayton, alabama where it's hot hot hot  
like our local striplings sausage make sure to pick some up before  
you leave.

*have i told you 'bout the time i broke a guy's nose over a pinball  
game?*

cracked graves and funeral potatoes  
preachers washed in stained-glass sunlight  
ivy grown all elegant over the white paneled houses with the  
wraparound porch  
no one'd ever know they're all getting evicted  
or arrested  
or dying alone in this godforsaken 103 degree weather  
*did you know your daddy once rode his pony up the courthouse  
steps?*

we'll drink sweet iced tea and play mahjong  
while you sweat over expenses.

how many childhood memories can you afford to keep?





# WOMANHOOD

By Rachel Cooper

I'm little again. It's bath time. Warm water tickles my belly button, and my Barbie dolls swim in their giant white swimming pool, unaware of the sea monster lurking below. A brunette doll with a red bikini swims out to the deep end, perching on a sea monster knee, thinking it an island, until it disappears under the water and leaves her stranded in the middle of the swimming pool.

"Help! Help me!" she cries, "A sea monster!"

A tanned male lifeguard, who has been sitting atop his shampoo tower yells, "Don't worry. I'll save you!" and performs a beautiful swan dive, plunging into the tub . . . pool.

The sea monster now has Red Bikini in her grasp as Shampoo Guy swims as fast as he can, gasping for air.

"Rachel, it's time to get out of the tub." My mom smiles around the corner, holding a towel. The sea monster drops Red Bikini and Shampoo Guy in the water and evacuates the pool.

We have a jacuzzi tub with deep sides, so I practically have to straddle the thing to get out. I'm shivering in that giggly, post-bath way. Mom rubs me down with the towel, and I pull it over my head and around my shoulders so only my face peeks out.

I COULD NOT WAIT  
TO GET MY PERIOD.

"Look, Mom. I look like Jesus, Mary and Joseph."

She laughs and pats me on the butt. "Go get your jammies on, little girl."

Waddling to my bedroom in my towel cocoon, I wonder why my Barbies don't have vaginas. I decide they must be wearing skin-colored underwear all the time.

I could not wait to get my period. In fifth grade, we watched the film about puberty and sex. Our teachers put all of the boys in one classroom and all of the girls in another even though we were watching the same movie. We were each given a slip of paper and instructed to write a question on it during the film. These questions

were to be written anonymously and would be addressed after the movie was over. We sat in Mrs. Baxter's classroom listening to the nurse answer our questions until the end of the day.

"How do you use a tampon?"

"Does it hurt when you grow breasts?"

"What do I do if I start my period at school?"

The boys went to recess. No wonder I know more about my body than boys do.

My mom read me a pocket-sized picture book the night before I watched "The Movie" (as we all liked to call it—air quotes and everything). The book followed the story of a young girl, crudely sketched, and her journey through puberty. Mom and I sat on her bed with the door closed, and I watched and listened as the girl received drawn-on body hair and drawn-on breasts. That was the first time I heard about menstruation, and I wanted my period more than all of the body hair and breasts in the world.

The end-of-the-day bell rang before the nurse could answer all of our questions, so we went back to our home rooms and filed into our respective pick-up or bus-rider lines. The boys were sweaty from playing kickball. Some of them even had the body odor that the film had described. How had I not noticed it before?

I stood in line with my best friend Shannon.

"Hey, since it's Friday, do you want to spend the night tonight?" she asked.

"I have to ask my mom. I'll call you after I get home."

When my mom asked me how "The Movie" was, I acted like it was no big deal. I was almost a woman with all of my new knowledge.

I took some pads over to Shannon's house just in case. They had lavender wrappers. I tucked them under my pajamas and my toothbrush in my overnight bag. Shannon's pet cockatiel greeted me at dinner by shitting on my grilled cheese sandwich. Her father roamed the house in his boxer shorts, smoking cigarettes, cracking odd jokes

that I didn't get. After dinner Shannon showed me to her room. Her dirty underwear littered the floor; some of them even had stains on them.

"You started?" I asked, motioning to the underwear.

She flopped down on her bed. "Yeah. A little while ago. I don't remember when exactly."

Suddenly I felt stupid for bringing my little lavender pads to her house and prayed that I wouldn't start my period in her crumb-infested bed.

After Shannon, a girl in my class named Haley got her period. She was wearing white pants to school that day and told everyone she accidentally sat in barbecue sauce at lunch, but we all knew what really happened thanks to her best friend who whispered it to us at recess. All of the girls wanted to play with her, but she wasn't playing. She was sitting up on the hill so she wouldn't get blood on the slides or the swings. I wanted to sit up on the hill and be a woman. After that I stopped going down the slides as much.

Once we got to middle school, it seemed like all of the girls who had their periods started having boyfriends. My new best friend, Beth, and I weren't too interested in boys and still didn't have our periods, so we spent our sixth grade year living at each other's houses, practicing our new band instruments (she played clarinet; I played flute), and playing with our Barbie dolls. My mom made me a Barbie dream house out of plastic shelves. The stories for our dolls were different than in my bathtub days. Instead of sea monsters antagonizing Red Bikini, Red Bikini antagonized the newest citizen to Beach Town—my new beach doll whom I gave my name: Rachel. She was the classic shy artsy girl who took off her glasses at the end and turned out to be really sexy but also kind and intelligent. Rachel—the Barbie—didn't have a vagina either, so that gave her and Red Bikini something in common in addition to their shared love interest—Shampoo Guy.

When Beth told me she got her period, we were in math class. I thought the world was ending. Everyone was getting her period except for me. She leaned over in her desk and whispered her news to me while Mrs. H. spelled out “algebraic method” on the whiteboard.

“Rachel. I have to tell you something at lunch.”

“What do you have to tell me?”

“I’ll tell you at lunch.”

“Just tell me now.” I already knew what she was going to say.

“I started.”

I gave her a shocked look and went back to taking notes.

Later in band, while we retrieved our instruments from our lockers, she told me more about it.

“I was just going to the bathroom, and there it was. So I told my mom, and she showed me where she keeps the pads. She told me that when you get your period it sometimes makes you moody, so once you get your period we might fight sometimes, but we just have to remember it’s because of our periods.”

I WANTED TO HIT  
HER AND WORSHIP  
HER ALL AT THE  
SAME TIME.

I wanted to hit her and worship her all at the same time.

“She also said that periods can give you cramps.”

“Cramps?”

“Yeah—like your uterus hurts, I guess.”

“Oh.” I didn’t understand how something so magical could cause moodiness and uterus cramps. I thought about telling Beth that I had started too and I completely understood what she meant, but I decided to wait and figure it out myself.

Lucky for me, I only had to wait a few months. Over Christmas break I was just going to the bathroom, and there it was. I sat on the toilet for a long time rejoicing before peeling the pretty pink wrapping off of a panty liner and sticking it to my underwear. Then I marched proudly downstairs and told my mother. I was finally a woman.

After break I met Beth back at the band lockers and broke the news to her.

“Guess what.”

“What?” She didn’t even look at me as she fiddled with her lock.

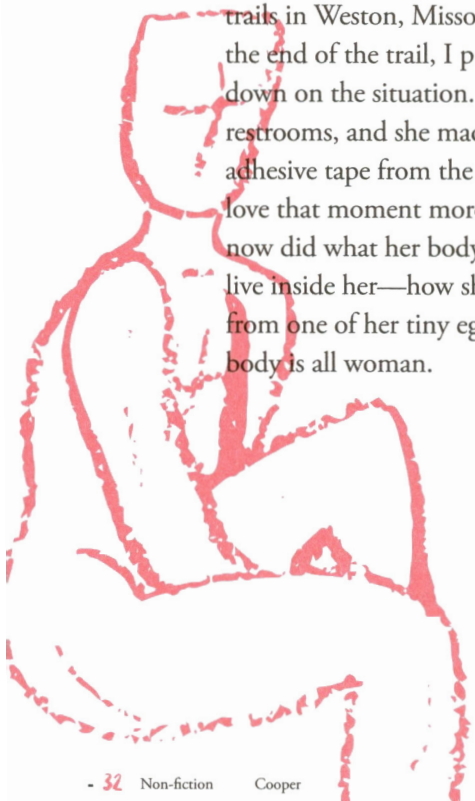
“I started. Over break.”

That made her look up. Her face showed me she wasn’t quite ready to give up the one thing that made her different than me. Once she recovered from the news, she went back to fiddling with her lock and shrugged her shoulders.

“Cool.”

This time I just wanted to hit her.

A few years later my family and I were hiking one of our favorite trails in Weston, Missouri, when I got my period. When we reached the end of the trail, I pulled my mom aside and gave her the run-down on the situation. She and I took our family mini van up to the restrooms, and she made me a makeshift pad with paper napkins and adhesive tape from the first aid kit. I don’t know why, but I’ll always love that moment more than when I announced to her that my body now did what her body did. Sometimes I think about how I used to live inside her—how she gave birth to me with all of my tiny eggs from one of her tiny eggs. My body came from her body, and my body is all woman.



# DAUGHTERS

By Haley Coburn

Interview with Mom

I was only seventeen.  
I left in November.  
Didn't get any credits.  
Didn't really have a plan, either.

I left before Thanksgiving,  
Texas to Ohio,  
That's where Tony was.  
    David's father.

From Texas to Ohio  
We couch surfed and partied.  
We were just kids.  
We were just having fun.

We partied  
until everything changed,  
and I was alone most nights.  
He just couldn't give it up.

I guess not everything changed.  
My first thoughts?  
I think I said,  
"Oh. Shit. Okay."

It's not for everyone.  
Tony had a harder time.  
    "Oh. Shit."  
He tried.

My parents tried to help.  
They said it was a mistake.  
It's not for everybody,  
    But there was no convincing me.

They all said it was a mistake.  
I wonder if they remember,  
    Everybody you can think of.  
All the horrible things they said.

I wonder if they remember.  
She cried at my wedding.  
    All the things they said.  
And left before it ended.

My mom cried at my wedding.  
I was only seventeen.  
She left before it ended.  
    I was six months along;

I was still seventeen  
when I tried to go back to school.  
I was six months along,  
I was too young to enroll.

Tony was working in the city.  
I couldn't find a job.  
I was only seventeen.  
He came back that day.

I called him:  
    it was time.  
He came home that day,  
and went back out that night.

It was time;  
The nurses ran into the room.  
His son was born that night,  
but Tony wasn't there.  
They left him in the crib,  
and shut the door behind them.

I pushed myself up in bed,  
and laid him in front of me.

My hands holding his,  
I looked down at this child,  
    his tiny, bright blue eyes.  
We were alone.

I looked down at my boy.  
I said,  
“We may be alone,  
but we are together.”

I told him,  
“You will never be alone.  
We will be together.  
I will be here for you.”



# SUMMER CRUCIBLE

By Haley Coburn

Back when we were kids,  
despite himself and the Texas drought,  
our dad still shaved his face,  
worked every Monday through Friday,  
patted the dog hello,  
wore sunglasses on top of his head,  
grilled burgers at sundown.  
He could put good food in our mouths  
if he had a night off  
and an open flame, our dad.  
Yes! Remember, he laughed that summer:  
Something I hadn't seen.  
The boys met it with measured restraint.  
I was too young to see,  
perhaps too in love as daughters will be,  
Daddy's patterns, his faults.  
That summer we saw, in our backyard,  
our nuclear family lit.

Late one June afternoon,  
while we gathered in the living room,  
by the A.C. unit,  
Dad browsed cryptic gun ads, trucks for sale,  
missed connections, and "or  
best offers" online. He had the worst  
idea to build an  
aquatic oasis on a dry acre.  
He brought home a used pool,  
several stacks of lumber, two old  
hot tubs so that he could  
take parts from one to fix the other.

Three weeks later I stood  
on a board to keep it anchored  
while Dad drilled it in place.  
Suddenly, he looked up at me.

What did I want for my birthday?  
I'd be twelve on the first.  
I looked out at the yard,  
as if I could find there  
anything a little girl might want.  
Unfinished sheds housed tools and car parts.  
Sheets of metal lay haphazardly.  
What once were neat wood stacks  
became heaps of bowed and dried lumber  
that left fatal indentations  
in the wild grass.  
Our hot tubs leaned against each other.  
Armadillos nested in their shade.  
Rusty barrels crumbled in the field  
under June's trash accumulated  
during the burn ban.  
I looked back at my dad.  
His dark, dripping brow over green eyes  
reflected mine like a dirty mirror.  
    "I want to go swimming."  
The next day he abandoned the deck  
and filled the pool.

In mid-August we got back to work,  
a storm waking above.  
My brothers and I collected trash  
strewn across the yard from the west wind.  
Dad sat at the table  
with his weather scanner.  
He directed us to  
put everything in the hot tubs.  
The boys broke down the one  
that had been gnawed through most  
by age and animals.  
They put the pieces in the barrels,  
put them in the other tub,

along with any metal, wood, car  
parts, trash, plastic bags of  
dead grass, small mesquite trees;  
we piled it all up  
until the yard was empty again,  
but for the mountain of waste we'd built.  
Overcast lowered the sky,  
trapping us in like a heated blanket.  
My older brother splattered gas,  
threw the can to the side,  
lit a match,  
hauled me by my elbow,  
and sprinted away.  
We turned around to see our father  
standing across from us,  
blurred by heat waves and noxious fumes,  
watching the summer burn.



# SEASHELLS AND PLUMS

By Maya Alpert

The room was filled with needy people who wanted for nothing. And those of us that strove for greatness were like seashells upon the shore. Beautiful, maybe, but one of hundreds that everyone had seen before and certainly smoothed and eroded by some degree into dull, wet lumps. We had all put on our best clothes, sprung for designer shoes. Shown everyone—including our bosses—that this, they, were important. That they weren't missing a day at the lake or their nephew's graduation for nothing. That we wouldn't rather be anywhere else besides an office function in a freezing hotel ballroom, no, we were so happy to be here. We seashells cradled the delicate egos of the giants among us. Always offering an ear or a hand or the withered remains of our American Dreams, never commenting on anything not specifically stated in our job description, unless that something was gossip.

**WE SEASHELLS  
CRADLED THE DELICATE  
EGOS OF THE GIANTS  
AMONG US.**

room. We were the best. The best at eavesdropping on superiors but knowing when to keep quiet and when to share the succulent fruit with our peers.

The sub-zero climate of the ballroom kept sweat from the brows of those who were already down for the count and raised hairs and bumps upon the exposed necklines of those who were still upright. We were the only ones prepared for the literally chilled atmosphere. We wore pants instead of skirts, kept our suit jackets on. You would think that the bosses would have done the same—after all, the only reason we were here was because they were here. But, like every time before, our employers were without extra textile protection and thus proceeded to warm themselves at the open bar.

We the underlings were dutiful as always. Holding drinks.

Gossip could be picked and hoarded like a ripe plum from a neighbor's garden—if we were smart, diligent, savvy. And if we weren't, well, we wouldn't have been in this

Swimming upstream through the crowd for refills. And pretending not to hear the uninhibited innuendo passed between colleagues. Never drinking ourselves—not yet, not until much later. After this was all over, when the bosses were safely secured into the beds of their impatient spouses, we would be at the bar—any bar—reveling in the ecstasy of relieved responsibility. Beer. Tequila. Salted peanuts. All for our own consumption, without our arms tethered to men and women too sauced to fly solo. We were raucous and happy with cheeks pinked by cold spirits.

But we never went too far. Because nothing is worse than being hungover while your boss is still drunk from the night before.

So two drinks, then go home, and wait to do it all over again.



# LIGHT MALAISE

By Tiffany Corley

No longer lit, the back field,  
the one neighbor claims has gone unkempt  
five owners past and I.  
Robbers now dine unrevealed on garden rows  
the shape of children's graves;  
lettuce heads share beds with rusted nails,  
the occasional fine chain but never more that false glare,  
covering faraway sky bodies with polluted hands,  
feigning interest the entrance of a wild maze  
in woods too clandestine to claim.

Yes!

Never again will it blast me wide awake  
through the window  
in dreamstate bathroom visits,  
those fragrant nights when I lived to see it die:  
its wooden pole dawdles drunkenly to side,  
split, erupt in earthly fungal scent  
burped by the maw of time, reclaimed  
by raised beds strangled in recurrent weeds  
as I fall off-grid,  
the newest chapter in  
neglectful-owner oral history.





# THE GOOD SAMARITAN

By Heather Beger

Characters

Mark- 20's to 30's, sarcastic but trying to change

Gerty- 80's with spunk

Time- Present

Setting- Grocery parking lot

LIGHTS UP. GERTY scuttles across stage with bag of groceries. MARK runs through audience to stage waving a thick wallet in one hand and holding a bouquet of flowers in the other.

MARK

Miss?! Ma'am!

Mark runs onto stage. He stops behind Gerty, catches his breath, taps her on the shoulder.

MARK

Miss?

Gerty jumps and smacks the wallet out of Mark's hand.

GERTY

Hooah! Don't you run off with my wallet you hooligan!

MARK

No! Ma'am, I was just-

Mark begins to reach for the wallet. Gerty swings the groceries at him.

GERTY

I said don't! It's my wallet!

Mark steps back and crosses arms in front for defense. Gerty scuttles toward the wallet-patting her hair.

She reaches for wallet.  
No luck.

She tugs up sleeves,  
adjusts skirt. Reaches.  
No luck.

She puffs up and tries to lower herself to the ground through different means of spreading legs or bending one knee.

After many failed attempts, she sighs and stands up.

GERTY  
Well, what are you waiting for? Help an old woman get her wallet!

MARK  
Yeah, sure.

Mark looks Gerty up and down, hesitates, then hands over her wallet. Gerty eyeballs the bouquet.

MARK  
Didn't mean to startle you. I found this wallet in a cart back at the store.

GERTY  
Oh! Silly me... Did you look inside it?

MARK  
I looked at the driver's license. It's actually expired ya know. (BEAT) Well, you can count the money. I didn't take any.

GERTY  
Oh a good Samaritan like you isn't looking to steal my money. He's looking for a reward.

MARK  
No. I don't want your—I don't need any money, thanks.

GERTY  
You deserve it! Who do I write the check out to?

MARK  
Mark- I mean, no thank you. I have to be somewhere actually.

GERTY  
Are you possibly Canadian?

MARK  
I'm actually—No, no. I'm sorry—

GERTY  
Gerty.

MARK  
Gerty. But I have to be somewhere.

GERTY  
Won't you let an old woman be at ease knowing she rewarded the nice boy who returned her wallet?

Mark stands still, giving up.  
Gerty takes out a check and

pen.

GERTY  
Of course you couldn't have stolen any money. I only use checks.

MARK  
Is that so?

GERTY  
Safer that way.

MARK  
Ah.

GERTY  
Kids are all doing their spending online. Virtuously.

MARK  
Virtually.

GERTY  
Using virus money? Doesn't seem sanitary to me.

MARK  
Viral.

GERTY  
Still not sanitary. I know how computers get sick.

MARK  
Infected.

Gerty hands Mark the check.

MARK  
Wowie. A check for a whole ten dollars.

GERTY  
Don't spend it all in one place!

MARK  
Well, it looks like you've got all the answers, Gerty.

GERTY  
You don't mean that.

MARK  
No, I do. Anyone could come snatch my credit card but no one could possibly forge my signature.

GERTY  
I haven't been this flattered since Harold tried to play footsy with me at last week's bingo.

Mark checks his watch.

MARK  
All right, well. Now that you have your

wallet back. Have a nice day, Gerty.

Mark walks away.

GERTY

You're not gonna help an old lady with her heavy bag of groceries?

Mark stops. He returns to Gerty.

MARK

Do you need help with your groceries?

GERTY

Of course not!

MARK

Didn't you just ask-

GERTY

I'm a young independent woman!

MARK

I'm certain.

GERTY

That's a joke. No one's independent in this consumerist hell hole.

Mark is shocked.

MARK

Gerty!

GERTY

That's why you kids don't get satire these days.

MARK

Because of consumerism?

GERTY

Because of consumerism!

MARK

I don't see how the two correlate, but I don't care anymore.

Mark leaves again.

GERTY

I hope those flowers aren't for your girlfriend. She'll hate them!

MARK

They're actually for my boyfriend.

GERTY

I thought gay men had better taste in gifts.

Mark stops. Checks his watch. He wants to leave but can't

so he stomps back over to  
Gerty.

MARK  
Actually Miss Gertrude, I'm bi.

GERTY  
Oh, good bye then.

MARK  
No no. Gerty.

GERTY  
Weren't you leaving?

MARK  
Not good bye. Bi. As in bisexual.

GERTY  
With bicycles?

MARK  
Are you kidding me?!

Gerty pats her hair. She's  
not kidding.

MARK  
I've dated quite a lot of girls. But now  
I'm dating a guy. I like both.

GERTY  
You've dated both men and women and your  
idea of a gift is alstroemeria?

MARK  
The girls always loved the flowers.

GERTY  
And the men?

MARK  
This is my first boyfriend.

GERTY  
Just because you like both men and women  
doesn't mean they'll like the same thing.  
Also those gals were lying.

MARK  
Excuse me?

Gerty starts to get a little  
heated on this subject.

GERTY  
No one really wants something that sits on  
the counter and dies.

Mark waves the flowers in the  
air.

MARK

Well you just have the answer to everything don't you.

Gerty starts wagging her finger at Mark.

GERTY

You are too sarcastic to be attractive, Mark.

MARK

Oh really?

GERTY

(spitting back the sarcasm)  
Oh my bad. I actually think it's a loooovely quality. Your boyfriend is probably just drooling over the way you 'charm' the elderly.

MARK

Go play footsy with Harold, you check writing Communist!

Gerty is taken aback. Then softens.

GERTY

You were paying attention?

Mark straightens up.

MARK

What?

GERTY

You were listening. Earlier.

MARK

Yeah?

GERTY

No one ever really listens to me. They usually just let me talk till I get too tired.

MARK

Well, not everything you say is completely wrong.

GERTY

Even about the checks?

MARK

No, checks are becoming obsolete and someone could have easily forged the signature from your driver's license.

GERTY

Oh no.

Gerty holds her wallet tight.

MARK  
But I know what you mean, Gerty. No one really listens to me either.

GERTY  
What about your boyfriend?

Mark smiles.

MARK  
He'd listen to a rock if it could talk.

GERTY  
He must be very sweet.

MARK  
I thought I'd give him something nice because he puts up with this.

Mark gestures to himself.

GERTY  
Don't be so hard on yourself. I'm sure you're nice to be around.

MARK  
You're flattering me.

GERTY  
Really. You were nice enough to take the time to return my wallet.

Mark blushes.

GERTY  
Is your boyfriend afraid of heights?

MARK  
What?

GERTY  
Is he afraid of heights?

MARK  
No.

GERTY  
Let me give you a real reward, Mark.

MARK  
A real reward?

GERTY  
I may not be a fan of capitalism, but it did make my husband and me a living.

Gerty pulls out a basic cell phone and calls someone.

GERTY  
Hi sweetie. Could you do me favor? No, no, I don't need to dye my hair today. Maybe next week? Are you free next Thursday?

Mark checks his watch.

GERTY

Oh sorry! That can wait. David, I need you to prep the red balloon. Yeah, I've got a young man coming with his boyfriend. Well you're not uncomfortable with that are you? I mean really, David, it's the 21st century. Haha, okay. Just take them over the lake and back. Thank you sweetie.

Gerty hangs up.

GERTY

Do you know where that nice dollar store on 72 is?

MARK

The rundown "4-A-Buck"?

GERTY

Go pick up your boyfriend and drive him there. Well, not to the dollar store. But down the road next to it about a mile. You'll see a warehouse with a little blue mailbox. David will be expecting you with a hot air balloon.

MARK

You have hot air balloons on order?

GERTY

Now that I own the place!

MARK

You are one surprise after another, Gerty.

GERTY

Checks may be obsolete. But romantic balloon rides are classic.

Mark takes a moment. Then extends the flowers to Gerty.

MARK

Thank you, Gerty. That's one of the nicest acts of kindness- Oh! I'm sorry.

He takes back the flowers, but Gerty smiles and takes the bouquet from him.

GERTY

No, I love them, Mark. Alstroemeria is my favorite.

Mark looks at her, skeptical.

GERTY

I dry them for my scrapbook.

Mark shakes his head.

BLACKOUT.

# PORTRAITS OF GUATEMALA

By Livvy Runyon

Recently, I spent a month in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala as the producer on a documentary film. During my time there, I found that Guatemala is a place of beauty with high, lush mountains in clouds that hang low and streets of brightly colored buildings and clothing. These details emphasize a culture in which both joy and resilience are deeply rooted, and the same goes for the people who live there. In a society steeped in a tradition where women are often restricted to work in the home, discrimination and hardship are daily staples. Yet despite their circumstances, they possess something much stronger—a quiet nature of steadfast perseverance, humble strength, and unconfined hope. In this series of portraits taken of women I met during my stay, I aim to capture the beauty that is the strong but gentle spirit of the Guatemalan woman.









To view the documentary, *Rompiendo El Ciclo* (2015), or to read more about my experience, please visit [www.livvyrunyon.com](http://www.livvyrunyon.com).



# WEIGHING THE HEAVY WAIT

By Tiana Williams

She carries her weight like a ball.  
My dear, put your feet to the table.  
Collapsed mouth, swallowed spirit,  
she big, but she small.

Don't waste your daydreams on maple  
pressed ears on stained glass.  
Get lost in the thin of empty  
nose to nose, void to voice kicking at her navel.

Her gray lips wrap rim,  
sip black tea in red rain,  
mourning the morning with a hymn;  
her hips shadow a mother's pain.

Like yesterday afternoon, she'll never forget that  
red always fades to brown:  
three black boys sung their last tune,  
never dye the mid-point of your crown.

Don't carry your pride in your back pocket.  
Don't sup with our sadness across the sky.  
Don't store your love in a rusty locket.  
Don't blend our truth with no lye.

I'll carry my weight like a box of raisins,  
drop it in water and watch it swell.  
Cycle on reverse shrink, air dry my chords,  
play our brazen brown song so well.

# WHAT LADY GAVE US

By Hillary Gordon

The moon was so bright above my head that I wondered if headlights were even necessary. The city lights glowed yellow along the sides of the street as my cherry-red Mustang hugged the curves of Laurel Canyon. Even at midnight, it's warm enough to keep the top down, and I turned the radio up to hear the music above the wind tangling my hair. The road twists and turns through imposing hills that look down on the cars zooming through their core. The canyon is spotted with old mansions that jut from the hillside like crooked teeth. Homes weren't meant to sit on these hills, and it just takes one act of God to remind Angelenos how quickly it could all be crushed and washed down the cliffs. Remnants of old earthquakes and mud slides still litter the canyon. The remains bring me a strange sense of comfort. Sometimes this City of Angels needs to be brought back down to Earth.

These very Hollywood homes were frequented by my grandmother in the 1920s and 30s. I like to think of her visiting these homes when I'm driving through Laurel Canyon. She was a C-list Hollywood actress long before the term even existed. Her real name was Lady, but in the late 1930s Paramount decided she'd be called May. Although I never met her, as long as I can remember, I've heard her stories from my mother and aunts around the Thanksgiving table. They have Little Rascals collector's plates and dolls, telling me that's how Lady got her very first break. I look at the old "Our Gang" photos and see how charming she was, even as a child. I've spent hours staring at the glamorous headshots and stills from her many movies. I find it hard to believe a woman more beautiful than my grandmother has ever existed. She won a contest *The LA Times* held in 1938 called "The Most Beautiful Face." I stare at that Most Beautiful Face printed huge in the pages of the newspaper. She stares back at me, in black and white, her eyebrows penciled on thin and long. I wonder what it would have been like to know her. And I wonder what happened to make her quit her movie career, start a family, and sink into an

alcoholism so deep she was never able to pull herself out.

I pulled into my mom's driveway in the Valley. She'd grown up on this side of the Hollywood sign and raised me in this home. She met my dad at Reseda High when they were fourteen, and they'd been together up until last year. I stop by often to check on her. I live at the beach, 25 miles away. We're both in Los Angeles, but our homes are in different worlds. My childhood house was built in the sixties and is a far cry from the 1920s Spanish style homes my grandmother spent her glory days in.

I would never be one to be invited to a Hollywood party. My grandma didn't pass down the beautiful-face genes to me. I didn't get her skinny legs or her flat stomach. I wish I would have gotten her beautiful hands. They looked so graceful every time I've watched her float across the screen, holding hands and twirling with Fred Astaire. She looked so classic as she rested her cheek on her hand, leaning on a piano, singing with Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn*.

Having inherited my dad's Midwest farmer genes, I decided to become a radio DJ in a city that thrives on fame. "A face for radio," I used to joke with my mom and dad. Just like my grandma before me, I don't go by the name I was born with. Jennifer is what my family calls me, but everyone else knows me as Chris Kelly from 92.9, and it still sounds like a stranger's name to me. Chris Kelly is a bit of a celebrity in her own right, but she is not me.

I open the door to my childhood home quietly. It's well past midnight, and I don't want to wake my mom if she's already fallen asleep. She needs her rest. I find her face down on the couch. A half-empty bottle of Ambien and an empty bottle of wine sit on the carpet. I look into the kitchen and see piles of dirty dishes, a stove top caked in old food, and dust bunnies on the floor. The sight makes my head ache.

You hear about men having these mid-life crises, running off with younger women in sports cars. My dad's wasn't as unique as I

sometimes think it was. He just wanted to travel to music festivals with women younger than me, and no one would stand in the way of his happiness. I had left home, and he had survived cancer and was a new man. A selfish one I didn't like a whole lot, but I still missed him every single day.

My mom had quit working at 26 and lost most of her social life raising me. In recent years she occupied her time planning my parent's retirement. They would travel the U.S. in an RV, stopping along the way to eat beignets in New Orleans and barbecue in Kansas City. They planned on taking pictures in front of the Grand Canyon and to spend a whole week at Graceland. When they reached the East Coast, they would sail to Europe and leave me to take care of the house. I would raise my family there. Along the way, I failed to make a family and my dad got tired of waiting. I hear from him about once a month now. I tell him how my mom is doing, which isn't great. It isn't even good. About a month after Dad finally left for good is when I noticed her speech slurring. I also noticed her forgetting conversations we'd just had. It wasn't long after that I had to pick her up from the hospital after a sleeping pill overdose that was no accident.

My mother had been sober her whole life. She lived her childhood with a beautiful and drunk mother. She swore from an early age she wouldn't put her kids through the same things she went through. I know from bits and pieces that her childhood involved screaming fights with her father, who became a grandfather I never met. I know my mom spent hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars in therapy trying to forgive him. Her childhood home was chaotic with name-calling and crying fits when my grandmother would take off for weeks at a time, never even checking in. She left my mom and her sisters wondering if they'd ever see their mother again while she went off on benders with strange men.

Not only had my mom sworn off alcohol, she still refuses to drink Fresca. One hot day in North Hollywood, she came in from playing

in the yard. She saw her mom's can of Fresca sitting on the kitchen table. Without hesitation she took a long swig, only to be stunned by vodka. She threw up right there in the kitchen. I boycotted Fresca in her honor. I hate to think of how much damage that vodka must have done to a pig-tailed, freckle-nosed, red-headed version of my mom. I also stay away from the soda because I prefer to think of my grandma in her days of glamour. Not drinking vodka out of soda cans, but drinking martinis dressed in diamond-drop earrings and an emerald evening gown with Judy Garland. I like to relive the story of her kissing Mickey Rooney on a moonlit balcony overlooking all of LA, the city lit up yellow against the black night.

My mom was lucky enough to be passed down the genes of the "Most Beautiful Face in Hollywood." She's long and lean, and classically beautiful. From the time she was twelve, men were lined up to take care of her. She couldn't wait to turn eighteen and get out of the house and marry my dad. He took great care of her for the next thirty years. I was one of the few kids growing up whose parents were still married and I held onto that fact with pride. I would talk to my childhood friends with sympathy as they described packing their bags to visit their dads for the weekend. Mom and Dad provided a nearly perfect suburban upbringing. I spent birthdays in our backyard pool with dozens of friends from the neighborhood and school. I had a brown bag lunch made for me everyday, and knew, without a doubt, that I was loved, and that neither of my parents would ever leave me for weeks at a time.

I shook my mom awake. She looked at me with blank eyes.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Just checking in before I head home."

I helped her up, and helped her into bed, leaving a glass of water next to her. She mumbled, "I miss your dad."

"I do, too," I said.

"I miss my mother."

“I know.”

“She would have loved you so much,” she said, touching my face. “Did you see her? She was here. She asked me to forgive her, and I do, but I was just a kid.” She looked at me like she really did see her and like it was a normal thing, to talk to your dead mother. Sleeping pills have a funny way of destroying people’s reality.

“Get some sleep, Mom.”

I woke up on the couch the next morning, stiff neck and back. I checked on my mom, still snoring in her bedroom. A black-and-white picture of her mother draped in a long gown and fur, standing on the set of a movie sits in a frame on her bedside, right next to the empty bottle of Xanax. I can see for the first time exactly what my mom had inherited from Lady. I’m suddenly grateful to not have gotten the good looks or the addiction. I wonder if one would exist without the other for both my mother and grandmother. I may never be beautiful enough for a movie star to kiss me on a balcony or even enough for a good man to raise a good family with me. But, I will never know the pain of losing those things. I will never burden my children with the pain of watching the first person they love slowly erase herself. And for the first time, I am grateful for what Lady didn’t pass down to me. I run my hands over my short, but strong and sturdy legs and walk out of the house.



# SO, YOU'RE IN A HORROR MOVIE, HUH?

By Shelly Romero

*(How To Survive Your Terrible Predicament: A Short Guide)*

So, someone is running amok through your little town, killing your friends, your family, and you need help to survive? Well, sit on down. Let's look at the scenarios, because let's be honest, you won't live if you don't know the rules.

*Scenario 1: Don't Be The Popular Girl*

You're the popular cheerleader. Hell, you're the cheerleader, and you've finally scored a relationship with the hottest guy in school—the quarterback of the football team. You're the Queen Bee; he's the most eligible bachelor in school. You're also nominated for Homecoming Queen, the biggest event of your senior year, which is in a month. You're sure to win, and he'll definitely be your king, standing by your side as you're crowned. Let's call him Brett.

Right now, you're getting frisky. Hanging out with Brett at that late night party held at the local corn maze. Your beer-goggles are on and you're ready for anything. You take Brett into the old cabin on the outskirts of the maze, far from the partygoers. You lie down on the creaky bed and get down to business. The cabin creaks and then, you hear something. Was it the wind? The branches scratch against the fogged windows, almost like fingers, and then, clank! You tell Brett to get off of you and to go check out what that noise was. He tells you not to worry, the cabin's been abandoned for years. He doesn't want to stop. You bite your lip and mention the old town legends. He smiles and says it's all hocus pocus, right? You shake your head, an uneasy feeling creeping into your stomach. It might've been all that beer you drank; it could just be fear. You tell him to go and he does, but right before he walks out of the bedroom, he tells you, "I'll be right back."

You lie there while the minutes pass. You're worried. You haven't heard from him since he left. You call out, "Brett? Are you okay?" but no one responds. You pull your clothes back on and head out to investigate. You walk through the creaking cabin and Brett is nowhere

to be found. As you head to the back door, there's a pool of dark liquid smeared across the floor, leading outside. You lean down and realize it's blood, fresh and bright red. You turn pale, heart beating fast, and run out the door. The corn maze towers over you, nothing but dried cornstalk for miles. You run faster in the direction you think the party is and end up in an open field. A dark figure stands silently in the middle of the area, strung up on a pole, arms marionetted in an obscene manner. You walk closer, slowly, to look at the figure's face. Brett stares wide-eyed back at you, bleeding, a crooked smile slashed onto his pretty-boy face.

You scream, too frozen by fear to turn around and keep running. You collapse, knees hitting the cold, dirt ground. That's when he catches you. You don't even see his face. He grabs you by your hair, pulls your head back. You scream again. He raises a machete and the last feeling you ever have is that of the blade's cold caress against your bare throat.

Don't be the popular girl, and definitely don't have sex.

### *Scenario 2: Don't Be The Boyfriend*

So, you're the boyfriend, huh? No, not Brett. You're special; you're the Final Girl's Boyfriend. For this scenario, we'll make her a virgin. You and she fell in love. You've been so patient, wanting to take this relationship with her to the next level when you both graduate in a few months. But, there's been a change of plans. Your and your friends' lives have been changed forever once this mysterious killer arrived and people started dropping dead. You're worried for her. You want to keep her safe and make it out of this massacre alive. You won't stop running, fighting, or doing whatever it takes to survive through the week. You forgot a little detail. There's a reason your girlfriend is called the Final Girl. You don't make it to the end. You fight and fight, using your skills and strengths to evade this hellish killer.

You manage to make it out with just a few cuts and bruises. You

sit in the living room of a dark house; glass is sprinkled all over the hallway in front of you, remnants of your recent encounter with the killer. You sit next to the Quiet One while your girlfriend runs to safety, trying to get the attention of the local law enforcement. You press your back against the wall and relax for the first time in weeks. You're tired; you just want this to be over. The Quiet One, true to his name, is silent. He's beaten and bloodied too. Despite everything, you've put your whole trust in this meek person, the kind of kid who always sat in the back of the classroom and got made fun of by your friends. You watched the Popular Cheerleader pretend to ask the Quiet One out on a date, only to leave him waiting on his doorstep with flowers for hours. You watched Brett shoot spit balls at the back of his head. You did nothing; you even joined in their cruel laughter.

You turn to the Quiet One to make a plan for escape; the killer is probably close by and preparing for another attack. You notice that he's smiling and brandishing a knife. The Quiet One has been the killer all along. You're furious, and, at the same time, fear swells in you. You scramble to get away, but his cold blade slices your ankles. You fall to the floor in agonizing pain. Your ankles are burning, bleeding all over the floor. You scrape your palms against the broken glass, trying to escape this madman's clutches. The Quiet One stands above you, laughing.

"Have you ever seen the movies?" he asks. "You're not supposed to make fun of the quiet kid."

He continues to chastise you for all your mistakes as the machete cuts through your back, ending your misery before you reach the door.

You didn't even get to say goodbye to your girlfriend.

The Final Girl is indeed, the Final Girl.

The movie doesn't end with her having a boyfriend.

*Scenario 3: Don't Trust The Quiet One*

You're the Quiet One. You're the kid who sat in the back of classes,

the know-it-all movie fanatic who never made an effort to be “cool.” You were an outcast, so you got picked on. The Popular Cheerleader faked interest, **THE FINAL GIRL IS INDEED, THE FINAL GIRL. THE MOVIE DOESN'T END WITH HER HAVING A BOYFRIEND.** left you standing on your doorstep

with freshly cut red roses from your garden. Brett the Quarterback used you for target practice after he forced you to write his papers for him. So you grew angry, bottling it all up inside until one day, you snapped. Halloween was perfect timing, you thought. Everyone would be in costumes, getting drunk, not having a care in the world as they pretended to be someone else. You found that old machete from your dad's lumberjack days in his shed. You donned a mask, a costume, and began to slice and dice through all your victims.

They should have known. The rules were always right in front of them. Don't have sex. Don't drink. Don't mess with you. They should never have underestimated you. You reached the end of your massacre, still not found out. You played the game, moved everyone around like chess pieces, fitting them to their perfect roles in your movie. All the while, you were “safe.” You escaped the killer's so-called attack on you with a few cuts, which were self-inflicted, to fit in with the rest of them. You've scared them half-to-death.

Two more pieces were left on the board: the King and Queen. You help the Final Girl escape from the dark house, the old one at the edge of the neighborhood. It doesn't matter, anyway. By the time you reach her, she won't be able to scream for help. In the house, the floor is covered in glass from your previous attack on the pair. You and her boyfriend sit down, taking a moment to relax before it's time to run again. He trusts you, wants to plan out how to escape, but you reveal yourself. There's a beautiful look of horror that crosses his face as he realizes who you are. It's so funny, isn't it? You laugh at his misery and then thrust the machete through his back.

You drop your weapon and stumble out of the house. You cry and scream as the boyfriend's blood covers your palms. You find your way to the Final Girl. She's right there, almost in your grasp.

But you slip up. You say something you shouldn't, something you couldn't have known. She's a smart girl, now, she truly knows you. The Final Girl lives up to her name and role. She's pissed and dangerous now. You chase her back into the old house, picking up your machete. She stumbles over her boyfriend's corpse before running upstairs. You're right behind her. You follow her into the bedroom and begin to swipe and slash at her. Yet, somehow she can dodge your attacks. You push her out to the balcony and into the metal railing. As she recovers from the hit to her back, you lunge and miss. In your mad rage you fall over the railing onto the lawn of the second-story house with a bone-shattering thud. The Final Girl has outsmarted you, but has your bloody legacy really ended?

*Scenario 4: Be The Final Girl*

Oh Final Girl, hasn't your life been turned upside down by the recent murders plaguing your usually quiet All-American town? You had a loyal group of friends. You were dating an amazing guy. But they won't make it to the sequel. One-by-one, they're killed off by a madman who has made you and everyone you know a target. This is one nightmare you can't escape. You try your hardest to stay calm. You try to go day-by-day, silently mourning those killed while maintaining a perfect 4.0 GPA and a stoic face as student body president. But the nightmare grows darker and closer to home with every killing. You barely escaped the corn maze party; you even saw the killer with his bloody machete and emotionless mask that obscured his identity. You began to walk through your school's halls, cautious and anxious, unsure of who could be behind the murders.

One night, while gathered at your house, he finds you and your friends and chases them to the edge of the neighborhood, to that

long-abandoned house. You try to keep calm; your boyfriend tells you to run away, to get help. The Quiet One agrees and decides to stay safe. While you're away, they'll encounter the killer once again. You try running house to house, banging on the front doors for help. No one's home, or perhaps they're too scared to open their doors. Your world is spinning, and it comes crumbling down when the Quiet One arrives covered in blood to let you know that your boyfriend's been killed.

"I'm so sorry," he begins, and then he slips and says something that he definitely could not have known.

"How'd you know that?" you ask him, pulling away from his consoling caress. You put the details together and haul ass. You stumble back into the house and onto your boyfriend's corpse, but there's no time to grieve. You run to the bedroom, pissed and traumatized by this whole ordeal. But you have to keep going. You have to live. The Quiet One is at your heel and the fight begins. He's brandishing his signature weapon, slashing at you. With your adrenaline pumping, you dodge all of his attacks. He pushes you out onto the balcony and into the railing. The pain shoots up your spine and for a moment, you lose focus. The Quiet One lunges at you but you fall down to the hard ground. He topples over the railing and onto the lawn, just as the police arrive. You lie on your back as the police rush in to help you. You begin to cry, exhausted and beaten. This is the first time you have time to grieve for everyone you loved that has been killed.

You are the Final Girl. Somehow, you'll get through this tragedy. You'll find new friends, maybe even a new love, because there's always a sequel, right?

*Bonus Scenario: You're a Person of Color*

If you find yourself being a person of color and acquainted with the main cast of a horror movie, you're probably going to die. Sorry, but unfortunately, that's just the rule. You'll end up dead somehow like in Scenarios 1-3.

# AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DYSMORPHIA

By Allison Wright

Chapter One.

Fat Girl, age 8.

Baby weight, bad haircut  
and the brightest eyes  
joins the local swim team with complete joy  
and not a second thought  
to lycra cutting thighs  
or the size of her splash.  
Still eating ice cream before bed  
still convinced  
that the biggest thing in her life  
will always be these Olympic-sized  
dreams.

Chapter Two.

Fat Girl, age 10.

Begins to notice how her shoulders  
take up extra room in team pictures.  
But her new best friend  
tells her size is an advantage, cheering  
as they set new records.  
And “a growing girl needs seconds  
or maybe even thirds”  
her parents laugh and laugh.  
There is always the plus-size section  
she has yet to discover  
there is anything wrong with.

Chapter Three.

Fat Girl, age 13.

Watches that same best friend  
leave the team.  
Sees her slowly gain hips, gentle rolls,  
where sharp collar bones once lived.  
Learns at this age of locker room gossip  
that outside of practice



size is not an advantage  
and that if she is to avoid whispers  
backhanded looks  
she can never risk following  
in her friend's heavy foot steps.

#### Chapter Four.

Fat Girl, age 15.

Tired of early mornings, tired of slower times,  
gives up the team she has loved for years now  
and with it  
gives up breakfast, gives up dinner, gives up lunch.  
Fills those hours once spent working toward something  
on a stationary bike in the living room  
becoming as close as possible to nothing.  
Drops 25 pounds in 41 days  
to hear Dad say  
he is just so proud of the way  
she has kept up with her fitness.

#### Chapter Five.

Fat Girl, age 16.

Decides as a birthday present to herself  
she will eat whatever she wants for once:  
likes it so much she makes room for more  
and more and more and more.  
And soon it's three fingers down the throat,  
nine times a day  
every day.  
And when her friends are more confused than they are concerned  
her isolation with the issue  
comes with nearly as much relief  
as the now frequent purging.

Chapter Six.

Fat Girl, age 18.

She can throw up silently  
and has—

at church, at school, in the homes of everyone she loves.

No longer needs her hands to make it happen.

Knows to check her neck for vomit,

to code binges by temperature, by color, by texture.

Knows all about minimizing by the time she is made to sit,  
silent in a therapist's office, just to hear:

“I have never seen a case like yours before,”

crying as her parents try to explain how it could possibly be best  
to send her away.

Epilogue.

Fat Girl, age 20.

Knows by now that her's is the only voice  
to have ever called her that.

Still sometimes sees caloric counts instead of groceries,  
cringes when a friend brings up diet plans.

But, 28 months into what will be nothing short of a life-long recovery,  
she has begun to realize that people mean it when they compliment  
her pretty face.

And that accepting how she will never be able to trust scales,  
or mirrors,

or anyone but herself

will be what it takes to stay safe, saved.

# TONIGHT AT EIGHT

By Allison Wright

Listen to this song when you realize:

I hate my long hair attitude,  
but love the arch of a cable cord,  
connecting cognitive dissonance with a left hand diamond—

A pitched no hitter.

Don't be long,  
we haven't got any leftover from tomorrow/  
the next day/the day before that

If runners run and dodgers dodge  
what do artists do?  
Just forty, just five more minutes, and I swear I'll  
(stillnotstillnotstillnot)  
be ready for a lifetime commitment  
to pay-per-view fights and plastered walls.

Riddle me bliss, who said anything about  
a gift?  
Something old,  
Something new, something stolen  
(count it blue).





# THE LISBON GIRLS

By Kirsten Izzett

“The Lisbon Girls” is a conceptual portrait series inspired by the suicides of the Lisbon sisters in Jeff Eugenides’ novel *The Virgin Suicides*. To fully enjoy these photos, I suggest listening to “Playground Love” by Air while taking them in. Using local models and heavy art direction, I strived to create the beautiful melancholy tone of the novel rather than the morbidity of the actual deaths. *The Virgin Suicides* is one of the few books that captures the dullness and redundancy of being a suburban teenager, and it was a book that as a teenager I found myself reaching for again and again. Adolescence can be such an unhappy time, and I sometimes wish that no one ever had to experience it.



Mary



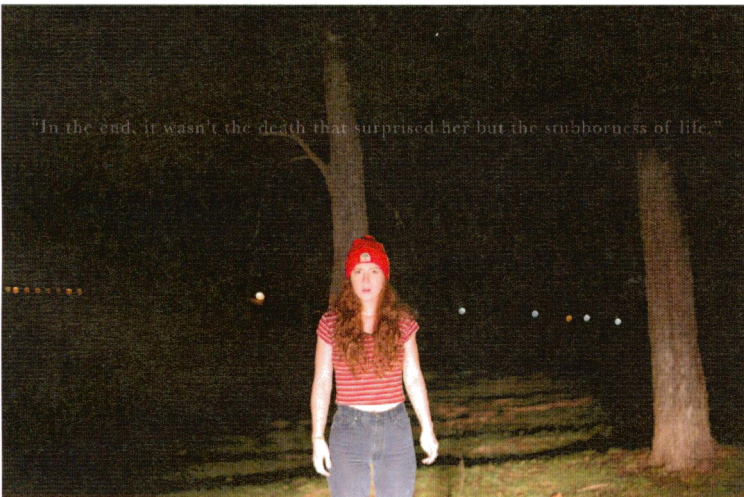
Bonnie



Therese



Cecilia



Lux



# SHOPLIFTING

By Kitiara McGuire-Stiggins

I steal love by the handfuls  
from the produce section at the grocery,  
between the sweet snap peas  
and the bitter spring mix.

Not because I need nutrition,  
just because it's there.  
I feel better, for a minute,  
but then love wilts against my lips.

I stuff intimacy in my pockets,  
nestle it in among crumpled dollar bills,  
mold it around used tissues,  
filling in the holes made by my worried thumbs.

It slides through anyway.  
Intimacy always slips away.

I head home alone and stop  
at a gas station, a QuikTrip.  
I pick up a bar of lust, a bottle of desire,  
and slip them under my shirt, run out to my car.

The jog shakes them loose,  
and they fall,  
crack and crumble.  
I keep walking, pretending not to notice  
so that maybe, for once, someone else will.

What little intimacy I can grasp with greedy fists  
is never enough to keep me well-fed.  
When I try to spread it out over a week—  
a month—a year—it's always too thin.

I am starving to death.

# MENARCHE

By Victoria Patrick

## I.

It is the weekend before the Halloween of 2006. It's unseasonably warm; but then again, this is Kansas, the weather has never cared for what is seasonal. I'm sitting on the concrete garage floor, sprawled out in the loose-legged way that only children can manage. I'm saving my costume (a fortune teller: a complex arrangement of gauzy, loose fabric) for the actual holiday, so tonight I'm wearing spider-web patterned pants and a black T-shirt decorated with glittery bats.

Everyone around me is carving pumpkins. Fresh, orange flesh spill out across weeks of newspapers, the smell of fresh fruit fills the air. At eleven years old, I'm still excited by the slippery mush of pumpkin flesh between my fingers, still planning on going trick-or-treating with my younger brother. This year, my friends are over all of that "kid stuff," ready to move onto Halloween parties that have more spit-swapping than candy-swapping. But this year we're still young enough to love carving pumpkins. A perfect Jack-O-Lantern takes planning and deliberation, and this is dehydrating. One of my friends asks me to get everyone some punch from inside. As I stand up, something wet pools in my pants.

I've peed myself. Of course, I hadn't felt like I'd had to go to the bathroom, and there's nothing dripping down my legs like there ought to be, but I can't come up with any other explanation for the spreading warmth. I hurry off in the direction of the kitchen door, which also leads to a bathroom. I lock myself in the room, tiny and claustrophobic. A crochet ghost covers the toilet-paper roll on the back of the toilet. A song about a one-eyed, one-horned flying purple people eater filters in through the door.

I yank my pants to my ankles, my underwear catching around my knobby knees, and there is a dark brown splotch, shiny and wet under the harsh overhead lighting. My stomach clenches and I'm crying, and then I seek out my mom in the basement, where the little ones have been sent to play. I don't recall crossing the entire house to get here; I

must have walked with my legs bowed, an odd waddle. I yank at my mom's arm, pulling her over to my side, whispering harshly that I got my period.

I'd been told about periods from the time I was old enough to start asking questions. I saw the boxes of pads that appeared on the back of the toilet once a month, I knew that sometimes in the summer my mom preferred to sit poolside rather than join me in the water. I knew all about eggs and uterine lining, and I shared this information with my friends, as though it was something precious. Their mothers didn't think they needed to know yet, but mine believed that knowledge was power. And so we talked about menstruation the way women on our mothers' favorite shows gossiped about lurid affairs. This was how I knew that none of my closest friends had gotten their periods yet. And that was the reason for my panicked tears: I was different now.

In the basement, I drag my mom to the bathroom. I show her the evidence, and her immediate reaction of joy is stopped in its tracks by my tears.

"I don't want to be a woman!"

My mom calms me and tells me that my period doesn't mean anything I don't want it to mean. She explains that it's just a biological function, a cycle like any other. She strips it of importance and turns it into hard, logical facts. This calms me down. I haven't lost my youth, and I'm not suddenly an adult, cast out on my own. It's just a little blood, that's all. In the midst of assuring me that my childhood didn't end the instant that I stained my first pair of underwear, my mom teaches me how to put on a pad. This defining moment, this turning point of womanhood, is obscured in memories of tears and embarrassment and fear.

## II.

I don't tell any of my friends. I can't muster up excitement about my first period, nor my second or third. It isn't joyful or beautiful,

not like I was told it would be. Within my present group of friends, menstruation is talked about as though it's something scandalous. My closest friend, Carrie, doesn't even know. I can't bring myself to tell her, though I'm not sure what I'm so afraid of.

It finally becomes too much that my best friend doesn't know this intimate detail about me, and I come up with an elaborate reveal. I take a wooden box that I hand painted myself, and stuff it full of pads. I casually place this underneath a jewelry box that I want to show her. The next time she comes over, I make a production out of showing her my new necklace. I open its jewelry box, intentionally clumsy, and the wooden box beneath it falls onto the floor and pops open, scattering colorful pads across the floor. Carrie isn't impressed.

"Is this how you decided to tell me you got your period?"

Somehow, she already knew. I'm embarrassed, and I drop to my knees, hurrying to clean up the mess. Looking up at her smug face, I feel small. Like a child. We don't talk about it after that.

### III.

You wouldn't think I'd gotten my period before Carrie if you'd looked at us. I'm scrawny and flat-chested, my knees jutting out from bony thighs, my chest and stomach a straight line into my non-existent hips. More than once, I'm mistaken for a boy, with my long nose and short hair.

Carrie, however, is already curvy and round. Her face is full of softness, and her body looks like a twenty-year-old's. She outgrew training bras soon after I outgrew training wheels on my bike. Boys behind the counter at Panera flirt with her, and men at the tennis courts compliment her on the form of her serve.

It feels unfair, unreasonable. If I'm the one who has to bleed, shouldn't I also have something to show for it?

### IV.

It isn't my first time having cramps, but it is by far the worst. It's a

warm summer day, and the curtains in the bedroom are pulled shut, blocking out the sun. I have a piercing, throbbing headache, just like I do every month. I'm in my mother's bed, clutching a heating pad to my stomach. There's a fan blowing from across the room. I can feel myself bleeding through my clothes, through the sheets, through the mattress. Something awful is tearing away at my insides and the strongest dose of painkillers allowed for a twelve year old isn't cutting it. My mom stands nearby, landline phone in her hands, asking if I want to call in today.

I'm supposed to volunteer at my local library. I go in twice a week for a couple of hours during the summer and run the summer reading prize table. When kids bring in their reading logs, I tally up books or pages read, and give them their prizes.

Today I can't bear the thought of sitting upright in a wooden chair, or moving at all, really. My body feels tight and bloated, my stomach rolls with each cramp. The pain shoots down into my knees and ankles. My joints ache and my hips are on fire. I'm certain that this is the worst pain a human can endure.

My mom offers me the phone, a tinny ring as it calls the library front desk. I frantically wave it away, my throat feels too raw and clogged with tears to explain why I can't come in today. My mom takes it back and calmly reports that I'm sick today, but that I should be better by Thursday, no worries.

But I can't think that far ahead, can't imagine ever not being in pain. And I've never not gone in on my assigned days in the whole year I've been volunteering there. I'm filled with anxiety that I'll be dismissed from the program, until I go in that following Thursday, and I'm greeted with well wishes and glad to see you're better.

## V.

Cramps become my monthly routine. I curl up in bed, my mom's or my own, and gaze at the television while a heating pad rests on my

abdomen, and a towel is spread out beneath me. I alternate between munching down handfuls of M&Ms, and rolling nausea. I drink glass after glass of water, constantly thirsty. My skin blooms with bright red acne. I hate the feeling of being bedridden. But more than that I hate the feelings of self-consciousness whenever I do leave the house. So I grab my teddy bear and tuck myself in bed with the lights turned low and wish for early menopause.

## VI.

Carrie got her period, finally. She calls me, cool as a cucumber, to tell me about how her dad bought her red roses to celebrate. How her parents are so proud of her. Her tone has just the right amount of gloating, a bit flippant. I feel a mixture of shame and anger, and envy: No one bought me flowers to celebrate. But I remember that sort of attention was the exact thing I didn't want, I wished in that moment that it had happened anyway. That I had been excited for this change. I'll never get another first period; I'll never get my red party.

Suddenly this is the worst thing in the world. I'm mad at myself for not being happy when I started my period like Carrie. She would never be ruffled by something as silly as blood. She would never react so childishly. Jealous of Carrie's excitement over her own period, I don't talk to her for a couple of days, pretending to be busy. The next time I see her, she packs her purse as we head out to a local coffee shop. She oh-so-casually tucks some tampons inside.

"Now that I'm a woman," she giggles.

## VII.

Every year, for the last two years, we've gone to the Great Wolf Lodge for my little brother's birthday. This year he's turning six, and currently he's bouncing off the walls with excitement as we get ready to head down to the water park. Carrie has come with us this year, and she's sprawled out on our shared fold-out couch bed, reading manga

while waiting for me.

I'm in the bathroom, staring at the most horrifying thing I've ever laid eyes on: a tampon. It's a small cotton bullet, round at the top, with a long string trailing down. No applicator! the box proclaims proudly. My mother has told me repeatedly how easy it is, how it allows you to get to know your body more intimately. There is no way in hell that I want to know anything that intimately. But this cotton cork is my only chance at slipping down the slides tonight, so I have no other choice.

I call my mother in for guidance and refreshers on how, exactly, this thing is supposed to fit.

"Our bodies are made for this, and things much larger will come out." She's trying to reassure me, but it doesn't work.

"That's not what I want to hear right now!" I feel hysterical, and the bathroom is too cramped. I hear my brother shriek in the room outside. I lower my voice, not wanting to be heard.

"I don't want to do this. I didn't ask for this."

My mother gazes at me. "I don't know what else to tell you."

By the time I'm done, the bathroom looks like a murder scene, and my cramps have gotten worse. I worry that it's actually my body trying to expel this foreign object. I never, ever want to do this again, but I'm momentarily proud of myself for doing it at all. As soon as I step out of the room, Carrie speaks up: "See? It's not that bad! You just had to get over yourself." Great, there goes the pride. I shrink up and patter down the hall after Carrie, tugging at the skirt of my swim suit.

The rest of the day is spent making sure that the wetness on my thighs is just water. I trail behind Carrie as we ride slides over and over again, watching as she flirts with the gangly life guards. I stand off to her side, my arms crossed tightly, flattening my bikini top against my concave chest. I'm sure I'm standing rigid, almost clenched, as I worry about the security of the tampon.

I eventually navigate Carrie away from her new friends and towards

the hot tub. I sink down, down, into the hot water, letting my face slip under despite the signs posted that advise against it. It's the most comfortable I've felt all afternoon.

### VIII.

That Christmas our whole family gets the flu. We're all bedridden, coughing and running fevers, except for my mom, who decides after two days that she's done being sick, and is up and out shoveling snow so that she can take my brother and me to urgent care. The flu has hit me especially hard. I can barely eat, and when I do I can't keep it down. My fever spikes to 102 degrees.

On top of being miserable, I start my period. It should add to the illness, should make me feel even worse. But this month the cramps are nothing compared to how awful I feel. I'm almost grateful for it. Having to get to the bathroom regularly forces me to get out of bed. By the end of the week, as the flu fades into a lingering cough, I realize it's the first time in over a year that I haven't felt like my life is ruled by blood.

### IX.

A summer day in Kansas. The heat radiates upward from the concrete sidewalks as the sun beats down on my back. Deep in my abdomen, a sharp ache, the pressure of a dull knife cutting away my insides.

My friends wear strappy tank tops and loose dresses, clothes that are free and young. I'm wearing pants, in order to conceal the diaper-like pad. I'm thirteen today, but I still won't go near a tampon. My shirt is baggy, covering my bloated stomach.

My friends walk ahead of me, together on the sidewalk. I'm a pace behind them, as the tight, stabbing ache of cramps radiates upwards through my back and hips. I feel decades older than thirteen. Carrie and Sydney move lightly, sandals thwacking against the pavement,

purses swinging, strolling and strutting like girls who are discovering their bodies tend to do. But I am all too aware of my body today, and I walk slow and hunched and with my jaw clenched. These aren't even the worst cramps I've experienced; I'm able to walk and talk, I'm not throwing up. I should be grateful.

As we walk, they debate whether or not the cashier at the sandwich shop where we ate lunch was hitting on Carrie. I contribute "yeah's" and "well duh's", smiling wide and tight when they look back at me, asking my opinion. Sydney tells me that she thinks the other cashier was totally checking me out, too. I want to believe this more than anything. I'm officially a teenager today; I should be giggling and buying lip gloss that tastes like dessert. I bump into Sydney's side and say, "Yeah, right!" A flutter of giddy hope fills my chest. Maybe she's right? But a cramp seizes in my abdomen, and I'm reminded of how gross I feel. I push the thoughts of the pretty cashier out of my mind.

We stop in Hot Topic, a store known for its alternative clothing styles, and pick out ridiculous outfits for each other to try on. Sydney picks out a purple crop top for Carrie, and I pull a hoodie with cat ears for Sydney. Carrie grabs a skin-tight black and pink checkered dress for me. We take turns in the dressing rooms, not wanting to annoy the sales associates any more than we already are. I insist that Carrie and Sydney go first, since it's my birthday. They model their outfits, stepping out of the changing room already laughing. We are louder than the screamo playing over the speakers.

It's finally my turn, and I hesitate after locking the door behind me. My skin is blotchy in the mirror, and my hair looks limp with sweat. I slip the dress over my head and turn to see how it fits. I'm mortified. It's tight, so tight, and my pad juts out from behind me, an obvious oblong shape. I can't go outside in this. I yank off the dress and step out of the room with a shrug ready on my shoulders.

"Where's the dress?"

"Oh, c'mon, you have to do it, too!"

I play my shrug, and give them a small smile. “It didn’t fit,” I explain. “Let’s get going, my mom will be here soon.”

We decide to end our day in an ice cream shop, packed full of families on the steamy summer day. The AC chills the sweat on my skin, but does nothing for the heat of pain in my abdomen. After we order our ice creams, I ask my friends to grab mine, and I scurry off to the bathroom. I slip my shorts down my skinny legs, and I’m greeted by the sight of blood. It no longer nauseates me on sight; I can go out when I’m on my period.

## X.

Five years later I’m prescribed the pill. The relief isn’t instant, but it’s significant; no more joint pain, no more nausea. Pre-menstrual syndrome doesn’t dictate my emotions anymore. My back still aches, which makes sitting uncomfortable, but that’s the worst it gets. And I still have cramps, every month like clockwork, but at least now Tylenol makes a difference.

It isn’t that the pill has cured me, but it’s given me a step up. My body and I have an understanding now: it is free to bleed and hurt, but I’m going to live my life anyway. I’m not running through a field in white linen like you see in every tampon commercial, but I’m not ashamed either. During my first semester at Stephens College, I’m joining my friends for dinner when one of them references a tweet I had made earlier that day.

“What are you sick with?” asks Emily.

“I think I might have a cold,” I say, “Oh, and I’m on my period.”

Everyone grimaces or nods knowingly. Nine years ago, it was a secret I kept from my friends. Today, it’s just a fact.



# I HAVE BURNED HOLES IN MY MOUTH

By Jonné Pratt

I have burned  
holes in my mouth,  
where words should be.  
This is how they taught me to be  
woman.

i. bitter taste buds

I have  
lost myself  
  l o s t myself  
  lost myself  
in a forest fire of words  
that do not belong to me.  
You can have them back.  
This, is how they taught me to be  
  woman.

ii. return

We have  
neatly folded our sexuality  
our legs  
our minds  
underneath respectability.  
It is a shame that this  
is how they teach us to be  
  woman.

iii. the world cannot raise my daughter



# i USED TO THINK

By Jonné Pratt

I used to think babies came from  
swallowing watermelon seeds on Grandma's front porch.  
On Tracy, where I fell on a nail for the first time,  
taught me that things bleed, things break, things heal.  
Learned how to appreciate white rice,  
margarine, and no sugar that year.  
Where my aunt used to study Watchtower in the room next to  
Granny's with her husband.  
We never mentioned daddy's name,  
never spoke of his skin.  
Never cried because he was gone.  
Grandma didn't believe in mourning,  
or midnight.  
Didn't believe in Thanksgiving, or Valentine's Day.  
didn't believe in fairy tales.

That year, I learned to use my imagination,  
learned to look at a picture and make a person.

Grandma had skin smooth like dark chocolate,  
had language like Louisiana,  
had high cheek bones,  
thin lips, thick laugh.  
Grandma taught me how to tell stories.  
On 23rd and Jackson, in her wheelchair, I hung onto every word of  
her accent.  
Learned how to listen.  
Learned that things bleed, things break, things heal.

Grandma had hands like sausages,  
made us scratch her back at 3am,  
loved us.

Gave us Bible stories,  
and braids,  
taught us love.  
Taught us that  
things bleed, things break, things heal.

Hot wings. Apartment on Tracy. What was there is gone now.





# LIP-LOCKING LESSONS

By Tiana Williams

There were no fireworks, no magical sparks, no fireflies leaping from my belly into the night sky. Just lips, but I wanted to do it again.

I live for early mornings that lead to late nights; sweet nights that add flavor to the bland archive of my nineteen years of breathing. 7 AM every morning during the month of the summer solstice was, as my co-worker put it, “ungodly”. Being greeted by the half-smiles of middle schoolers also chipped away at my enthusiasm, but it was Friday, fieldtrip day, and the block party was that evening, so we all had something to march forward to.

I looked forward to seeing one coworker in particular, Ms. Marketta Taylor. Her “too cool for school” exterior was balanced by the flourishing field of affection she carried between her extended arms; this made the campers inevitably gravitate toward her. Those extended arms embraced me and I was caught up in her charm, coasted on waves of giddy excitement and clung to the flirtatious phrases we’d exchange. I liked her, just a little.

“Good morning,” Her eyes always said more than our environment would allow.

“Good morning,” I’d reply with a beaming smile.

“How’d you sleep?”

“I slept well, how’d you sleep?”

“Good, you ready for the zoo?”

“Not really.” We both laughed because we knew what was in store for us that day.

I was a “group leader” for the Alvin Ailey summer dance camp. Ailey Camp has been active in Kansas City for over 25 years. Each summer about 100 urban youth (at no cost to them) are exposed to the black arts culture and self-preservation. As a group leader I ensured safe and timely transitions from class to class and worked alongside three other group leaders (Marketta was one of the three), four professional dance instructors, and a host of other staff. The staff was like a family, woven with drama, and love. This was my first summer

working with Ailey Camp, so not only was I the youngest of the staff but also the newbie. By the end of the six week camp, I felt like a new square added to the middle of a warm quilt.

The biggest part of our job was to care. I often felt lost and unsure of how to interact with the kids because there is no manual to teach you how to care. I care, but how was I to show that? So I observed Marketta's manner with the kids. She always inquired about the kids' wellbeing: "How was your evening? Did you get enough sleep? How are you feeling today?" etc.

Standing at 5'1, she blended with the campers, but she asserted her authority. When her group was in the hall, you didn't hear a peep, and if a peep was made you'd hear her booming alto rising above and corralling all the noise. The kids respected her and rushed to her with open arms, eyes full of excitement and mouthfuls of laughter; they were a direct reflection of her inner child.

"Ms. Marketta, Ms. Marketta! I need to go to the restroom!" One of the campers was buzzing frantically in our ears and contorting her body in the 9-1-1 Pee Emergency pose. Marketta, still eating breakfast, gave me the "could you please" look. I placed my gentle hand on her shoulder,

"I'll take her."

School bathrooms have a distinct smell; the air is always stale with a hint of dead garbage and apple cinnamon air "freshener". This one was no different. As the girls filed into the stalls I would take a few glances into one of the two vertical, full-body mirrors mounted on the wall. First, I had to check out the face, and then turn around and take an ever-so discreet peek at my undeveloped, but still cute, booty. I wore my favorite green, thrifted athletic shorts with white contour lines and faint nail polish stains on the side. They allowed for free movement, and this was a must in case I was enlisted in another spontaneous twerk session with my fellow group leaders. My white Ailey Camp T-shirt was already starting to lose its vibrancy. My tiny

fro was relieved once I removed my black bowler hat. If it were up to me my hat would've stayed on all day, but rules.

Chaos is to be expected when working with middle school youth and getting them active, but chaos on field trip day looked different. It was sprawled across attendance sheets and stuffed in name tag bags. But once everything was sorted out, we loaded the buses. Of course my group was not paired with Marketta's so the short ride to the zoo was elongated. We divided and conquered the intimidatingly large Kansas City Zoo with our groups. My group didn't really see any animals. We got on the sky safari and had just enough time to eat before it was time to head back to the buses. I was not disappointed at all. Before I knew it, we were back at the school waving goodbye and reminding the campers about the block party. The moment those departing buses pulled off to take those half-smiles back home put full smiles on all of our faces.

Every afternoon we'd drag our exhausted spirits to the staff room and emotionally collapse onto each other, but Friday was a day of jubilee. Responses were short and concise, and all ears tuned in to our boss's instructions; we were ready to go. No one wasted time hopping into her car, but I was carless, and not super enthused about driving, so I waited for my mom to pick me up. Marketta's car was in the shop so she hitched a ride with a coworker.

I only had a few hours to get ready before the block party. The block party is an annual event hosted by Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. Each summer current and former Ailey Campers come out and celebrate art and life with the surrounding community. I hadn't been to the block party since I was an Ailey Camper years ago, so I was excited to go in the shoes of a staff member. I already knew exactly what I was wearing: The plain grey dress that said I care, but still chill, pretty and carefree. A colorful threaded necklace adorned my neckline, under eye circles were concealed and I smashed my afro once more with the black bowler hat. I was ready to turn heads and show

everyone that I didn't look half bad outside of my work attire.

My phone beeped, and the screen illuminated. In my heart I hoped it was Marketta, and it was.

“My car is out!!!”

“Yay!!! That's good, I know you're glad.”

“Yep, so I'll see you at the block party.”

“Ok, see you then!”

My early arrival to the block party was intentional; I wanted to assist with setup, and a small part of me didn't want everyone to see me, a nineteen year old, get dropped off by my mama. The sun was not shy and seemed to find me no matter where I stood. Shady spots underneath the trees were my sanctuary. At first it seemed it took forever for people to show up, but soon the parking lot was filled with campers, their families, and the surrounding community.

We mixed, mingled, munched and marveled. I was having a great time but was a little antsy as I anticipated Marketta's arrival. I peeked around corners and my eyes swept up and down the block. There she was, walking toward the entrance of the lot. She wore a purple polo shirt with a yellow Polo logo, yellow shorts and shoes with a dash of yellow. Her hair was pulled back into a low pony puff reaching toward her neck, curls peeking through. She was with two other women, whom I assumed were some form of family, but I didn't ask. I acted as though I didn't see her when she walked in; I didn't want it to be obvious that I was waiting for her. We finally stopped faking the fonk and said hello to each other. Our eyes told the secret of our excitement as mine traced her body and hers glazed over mine. We were taken by each other's presence as if we hadn't known each other for more than a moment, but I guess seventeen days in the summertime isn't much more than a moment.

We enjoyed the festivities. I had more fun watching her face glow with excitement as she watched the drill team perform. She was so animated and comfortable with the natural rhythm of her soul;

I wanted to get closer and learn to sway my hips like she did. She floated through the crowd, sprinkling her charm everywhere and leaving a trail of her perfume for me to follow. I must admit I felt lost when she wasn't near me. I would search the beautiful cluster of melanin until I detected her browns, and then I could breathe again. I felt like we were at the event, not as coworkers but as a couple. I wanted our other coworkers to speculate and the campers to give us side eyes as we unabashedly flirted.

“So, what are you doing after this?”

“Nothing, probably just go home and chill.”

“Well, my car is fixed, so you can hang out with us if you want.”

My words stopped working, so I just smiled and gave an eager nod.

We continued to mingle and dance. I finally met up with my mama and little brothers and introduced Marketta. The party was winding down and people were starting to leave. I was waiting for confirmation from Marketta that she still wanted to hang out.

“Hey I'm about to leave.” I really wasn't ready to leave, not without her.

“What, I thought we were hanging out, what happened?”

“Oh, right, sure”

Yes, yes, yes! My night would not end in deathly boredom, and I could save the “No Friends Blues” for another time.

I never really realize how bad my social skills are until I'm isolated in a social situation and become the most awkward human being ever. The two women she was with were her younger sister Katie and her mama's girlfriend Mimi. I offered awkward hellos and hopped in the car. Marketta held a Black and Mild cigar to her lips; puff puff and the car took off. We pulled up to an apartment complex down the street from the block party—still familiar grounds. Cars parked on both sides, and neighborhood kids overflowed back and forth from the playground. Mothers in hijabs hugged tattered door frames, glued their eyes to their young. Locs and braids got re-twisted

on splintered wood patios and cracked concrete porch steps pulsed with life. Though it was my first visit, I knew this place. I admired the architecture; though aging and neglected, the cracks and wrinkles told stories just like the people who lived there. We'd come to see a young sistah named Memory, the mother of Marketta's niece. I coyly introduced myself and claimed a spot on the step next to Marketta.

"Well hello there, Ms. Poetic Justice, looking like you just won a poetry slam." Memory read my aesthetic quite well. "Ketta, this your girlfriend?"

"No, she's my coworker."

"Did you just nod your head yes?" Katie thought she saw my head nod, or maybe she just wanted to stir something.

"No, oh no, no," I had to refute quickly.

"Don't say it like that." Marketta gave me a look.

"She probably not even gay," Memory said.

"Well, she bi or something, she made a face." The very observant Katie was reading me too well.

"Are you?" Marketta blew smoke from her mouth and looked at me.

"Well I wouldn't say that but—"

"But you like girls."

I dropped my head, "yes".

After that brief "outing," Memory continued talking, her neck-length locs swaying as she moved her head to add emphasis. My lips rarely parted. I sat; I listened. Every now and again Marketta would check in.

"You ok?"

"Yeah I'm fine."

"What are you thinking about?" Her favorite question.

"Nothing." My favorite response

"Mmm, don't be thinking, dang I could've just went home."

I laughed because that thought did creep across my mind.

We went inside after awhile. Katie and Memory sat on the small sofa, Mimi sat in a chair to the side, and Marketta sat in the corner chair. Seeing that there was no more sitting room, I stood awkwardly for a beat, and then I prepared to sit on the floor.

Marketta had a generous offer: “You can sit on my lap.”

I’m pretty self-conscious about my weight so of course I refused. Thankfully there was another chair in the kitchen; Marketta took that one.

“Yeah, let ‘No-ass-at-all’ sit there.” Katie was referring to me as I sat down, but it took me a few to catch on. Everyone chuckled a little, and I was just ready to blend with the chair and wall.

“Did you hear what she said, she called you ‘No-ass-at-all.’” I made a face of disapproval, but really didn’t care.

“Stand-up, stand-up let’s see.”

Memory’s request was surprising but I obliged. I stood, they looked; my dress draped over my figure, so I pulled it closer to show my little booty bump better.

“Oh, see, you got a little something back there.”

I cracked a little smile.

“Well, she don’t need ass anyway, cuz she got these.” Marketta lifted her boobs. She had my back and thought I had nice boobs. My world was quite all right.

The sun was down, and streetlights were on. Words were tossed back and forth, I listened and tried to piece things together without backstories. My mouth never opened but my mind roamed. I overthought every tiny thing I did, cross my legs like this, sit up straight, nod my head every now and then, I was making myself uncomfortable trying to “act cool”.

My phone was my refuge. I would look through old texts or scroll through social media just so I wouldn’t be sitting there doing nothing.

“I see u.”

“○○○○□”

“What does that mean?”

“4 circles, 1 square”

“???”

“Y’all are circles, I’m a square”

“I figured that’s what u meant. u are perfect just the way u are, even I have a little square in me. Just be u.”

She always knows exactly what to say. I wasn’t the only one who needed to loosen up. After stewing in one’s reality for so long eyes may start to mistake sober for somber, and that’s when it’s time for a shot. Memory pulled out a pint of Peach Amsterdam and a cup of juice to chase. Marketta, Katie, Memory, Me, Mimi, repeat. This rotation continued until the bottle was dry.

We. Needed. More.

I didn’t feel anything until I stood up. I didn’t walk, but glided, to the car. Marketta opened the door for me, and as I sat in the backseat I whispered to her, “I’m feeling it.” She smiled.

“Well I’m a little alky so it takes a lot for me to feel it.”

Mimi drove, Marketta sat shotgun, and Memory sat between me and Katie. We went around the corner to the liquor store, penny pitched for another pint then went to grab some Church’s Chicken. I had money and was a little hungry but I didn’t want to be bothered with the process of getting out of the car, ordering, paying for it blah, so I stuck to the “oh I’m fine, I’m not hungry” routine.

Back in Memory’s living room the pint was passed in the same order as before. Memory’s daughter started playing her Wii dance game, and soon after we were all taking turns. This put me in another position to be scrutinized because my dancing is very hit and miss, but I didn’t care because my inhibitions had a looser grip on me and I was living. Marketta was really into it. I recorded a video of her doing the moves with so much force and precision. I realized she dances very well and she loves it; she lives through body movement. When it was my turn, I fumbled through the moves awkwardly, but she cheered

me on, yelling out the next moves and breaking down the counts. The next round was a duet; she guided me through. Every time our bodies touched my heart fluttered. I don't remember what song we danced to, but I didn't want it to end. The bottle was empty and the four circles were not faded. Marketta dropped the dreaded question on my lap:

"Are you ready to go home?" No, are you ready to take me home, that's what I wanted to say, but I stuck to the, "Sure, if you're ready."

We poured into the car. Mimi drove, Marketta sat in front, and Katie and I were in the back.

"Where do you live again?" Marketta asked.

"39th and Topping, over by Harvesters."

"Mimi, you know where that is?"

"Nope."

"Tiana, are you really ready to go home?"

"No, not really."

"Ok, cool, she not going home."

As the car turned in the opposite direction, I shifted into a new level of comfort and excitement. The breeze roared through the windows as we coasted down the highway. We pulled up to another complex, and Marketta and I talked outside while Mimi and Katie went in.

"So, you didn't pick up on me liking girls?"

"I did, and I was hoping it would come out through our texts but I didn't wanna just ask."

I already knew Marketta was gay just by the way she presented herself, and she didn't hesitate to tell me after our first staff training.

"Oh, I like girls by the way."

The truth serum was working its magic and transformed me from a silent wall flower to a tell-all autobiography. I told her about the first time I legitimately got drunk, and about this guy I was obsessed with. We moved from topic to topic and time was not a factor. When Katie and Mimi came out, we hopped back in the car, and we were off again.

This time Marketta drove. We stopped at another liquor store, and passed the bottle once more. We pulled up to another house, but this time everyone stayed in the car except Katie. I felt good, I felt great. I leaned up against Marketta's seat and ran my fingers up and down her neck. She leaned back and looked at me with longing eyes. I continued to finger draw on her neck and fixed my eyes on hers. I was enjoying myself, tuned out all background noise and focused on her. Her lips parted.

"You make me wanna kiss you right now. Can I, just a little?" I nodded my head yes. She leaned forward, and pressed her lips against my half puckered lips. It only lasted for a second or two. I smiled afterward; that was my first kiss. There were no fireworks, no magical sparks, no fireflies leaping from my belly into the night sky. Just lips, but I wanted to do it again.

For the rest of the night I kept thinking about it. Did I do it wrong? Did she enjoy it? I wanted a redo because it didn't go how I imagined. She didn't know that was my first time kissing anyone, and I didn't want her to know. I was embarrassed to be a nineteen-year-old who had never smacked lips with another person; it's not that I didn't want to but the opportunity never presented itself, until that night. I thought our lips were supposed to be interlocked and I probably didn't pucker enough, I was so worried that she wouldn't want to kiss me again but so happy that it finally happened.

We kissed again later that night, and it was worse than the first time. I tried to do the interlocking thing, failed lip fumble, but at least her lips wanted mine.

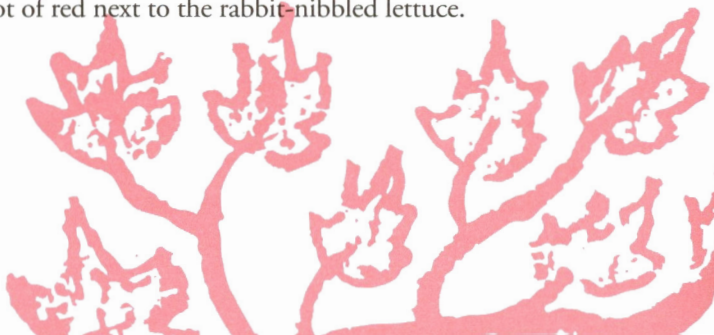
A month or so later, on another one of our drunken escapades, I revealed to her that she was the first and only person I'd kissed. I was worried that she wouldn't believe me, that my inexperience would turn her off. She was honored to be the first and "best" in her opinion. Our kisses got better, more intense, and more natural, and now there are always fireworks. Mwah!

# BRIAR ROSE

By Rachel Cooper

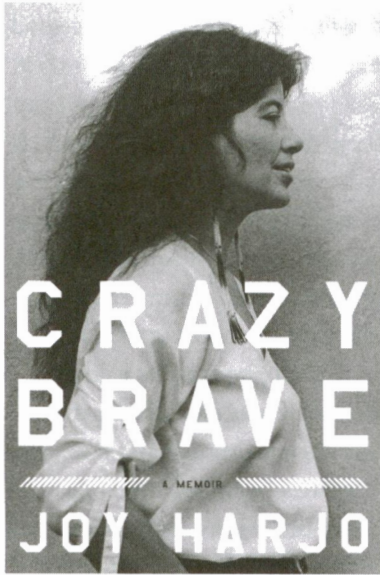
Hot. The tomatoes in Mom's garden lift their shiny red faces to the sun as I try to keep my bare feet off the scalding sidewalk in front of our house. I alternate between walking on my heels and the balls of my feet. I'm five or six. Mom and I have left the tulips unattended in the backyard in favor of the pink and white roses climbing up the side of the porch. I wonder if the tulips will be mad at us for abandoning them, but I don't wonder for too long because the grass is lush and green between my toes, and the pear tree is taller than I remember. I squat near Mom and pretend to help with the roses, but really she trims, and I watch. Once she holds out a pink bloom for me to smell. It smells like my sister's Burberry Brit perfume but better. She warns me to look out for thorns, but how am I supposed to know what's grass and what's a thorn?

I am twirling, mesmerized at how the sun turns brown hair blonde, when I step on something sharp. I sit on the ground and examine my foot. A rose thorn pierces between my first two toes. I grit my teeth and pluck it out. Bright red blood trickles from my toes down to my heel and drips onto a fresh blade of grass. At first I am frightened at the sight of my own blood, then fascinated. I watch it drip, drip, drip, turning the green grass brown before I remember that blood means I'm hurt. The perfect red stripe is smeared by the time I hobble across the yard to Mom. She helps me up the stairs and into the house. My foot stings when she cleans it. I stop bleeding. Suddenly it seems miserably hot outside instead of gloriously hot. I go out back and sit by the tulips, a riot of red next to the rabbit-nibbled lettuce.



# A CONVERSATION WITH JOY HARJO

By Rachel Cooper



Joy Harjo is the author of eight books of poetry, including *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* and *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*. Her memoir *Crazy Brave* won the PEN USA Literary Award for Creative Non-Fiction and the American Book Award. She is the recipient of the 2015 Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets for proven mastery in the art of poetry; a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the William

Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. In 2014 she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. She is Professor of English and American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

**Rachel Cooper:** Your first volume of poetry was *The Last Song*. Tell us about your early writing career, pre-*The Last Song*. Was that your first project or did you have other things you wrote before it?

**Joy Harjo:** That was a chapbook that came out while I was an undergraduate in my last year. It took me five years to get through school because I changed my major from studio art to creative writing. I started publishing in the student magazine called *Thunderbird*. It was an undergraduate student magazine, and my first poems were published there. Nothing I published there ever wound up in my chapbook, but that was the first place I published. There was a very lively literary community. There was a feminist magazine

called *Best Friends*. There were a lot of readings, and it was a very good writing program, so there was a lot of activity there.

**RC:** Tell us about your first poem. Where did the idea come from?

**JH:** The first poem I ever wrote was in eighth grade when our teacher came in and told everybody to write a poem, and we thought, “How do we do that?” I had read poetry and liked poetry, but to actually write it was another endeavor. She never gave us anything we could hold onto. She didn’t run us through any exercises; she just told us to write a poem, and then later she decided there was an anthology that she wanted to enter her students in, but we were in the dark. We sat there and never talked to each other. I wrote a poem for that, but it didn’t get in the anthology. My short story made it in and was awarded honorable mention, but I have no recollection of what either one of them was.

When I was a little older, I wrote acid rock songs for an Indian band. The next poem I wrote was a horrible limerick to comment on being bored in class in eleventh grade, but that was the extent of it until my first semester at University of New Mexico. I was getting involved with a guy who turned out to be one of the major Native American poets, so I was around it, and I wrote a few poems that were silly. There wasn’t much there, but I think for me a crucial moment was hearing other poets—hearing them read. I remember hearing Anne Waldman read, and also hearing and reading Native American Poets and finding their work. I was watching a TV show one night about a poet healer, although the show didn’t say this person was a poet healer. This person in their tribe sang the poem, and what was astounding was that they became what they were singing. That stayed with me.

After that I just started writing poems. I realized after reading and

listening that I could write about what was going on around me. That realization was huge because up until that time, I really believed that most of the poets were in England and were old white men—at least that’s what we were reading in school. There was Emily Dickinson, but she was a strange recluse; she was a lone woman’s voice. Although there were some others—Elizabeth Barrett Browning and a few other women—overall the landscape for poetry was mostly from the shores of England or the East Coast.

**RC:** You are a well-established writer with many published works and esteemed awards. How do you feel you have changed and grown as a writer since you first started writing?

**JH:** When you engage with a discipline, you can’t help but grow with it, whatever discipline that is. Writing certainly teaches me to listen, but it’s an ongoing journey; I’m always learning something new. It’s a journey about reading poetry from all over the world and learning from those poems and those places. My own poetry changed from being one-image-driven, which had a lot to do with being a young single mother, to more complex. At one point I got into prose poetry and being very prosaic through longer poems. It’s been a journey including poetry and music, but what’s compelling is that there’s always something to understand about language and the power of words. There’s always a universe of new directions and knowledge. It’s exciting.

**RC:** In your reading here at Stephens College you said, “Maybe all artists are activists.” Why is activism through art so important?

**JH:** Artists are usually a little ahead of everyone because they’re going into the space of the imagination, which is where everything comes from for all of us. Even a child is imagined somehow by its parents.

Artists are a little bit ahead in consciousness, in creation. I think of activism as a part of the imagination. It's the ability to imagine a world with justice, with equal rights for women, with enough food for everyone, with the ability to have a table and space instead of being in a boat sinking somewhere in the Mediterranean because you're trying to find a home.

**RC:** I'm interested in your work as a memoirist and poet. As a memoirist and poet myself, I've often heard from my professors and from fellow writers that the two genres go hand-in-hand, and often writers who dabble in one genre feel comfortable with the other. Do you agree?

**JH:** I never really thought of poets and memoirists. I usually thought that writing fiction is closer to writing memoir because you're using similar narrative structures, but you're right—there are a lot of poets who write memoir because it's easier to give yourself permission; after all, it's your life. Memory is a funny thing, and memory changes with time. Memories, in a way, have their own lives and assert themselves in different ways, at different times. You're probably right that poets would be more likely to write memoir because of the permission. I don't know that for sure, but it makes sense.

**RC:** Tell us about your writing process for your new book of poetry, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*. Where did the poems come from? What challenges or surprises did you face?

**JH:** I wrote those poems over a period of time. It was quite some time from *Map to the Next World*, which was my last full book of poetry. I accumulated some poems between that period of the last book, and I think some of the new poems in *How We Became Human*, a book of new and selected works, were not quite there yet. I went through

a period where I really couldn't write poems and couldn't find them. Sometimes things are there, and sometimes they're not. I was also working on other things. I did the memoir, *Crazy Brave*, and then poetry returned to me. I wasn't sure poetry was going to return in the way it did, but it did come back, and I took some of those poems that weren't working and totally revised them. They all come out of the idea of conflict resolution and the question of, "How do you move about in this world?" That was the organizing principle, and the poems seemed to fit with that question as the organizing theme.

**RC:** You mentioned in your reading that you are working on another memoir. Will you tell us more about that? Are you working on anything else new?

**JH:** I got a contract, a Guggenheim Fellowship, to work on another memoir. It's about activism and the Native rights movements seven generations back and maybe even looking seven generations forward. It might be a historical memoir. I'm not sure how it's going to work yet. I'm working on new music. I'm also working on getting the book together for *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light*, my one-woman show. Priscilla Page, who's working on it with me, sent me interview questions that are taking a while. We have articles and essays by different people in the Native theater program, so I've been working on that. I will also be teaching at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville starting in the fall.

**RC:** Who are you reading right now? Who should we be reading right now?

**JH:** Right now, my last semester at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I'm not teaching, but I'm working with a Palestinian graduate student. It has been great for both of us to compare

Palestinian and Native works. The project is focused on memoir, so I'm reading Edward Said's memoir. I love talking with her about it, and reading through these memoirs and looking at colonization and personhood. You asked what I've been reading—I've been reading Palestinian memoirs. (Laughs).

**RC:** I attended a panel of publishers recently at a conference in Minneapolis in which three representatives from literary presses—Graywolf, Coffee House, and Milkweed Editions—stressed the importance of diversity in publishing. Do you think that we are seeing an increase in diversity as far as works being published, especially poetry?

**JH:** That's hard to say. My point of view could be skewed because I work in that field, but there was quite a controversy last year because most people being published are male writers, and *The New Yorker* published an issue on male writers—all white male writers. If you look at the theater, very few women get their plays produced, and it makes me wish that I had started this play (*Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light*) with a male name because I feel like being a female is often a handicap. There appears to be more diversity, certainly when you look at Pulitzer Prize winners, and even getting the Wallace Stevens award. No Native has ever received that award. In the history of that award only three women and one black man have won. I think it's the nature of the world, though the world is changing.

**RC:** What advice would you give to emerging writers?

**JH:** I remember being told that I shouldn't publish anything for twenty years, but I don't believe that. Now there's a diversity in magazines and ways to publish, especially with the internet, that's blown open. But it's not really about publishing, it's about taking care



of your craft. I run into so many students and young writers who love to talk about writing, but then they don't write. It's important to write, to listen, to read, and to spend a lot of time in quiet. A lot of it is writing and practicing your craft. Don't compare—that's one of the biggest things. You cannot compare yourself with other writers; everyone is different. Your work is different too. I didn't even realize how revolutionary my poetry was. I wrote the poetry that pleased me and found my own way, but it wasn't without struggle. *American Poetry Review* turned down the poems that became a major part of *She Had Some Horses*. That book didn't win any awards, and those poems were rejected. I was turned down for all kinds of things, and now the book has become a classic. You have to believe in what you're doing, and sometimes you're the only one believing in it. Just take care of your gift.

# ARTIST'S STATEMENT

By Kitiara McGuire-Stiggins

I have been excited about the reveal of this year's theme for several years, because while I have played many roles on *Harbinger's* staff, the opportunity I have most looked forward to is this: designing the cover and layout for *Harbinger* 2016. When the unifying concept "Girls Like Us" was chosen, I was thrilled. We took inspiration from the subject matter, the recurring imagery, and the journey from girlhood to womanhood.

The accompanying illustrations of women's bodies and natural elements reflect the evocative descriptions of women's lives and the metaphors we find ourselves using to ground us and connect us to nature. The illustration medium of crayon and the resulting texture are reflective of the earliest days in our lives, while our spot color references the tumultuous relationship many women go through with the many shades of pink.

This shade of pink is also drawn from our cover art. I was inspired by Kirsten Izzett's "The Lisbon Girls" photos from the moment I first viewed them. As soon as the staff decided on "Girls Like Us" for this year's theme, I knew that her work would be an excellent feature, not only on our full-color pages, but on our cover as well. Being able to combine her photography with my illustrations was an exciting opportunity and a great honor.

Girls like us are talented, brilliant, and tenacious. Our journeys are messy, beautiful, and memorable. Designing and illustrating *Harbinger* 2016 has been an incredible journey for me. I hope you will find your experience with it just as illuminating.

Kitiara McGuire-Stiggins  
2016 Graphic Designer



# DRAGONFLY



# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



## MAYA ALPERT

Maya Alpert is *Harbinger's* 2016 Editor-in-Chief. A senior English major, Alpert recently completed her undergraduate thesis, which examines contemporary adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. She is the secretary of Sigma Tau Delta and presented her meta-fiction piece "Write What You Know, Or Don't" at the society's National Convention in Minneapolis. Her passions include editing, reading, and writing about celebrity chefs.



## HEATHER BEGER

Heather Beger is a senior creative writing major with a minor in digital filmmaking. She is the treasurer of Sigma Tau Delta. Her previously published script "Snowman" was selected to be read by Potluck Productions in Kansas City, Missouri. This is her third year on the *Harbinger* staff and her fourth publication in the magazine.



## HALEY COBURN

Haley Coburn is a sophomore English major at Stephens College and an A.V.I.D. tutor for Columbia Public Schools. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and presented her poetry collection, “Daughters,” at the 2016 National Convention in Minneapolis, MN. She is an Assistant Editor for *Harbinger*. This is her first publication.



## RACHEL COOPER

Rachel Cooper is a senior creative writing major, vice president of Sigma Tau Delta and Special Projects / Marketing Coordinator for the magazine. Cooper’s poem “Jazz,” featured in the 2015 edition of *Harbinger*, was recognized for the Donald E. Pittman Prize for Poetry. This is Cooper’s third year on the *Harbinger* staff and second publication in the magazine.



## TIFFANY CORLEY

Tiffany Corley is a third-year physics major working towards a Ph.D. in quantum physics. At 42 years of age, she is proof that it's never too late to accomplish your wildest dreams.



## HILLARY GORDON

Hillary Gordon was born and raised in Southern California. She currently lives in Columbia, Missouri, where she works full time as a disc jockey and program director for a local radio station. She is working toward a bachelor's degree in creative writing.



## KIRSTEN IZZETT

Kirsten Izzett is a digital filmmaking major. She has played soccer at Stephens for four years and has been on the AMC All-Academic Team for three years. Izzett has also been involved in the Citizen Jane Film Festival in different core positions. After her May 2016 graduation, she is moving to New York City to pursue a degree in television.



## KITIARA MCGUIRE -STIGGINS

Kitiara McGuire-Stiggins is a senior creative writing and graphic design student at Stephens. She has done design and copy edit work for Unbound Book Festival and Citizen Jane Film Festival. She is Communication Director of the Athena Chapter of Mortar Board National Senior Honor Society. This is her third year on staff and her third publication in *Harbinger*.



## VICTORIA PATRICK

Victoria Patrick is a sophomore creative writing major and women's studies minor. She has been making up stories since before she was able to write. Victoria enjoys writing creative nonfiction, young adult fiction, and poetry. She is involved with S.L.A.T.E. and works at the Children's School at Stephens College.



## JONNÉ PRATT

Jonné Pratt is a sophomore fashion marketing and management major with a minor in graphic design. She is the president of the sophomore class and one of three founding members of the Stephens College poetry collective, Poets of Infinity. This is her first publication in *Harbinger*.



## RACHEAL RHEA

A native Texan, Racheal Rhea is a junior majoring in creative writing at Stephens College. She is involved in Poets of Infinity and performs at their poetry slams. Live Poets Society of New Jersey published her poem “I Find This Oddly Comforting” in 2012, and her poem “Bottled Collection of Rocky Seas” is featured in this year’s *Harbinger*. She plans to write for video games or television.



## SHELLY ROMERO

Shelly Romero is a junior English major with aspirations of becoming an editor and writer in the world of commercial and literary publishing. Her on-campus involvement includes serving as President of Sigma Tau Delta, Academic Excellence Chair of Kappa Delta Sorority, and campus tour guide. This is her second year on staff and her third publication in *Harbinger*.



## LIVVY RUNYON

Livvy Runyon is a filmmaker, writer, photographer, and avid traveler originally from Rolla, Missouri. She has filmed documentaries in Haiti and Guatemala and recently completed her senior capstone film, *Home* (2016), a short narrative filmed on the family farm where she spent her childhood. She will graduate in May 2016 with a B.F.A. in Digital Filmmaking and a minor in creative writing.



## JAMIE WARREN

Jamie Warren is a junior creative writing major and film minor. Jamie is the vice president of The Human Experience, Stephens College's gender and sexuality alliance. This is Jamie's third year being published in *Harbinger* and second year on staff.



## TIANA WILLIAMS

Tiana Williams is a sophomore double majoring in creative writing and film. She is vice president of the campus poetry collective, Poets of Infinity. She loves to read and write poetry. Her piece “Weighing the Heavy Weight” is inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks’ poems and explores the ballad form.



## ALLISON WRIGHT

Allison Wright is getting a degree in social work from Moberly Area Community College. She is currently taking a year off to serve communities throughout the North Central United States through AmeriCorps. She is from Columbia, Missouri, and has been writing most of her life. She is excited to have her work published in the town she loves.

