



# Hedera helix 2013 Vol. XI

**Literary Journal of Sigma Kappa Delta**  
The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges

The background of the cover is a black and white photograph of ivy leaves climbing a weathered wooden fence. The ivy is dense on the left side and more sparse on the right, where the vertical wooden planks of the fence are more visible. The title text is overlaid on the right side of the cover.

# Hedera helix 2013 Vol. XI

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**Literary Journal of Sigma Kappa Delta**  
**The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges**





## ***Purpose of Sigma Kappa Delta***

Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing. ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for

- Scholarships
- Awards
- Leadership
- Competition
- Publication
- Travel
- National Conferences
- Networking

Access [www.english2.org](http://www.english2.org) for complete eligibility requirements.

*Hedera helix* – the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ, symbolizing resilience and individual growth. In keeping with the Greek spelling, we use the lower case “h” for helix.

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### ***Editor's Note***

This is an exciting year for the *Hedera helix*. For the first time we are able to put the runners-up for all writing categories in our literary journal. We hope the winners were pleasantly surprised in Portland, Oregon, at the National Convention when they received a monetary prize as well as the recognition of their peers.

As SKD continues to grow, the opportunities for our members increase. This is why we encourage all SKD members to take part in the writing and photography contests. The level of talent in our organization is unparalleled.

The entry deadline is **November 30, 2013**. We hope to see next year's winners in Savannah, Georgia.

Kat Padilla





## ***2013 SKD Scholarship/Award Winners***

### **Scholarships**

#### ***Dr. William Johnson Transfer Scholarship***

Caitlin A. Maddox  
Seminole State College  
Upsilon Alpha

#### ***Dr. Don Perkins Service Scholarship***

Latonia White-Jessie  
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Chi Delta

#### ***Dr. Susan LeJuene Service Scholarship***

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Northeast Alabama Community College  
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### **Chapter Awards**

#### ***Literary Magazine/Journal***

Compass  
Omega Delta  
Tarrant County College-Southeast Campus

#### ***Chapter Activity***

Books for Boys  
Gamma Delta  
University of Wisconsin – Rock County





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## Triple Play

It was Christmas morning when I felt the first stab wound. Do you know what those are? Those quick, sharp pains deep in the center of your gut? I think they're omens that something bad is going to happen. And something did, I just didn't know what at the time.

I'm sitting on the floor next to Rick's dad, and we're watching everyone tear into their presents. Wrapping paper is fluttering everywhere, and the air is punctuated with, "Awesome!" and "Where did you find this?" and "This is great!"

I am a Christmas nerd. Not for the presents, but for people. At Christmas, our schedules open up. We go out of our way to make time for family, friends, and strangers on the street. We all become the exception, and that's a good feeling.

I like this house, mainly because the man who's sitting next to me built it with his own hands. And what hands they are — long fingers, with veins flexing against his skin on the top of his palm. There is strength in those hands. How many homes has he built with them? How many families are now sitting just like we are, in a house he made, so they could have a home?

He looks over at me and says, "Listen, you take care of my son."

I look from him to Rick, who is guffawing, and sure, he's put on a little weight because of my good cooking, and I snicker. "I will."

That's when he takes my hand and says, "Just take care of him."

It's how he's looking at me, like he wants to tell me something, but the words are too far from the boat to the net. Then he's squeezing my hand, and I find myself bobbing my head.

"Okay. I will. I promise."

He kisses me on the forehead. "Merry Christmas."

And that's the stab wound. I want to take him by the shoulders. "Tell me," I want to say. I want to demand that he explain that sore in my gut. Instead, I kiss him back on his forehead and wish him a Merry Christmas.

That pain never goes away over the next couple of years. It sits and hides, but when his name comes up, it flares up again, the way old people sense in their knees when bad weather's coming. I sense in my gut something bad for him.

Doctors tell us he just has low testosterone, so he starts taking injections every day. His weight falls from him. Each time I see him, he is smaller and smaller until I think he will simply become invisible. We'll still hear him, and there will be an indentation in the seat of his favorite chair, but he'll be gone.

His health declines. He has to close his contracting business because he starts making major mistakes. Paint colors, wrong flooring, screwing kitchen cabinets shut. Then he keeps getting lost, so we take away his keys.

Finally, a trip to Mayo Clinic reveals moderate dementia and something even worse. Big Rick has MS, and it's already in the advanced stage, which means there's nothing we can do for him. I run to the closet and find the picture of him holding his grandsons. He's grinning in the photograph and completely oblivious to the fact that my son is using his mustache for monkey bars. I think about the way he'd take them out of the stroller in a store and carry them because he just had to. He couldn't stand not holding





them. He can't do that anymore. He can't hold on.

Little by little he forgets us. There is a sense of panic always present in his eyes. I want to soothe him. Tell him I'll remember enough for the both of us. In his mind, he is nine years old. He is stuck in a year of his life, and he must get home before he gets in trouble. There's a baseball game next week against their rival team, and he's in love with a girl who lives next door. His grandmother is still alive and babysits him after school. He's worried about his report card coming home that Friday and he knows where to hide it from his dad.

I wasn't there in that part of his life. Neither was his son. So we are just nice people who give him Dr. Pepper and help him find all his favorite shows on TV Land. He knows we love him; he just doesn't know why.

He can't walk anymore. He's in a diaper, and we have to trick him into eating, just like a child. The disease takes its toll on him and on all of us. When we come to visit, we think we are prepared, but we never are. It's always a shock to see this man, who was once so strong and capable, reduced to this shell with a voice.

Our last visit, we came through the door, and he was lying on the floor.

"He's been like that for hours," his wife says. "I keep putting him back in his chair, but he keeps laying himself down. So I'm letting him."

I place my bag by the door and lie down beside him. I'm on my side facing him, and he's lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. I take his hand, and he looks at me, fear replacing the blankness in his eyes.

"It's all right. You're safe." I stroke his hand and grieve for the loss of all that strength. I think of his sons and how he taught them to make things with their hands. I think of how Rick can build a car from scratch, all from what these hands once taught him.

I think about how smooth his hands are now. So different from those callused, work-hardened palms and fingers he used to command. Then I think about how sticky disease is. It gets everywhere and makes things cling in the craziest places. Like when I light a candle, every time, I will remember how he ran a bubble bath for me, complete with lit candles throughout the bathroom, when his son and I had just walked in from a long road trip. That memory is stuck to the candles in my home and on my sons' birthday cakes, and it always will be. And then the irony digs in. His forgetting, his disease, has made every memory I have of him stick permanently in my mind.

When we leave, he is sitting in the recliner, and when I reach the door, I can't help myself. I have to see if he'll remember our little tradition. I turn my hand on the knob, ready to bolt if he doesn't remember. Ready to hide my tears from him.

"Say it," I demand.

He slowly turns his head from the TV, and when his eyes meet mine, they are blank.

I pray in my head. "Please, God. Please let him tell me one more time."

"Say it."

And then, in the back of those beautiful brown eyes, I see a light come on. His face lights up, and he is so happy to see me.

"I love you," he slurs. Each word is forced out, like he's learning a new language.

My heart almost jumps through my nose. I want to throw my hands up and do the happy dance,







squeaking and whooping. But he's remembering our tradition, and I have to stick to the script. So I plaster a nonchalant grin on my face and smirk.

"I know. You can't help it. I love you more."

His grin splits a little wider and then slowly dims with that light in his eyes. He turns his head back to the TV, and I have lost him again. I want to break something. I want to shake him and shake him. I want to yell at him to come back, to tell him how much we have missed him and how much we love him.

Behind him, his wife stands at the mouth of the hall, and she is holding her hands over her mouth. Tears are streaming down her face, and I have to leave. He hasn't spoken to me since then. I keep hoping, but I have said goodbye.

At night when he is on my mind, and I am drifting in-between this world and my dreams, I visit where he has gone. I am in the bleachers cheering on a sweaty little boy with a baseball jersey. He's at bat, and dirt is streaked down the sides of his face and his uniform. He turns and looks over his shoulder, smiling and waving when he sees me.

I cheer the loudest.

*Martha Rose Gragido*





## Laugh and Learn

Being a mother has taught me countless lessons. Some of those lessons were terrifying to learn, such as how to dislodge a penny from a baby's throat, and some of those lessons were equally as memorable but not quite so intense, such as how to change the mother of all dirty diapers in a department store bathroom with no changing station. Before having kids, I could walk around upright in a generally graceful manner, carry a plate full of dinner to my dining room table, and drive my car hundreds of miles without incident; after having kids, I can now carry my dinner plate, a jar of baby food, a bowl of macaroni, and a drink through the kitchen, while stepping over a baby gate to the dining room table; I can drive my car while listening to Dora the Explorer in the CD player and search for a dropped pacifier in the backseat; and I can also hold a baby on one hip while helping another child use a public restroom without touching a single dirty, grimy thing in there. Seriously, I could join Cirque du Soleil with the balance I've acquired from motherhood. These are lessons that did not cost me any tuition money to sit in a classroom and learn. However, all life lessons do not happen in a complete moment of clarity with a choir singing in the background. I am simply trying to survive my life with kids while maintaining some sense of sanity.

Some lessons my children have taught me are more profound in their scope and meaning in my life. They have taught me patience in a way that would have been inexplicable to me before I became a mother. Patience when, despite his insistence that he is allergic to carrots, I try to explain nutrition to my son; patience when trying to understand my daughter's baby talk; patience when rocking an inconsolable infant to sleep: the list is infinite.

Learning something in an academic setting is easier to comprehend. Knowledge is given to you via lecture, textbooks, group work, and assignments. This type of learning, the taking in of new information and adding it to what is already in the brain, is more common, I think than an actual life lesson, a lesson that forever changes a person's perspective on a familiar situation. Learning something new in life is more complicated and requires an open mind. One major lesson that parenting has taught me it is that I don't know nearly as much as I think, that I am actually completely clueless, and that, despite any schooling I might have, I've still got a lot to learn.

In my quest to be a full-time mother, wife, student, and employee, I've spent the last four years crying buckets about the amount of time I spend away from my children to do it all. Honestly, if my husband wasn't in my life, pushing me to fulfill my dream of graduating and teaching, I might have given in to the feeling of defeat that envelopes me sometimes and quit. But, I am committed to finishing my degree, and therefore, I just empty the buckets of tears after my kids are in bed and finish my homework.

One day, a day that promised to be a long one for me, including working the lunch shift and then heading straight to class, I was driving my five year old son, PJ, to an arranged play date with my close friend and her son. While driving to her house that morning, running late as usual, and choosing my children's safety over the strong urge to speed, PJ was in the backseat running his mouth as if it physically hurt his face to shut it. When he does this I usually listen and respond enthusiastically for the first ten to fifteen minutes until he asks me the fifty-seventh question in a row, which is usually something like, "Mom, if there was a banana peel on the road and we hit it would we wreck?" I tune out and switch to auto-response. Auto-response includes lots of "yes," "no," "That's a good question for daddy," or just plain,





"Son, I'm driving right now."

So, on this particular day, in the midst of his incessant chatter, I hear him say, "Mom, I can read that sign. It says 'DO NOT ENTER.' It means do not enter this forest."

This immediately caught my attention because he really did read the words on that sign, which was super impressive, but also because I wanted to explain that even though that small thicket of trees may be the only plot of undeveloped land left in Frisco, it is not, in fact, a forest. But, instead of explaining land development and the unnecessary addition of another strip mall, I simply asked, "Why can't you go in that forest? What's in there?"

My son replied, in his most bored, matter-of-fact, voice, "You know, bears, Cyclops, zombies."

I began laughing so hard that I almost had to pull the car over. My son, completely offended by my laughter, said, "It's not funny, Mom! Why is that funny?"

Trying to catch my breath in between fits of hysteria, I told him that I was not laughing at him. I was just so happy that he had warned me about that forest because now I would never go in there. I was suddenly overwhelmed with love for this silly kid in my backseat who always comes up with the most creative, unexpected things to say.

After all my morning chores, including packing a diaper bag, a back pack, feeding both children breakfast, getting both children dressed, feeding the cats, stopping for gas, and the general chaos that is a morning at our house, this particular moment with my son was pure bliss, a moment of levity when I needed it most. And because I was so concerned with being on time, getting from one end of town to the other, and wondering if I packed the baby an extra change of clothes, I almost missed that moment.

After I dropped the kids off and got in my car to enjoy the twenty minutes of silence I get each day, I vowed to be more present for a few small moments with my children every day. These moments can happen when I least expect them; in fact, that's when they mean the most to me. I learned that I don't have to have so many buckets of tears, that being a good mother isn't about being a stay at home mom and spending every minute of every day with them, that I'm not an inadequate mother because I'm busy and my kids go to daycare. That morning my son taught me that if I can have a few minutes of quality time – not texting, not on the computer, not distracted by house work and homework, not in "auto-response" mode – but real time when I'm present with my children, enjoying their laughter and their silliness, then that's what being a good mother means. I can't devote every second of my life to my children; it just isn't possible or healthy. I want to go to school and I want to be a powerful teacher when I'm finished, but I want to be a good mother, too. And my son, that day in the car, taught me to enjoy a few small minutes with him and then go to work and enjoy a few small minutes with him again when I pick him up.

So, while I'm standing in the kitchen, making Spaghetti-O's for a child who refuses to eat anything else, covered in baby food, fantasizing about what real silence would be like, and wondering if my husband would forgive me if I secretly hopped a plane to Jamaica – just for the weekend – I will try to remember that I only have my children for a moment in time; and I am going to try to listen to every silly thing they say while I can.

*Jennifer Morgan Plash*





## *My Name is Written There*

When I was a boy, I thought my mother hated me or, at least, she was the most boring person alive. Every spring, while all the rest of the families on our street packed their cars for trips to the beach or Disneyland, my mother would tell everyone how we were going to see the cherry blossoms in D.C. We would inevitably end up at a memorial or a museum and then the same park every time.

The trips were great at first. Well, ok, the first trips I really remember. My favorite trip was going to the Washington Monument. I ran up to the monument and stood with my back to it. I looked up and it looked like it went on forever.

My least favorite was going to Jefferson Memorial. I was 6 and I really wanted to go with my friends from kindergarten to the beach. She made up for the boring memorial by letting me play around in the Smithsonian underneath the planes and rockets.

By the time I was 13, I had had enough. I argued and yelled at her until I finally screamed, "I hate going there. Everyone you want me to see there is dead!" She was crying and sat there quietly in the driver's seat. She didn't speak the entire trip. I counted cars by color to pass the time.

Once we arrived at this year's chosen monument, I had warmed up a little. I knew I had hurt her feelings, so I wanted to make it up to her. I told her everything my teachers had told me about President Lincoln. She smiled. I sat on Lincoln's toe to let her snap a Polaroid.

It was different that afternoon. We didn't go to the park. Instead we went to another memorial. It was a new memorial, or at least, I had not seen it before. We walked together with a guide. When the guide stopped, we stopped. Mama started to cry, and it was then I noticed something.

It is the lies we tell ourselves to help us sleep at night that are the hardest to overcome. All my life, Mom had said that Dad had gone away. I spent my entire childhood thinking it was like when every other kid on the street's dad "went away." Susie's dad drove a big rig. He would rumble down the street, and the boys would all stop and watch him. Johnny's dad was a salesman. He was always going on sales trips and brought Johnny all kinds of neat souvenirs. I always imagined my dad pulling up in the driveway in his rig on my birthday and taking me for a ride. We would watch the Cubs play that afternoon and then play catch in the yard until dark. It would be a perfect day. But Dad never came, and the only big rig to ever pull in our driveway was a moving truck.

Through the years, I gave up on Dad. I had come to hate him. I watched the other dads coaching our ball teams, grilling with their sons, and doing the yard work down our street.

But now those birthdays and Christmases without him were becoming a blur. "That is my name, Mama. Why is my name on that wall?" I turned to see her sobbing behind me, and I knew. My Dad had gone away. He had gone away to war, and I knew enough to know that if his name was on this wall, he did not come home. I wrapped my arms around my Mom's waist. She wrapped her arms around me and said, "Son, this is your Dad."

We walked slowly back to the car, and in the waning hours of the day, we drove to a huge cemetery that had a sign that said Arlington. Things were becoming so clear now. As we approached the stone that bore my name, I saw that today was his birthday. All these years, the trip had been to visit his stone, but my mother knew I was not ready. She had played me out at the memorials and the park until I took a nap





in the car thinking we were heading home. In reality, she would wait for me to fall fast asleep then come here to talk to him. I learned to love my Dad that day. I hated myself for ever doubting him.

My mother was never the same after that day. All those quiet meditative nights in our apartment were filled with stories of their love, and how it had lasted from the day they met in junior high until the chaplain handed her the letter. She still loved him.

Mom and I were closer than we had ever been. From that day forward, I could not wait to go to D.C. I would take my report cards and school pictures and leave them for him. His name may be one of thousands on that wall, but it was our special place because he's my Dad.

*Preston Pylant*







## The Consequences of Obsession

The concept of obsession is heavily featured in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter." It is this concept that moves the plot forward by forcing the characters to act rashly. The characters are plagued by obsession of a professional, romantic, and scientific nature. This flaw turns a brilliant doctor into a depraved scientist; a respected professor of medicine into a murderer; and a bright, young medical student into a tormented romantic doomed to spend his life in isolation.

Pietro Baglioni, a university professor of medicine, initially appears "jovial," "agreeable," and proud of his standing in the medical community (137). He shows concern for Giovanni, the son of an old friend, and wishes happiness and professional success upon him. There is a sense of rivalry and "professional warfare" between Baglioni and the reclusive Dr. Rappaccini (138). Baglioni tells Giovanni of the mad doctor's dangerous interests in his patients, viewing them only as "subjects for some new experiment" and not as humans in need of treatment (138). The professor feels that Rappaccini is undeserving of the praise he receives from the medical community and is completely worthy of their criticisms. Eventually, Baglioni begins to feel that Rappaccini's focus is aimed at making Giovanni an unwilling participant in one of his twisted experiments. After Baglioni's promise to ruin Rappaccini, he no longer sees Giovanni as a youth in need of guidance or as the son of an old friend but only as a pawn in his game of revenge. Baglioni was only interested in devastating Rappaccini's career but he is now obsessed with personal revenge, both for out-shining him professionally and for impressing Giovanni when Baglioni could not. Baglioni's obsession with Rappaccini is evident when he rants:

'We will thwart Rappaccini yet,' thought he chuckling to himself, as he descended the stairs; 'but let us confess the truth of him, he is a wonderful man—a wonderful man indeed; a vile empiric, however, in his practice, and therefore not to be tolerated by those who respect the good old rules of the medical profession.' (152)

Baglioni thinks nothing of Giovanni's feelings for Beatrice when he suggests giving her the "antidote," knowing it will kill her (151). Giovanni's happiness no longer matters to Baglioni; all that matters is his personal revenge on Rappaccini. This obsession makes Baglioni so desperate for revenge that he poisons a young woman, ruins his friendship with Giovanni, possibly damages his professional reputation, and jeopardizes his own sanity.

Giacomo Rappaccini, the notorious doctor, is said to "care infinitely more for science than for mankind" because of his disassociation with human emotion (137). His "insane zeal" for science leads him to poison his own daughter, Beatrice, so that one breath from her is deadly (151). Rappaccini's attempt to alter nature and control the life of his own daughter is unmistakable proof that obsession with science outweighs respect for humanity, and this obsession plagues him. According to Baglioni, Rappaccini has narrowed his single-minded focus on Giovanni as the subject of an experiment. Rappaccini is so obsessed with Giovanni that he employs Lisabetta, Giovanni's landlady, to lure him through a "private entrance" into the deadly garden (143). Giovanni has a moment of doubt when entering the garden. He has a fleeting moment of clarity and actually senses the danger awaiting him, but his own fanatical preoccupation with Beatrice leads him onward. Giovanni's obsession causes him to ignore the primal instinct to run from a predator.





Giovanni Guasconti, the youth visiting Padua, Italy, is quick to let his curiosity turn obsessive. Scientifically, he cannot stop wondering about the mysterious plants in Rappaccini's garden, especially "one shrub in particular" that is full of "purple blossoms" and is the focal point of the garden (134). Personally, he is consumed with lustful, romantic thoughts about the "beautiful" Beatrice (134). Giovanni feels himself being heavily influenced by her presence but is unable to keep his distance because his obsession with her mystery and beauty is so overwhelming. When Beatrice's venomous breath kills a lizard Giovanni is so insane with lust and curiosity that he doubts what his own eyes have seen. His obsession builds as he watches Beatrice through the window in his apartment. He is assaulted with internal questions about this strange woman: "Am I awake? Have I my senses? . . . What is this being? Beautiful I shall call her, or inexplicably terrible?" (140). Beatrice paralyzes Giovanni like a "fierce and subtle poison [in] his system" causing him to forsake all studious endeavors and focus solely on her existence (141). Even when Giovanni furiously discovers that he, too, has been made into a poisonous creature, deadly to all living things around him, he does not hate Beatrice. His anger and confusion are temporary, melting away the minute he enters the garden and is "in the actual presence" of his obsession (153). Giovanni pays a very high price for his obsessive curiosity about Beatrice and her mad father Dr. Rappaccini – his sanity and his freedom.

At the center of all the characters' obsessions are Rappaccini's poisonous daughter and his crazed experiments on her. Baglioni is living his life in peace when Giovanni renews his interests in Rappaccini, but this time Baglioni is unable to control his outrage at Rappaccini's success and infamy. He resents Giovanni's respect and reverence for the mad doctor and disapproves of Rappaccini's notoriety. These emotions lead to his obsession with revenge which ultimately drives him so insane that he ignores his medical vows to save lives by committing murder. Giovanni also is heading down a promising path when he becomes transfixed on Beatrice and her father. These two people that dominate Giovanni's thoughts and actions are the reason for his demise. His obsession with curiosity and romance results in a fate that will completely isolate him from society and destroy his future medical career.

Murder, professional ruin, insanity, and isolation are all consequences of the tragic flaw of obsession. The characters never consider walking away from their fixations; they ignore advice, logical thinking, and their own intuitions to further entangle themselves in their obsessions.

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Jennifer Morgan Plash





## Forgetting the Old Gods

It has been argued that humans have a need to worship a higher power. In most cultures some form of religion is common. Historically, however, most religions seem to follow the same pattern as social and political institutions in that they are born, grow to maturity, serve their purpose, and then fade into obscurity as they are replaced by others. This belief is shown clearly in Robert Frost's poem "Pan with Us." Through the use of a coherent story, the personification of the god Pan, and the symbolism, Frost's speaker shows just how far not just a god, but entire religions and cultures can fall from glory.

Instead of just talking about the fall of the Greek Pantheon, Frost's speaker instead tells the story of an aged Pan's reemergence from the woods. Pan looks upon his unpopulated, barren environment and says, "That was well! And he stamped a hoof" (10). This is ambiguous as Pan could be happy to be alone, or angry because he is. He then proceeds to listen to the birds and ponders what to play. This could mean that he has given up on his divinity and is now perfectly content to spend his days in relaxation. The use of the story, regardless of Pan's ambiguous feelings, helps show the fall of a god from power in a manner that is more relatable to the average person because of the inevitability of age and death.

The best evidence for Pan's fall is Pan himself. He has grown old. Many people tend to view gods as ageless beings though Pan has clearly put on a few years. His hair has turned grey and he is alone, which is an unusual position for a fertility god. Since fertility is far more often associated with youth, this could very well be why Pan is alone. When someone's identity is so associated with being a sex symbol to the point of being a fertility god, what would age and the loss of fertility bring? Pan also still plays his pipes, and according to the poem, "... the world had found new terms of worth" (27). This also reflects Pan's age, showing that the things he did in his time are no longer appreciated, much like what happens with every new generation. Pan and the religion and culture he was a part of, like many elderly and their culture, have been lost to time and forgotten.

The symbolism in the poetry, though minor compared to the rest of the poem, still adds to Pan's loneliness. The main symbol is actually the largest, the environment. There is nothing there. Frost's speaker even says, "In all the country he did command/He saw no smoke and he saw no roof," which implies that he is the ruler of no one, which is hardly fitting for a god (8-9). The environment represents the nothing Pan has. The other major symbol is Pan himself. Because of his age and differences from modern people, he is a symbol of his time. This shows that the poem is not so much a story about how one god is forgotten, but how entire religions and cultures are lost over time, a sad, but no less true, fact of life.

The use of a story, Pan himself, and the symbolism work together to show the fall of an age in a manner to which almost any period, culture, or person can relate. The story has a way of conveying a message more clearly than just explaining what happened, like an article in a magazine or a history text book, much like a child's bedtime story. Although the character Pan is a god, by giving him human characteristics and making him the central focus of the story, he is more relatable to the average person than an all-powerful supernatural being. Through the use of scenery and the use of Pan, Frost shows how civilizations and religions not only fall, but in the end are reduced to nothing. This tragic tale of loss and acceptance of Pan is not just the tragic tale of what happened to ancient Greece, but a commentary on what will happen to all cultures as time goes by.

### Work Cited

Frost, Robert. "Pan with Us." *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts. Pearson Longman, 2009. 1015-1016. Print.

William Liebe





## Bound by Obligation

In James Joyce's short story "*Eveline*," the protagonist, Eveline Hill, is a woman who is faced with a dilemma. She is forced to choose between her life of obligation and a new life in a foreign land with her lover. Eveline is a character bound by a lack of options. She is unhappy, indecisive, and scared.

Eveline is unhappy with the role she feels obligated to fill. Her daily life consists of the same repetitive routine; over and over again. Eveline is tired of being treated like a child at both home and work. She wishes to be treated with respect. Eveline states, "It was hard work – a hard life" (410). Eveline tries to escape the cusps of her past and present by agreeing to marry Frank and embark on a new life as his wife. The sound of a street organ reminds Eveline of "her promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could" (411). For Eveline, this promise is enough to hinder her decision to run away with her lover.

Eveline is so unsure of what she wants out of life that she is unable to take the risks necessary to make changes. It is this indecisiveness that will not allow her to go with Frank to Buenos Aires. As Eveline questions her decision to leave with Frank, "She prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty" (412). As she reflects on her life, Eveline remembers how uneventful and sad her mother's life had been, and she cannot wait to escape the same fate. It is the perfect escape from her dreadful job and her abusive father. Eveline hoped "Frank would save her" (412). Although Eveline views her day to day existence as unbearable, she is still unable to let go of her obligations and leave with Frank.

Eveline is an extremely frightened woman. Not only is she fearful of her father's abusive threats towards her, but she is also afraid of what she cannot predict. When faced with the choice to stay in a life of misery or to sail away to a mysterious land with her lover, Eveline is forced to analyze her past and choose the path that will define her future. Eveline appears to be terrified to break free from the reliance of familiarity to embark on a new life with Frank. Eveline thinks to herself, "Could she still draw back after everything he had done for her?" (412). As Eveline continues to reminisce on the past, she seems to coach herself into staying by thinking of the times her father had been nice to her. Eveline remembers, "Sometimes he could be very nice" (411). The fear of giving up a life of familiarity, in spite of the emotional toll it takes on her, is not enough to mask the fear that Eveline feels about starting a new life that is completely unknown to her.

Although Eveline is torn between the life she has always known and the mysterious life that Frank has offered her, she cannot let go of what she knows. Though she is unhappy with her life she cannot decide whether or not it is worth the risk to leave everything she has ever known behind to run away to an unfamiliar place. Eveline's fear is paralyzing. As her mother wished, Eveline would continue to hold the family together.

### Work Cited

Joyce, James. "Eveline." *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense*. 9th ed. Ed. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson. Boston: Wadsworth, 2006. 442-46. Print.

Jessica Baker





## Rainy Day

*Martha Rose Gragido*

## Winter Tranquility

*Julie A. Elliott*



## Abandoned

*Jessica Baker*







## The Curse

The curse is not the flow,  
as some would say,  
but its ceasing...  
the drying, dying  
autumn leaf clinging to the branch  
knows she will see no spring re-birth,  
nor lush growth  
bursting forth, fresh and new,  
She will not redo,  
nor do the never- done  
but only fade...  
wither...  
vanish with the wind

*Mary Teresa Toro*





## Writer's Block

Wrenching. Tugging. Pulling.

Turning and Swirling.

I reach into my throat.

I dig around in my mind

searching for the words

that should come easily,

but. . .

they don't.

Exasperated.

The need goes unquenched

The drive is suppressed.

The want to create grows and festers.

Excuses like poison

Fill the gap.

This or that,

Seeping into the spaces

Where words should grow.

Then. . .

A Flash! A Start!

A phrase, and a turn.

A thought.

The gate opens,

and it is not work.

It is free!

It is simile, and metaphor.

It is alluring alliteration and allusions

And it is glorious.

It is peace.

It is comfort.

It is release.

The jumble unwinds.

The muscles relax.

The tension is gone.

Until

next

time.

*Bridgette Pylant*





## Insomnia

The dark, solitary figure roams the night,  
seeking solace, a companion,  
one to keep it company in the long, still hours.

Finding the elect, it will not be denied.  
Insistent in desire,  
using all the wiles at its command  
(memories, anger, unfinished conversations, inspirations,  
unspoken fears)  
it seduces the victim until, bending to foreign desire,  
the prey rises, abandoning hope of rest or sleep

The beguiler must depart at dawn,  
a creature of the night is not fit for sunlight,  
It takes its leave, with little thought for its weary companion's plight,  
saying, "We will meet again."

And I,  
I must be fine company for it chooses me so often.

*Mary Teresa Toro*





## Black and Tan

"We're gonna get our stories straight. After that we never speak of this. You hear me?" She's breathless, but I hear her just fine. I can't stop staring at her hands, caked with red Alabama dirt. Her manicure is shot, and there is dust in the whorls of her elbow. Phanelle is one of those women who can paint a barn and not get a drop of paint anywhere except on the brush and the barn. She comes in from fishing all day in the summer heat still smelling like perfume. Today, though, her white blouse is streaked with iron and sulfur, and her hair is coming loose from its bun.

She pats the dirt one more time. "You hear me?"

"I hear you," I say. I hear, but what I'm remembering is the time she told me there were three things a woman should never do in front of her husband: brush her teeth, use the bathroom, and pass gas. Now here she is helping me bury the carcass of my husband's prize coon dog.

"Grab the shovels and let's get the hell back to the house."

I bend down and get the shovels we snuck out of his barn. Hell. That's where I'm going when I die. No sweet reunion for me. Not after today. I don't feel the blisters breaking open in my palms or the twinge in the small of my back. I don't smell the fear oozing out of my pores, or taste the dried salt of sweat in the corners of my mouth. All I can think about is how he can't ever know. Not ever.

Phanelle is already halfway down the hill, and I don't think she knows I'm still up here because I can hear her talking. I look at the fresh dirt at my feet and feel a grating sense of guilt. I can see Moses wrapped in that old garden tarp, wadded into a bloodhound ball four feet under the red dirt. He's in his own cross-section of the ant farm. Here's the nest, here's the queen, here's the workers, and this tunnel leads to Moses. What had this dumb ole dog done to me anyhow? Did I really have to shoot him? I have never broken the law in my life. I've never even got a speeding ticket. This is the first thing I've done that I'll have to ask God to forgive me for. Going into this I thought it would be better to ask forgiveness than permission, but now I just don't know.

"You hear me? I said we got to get!"

Phanelle is standing in her cropped jeans and her bright red croc shoes. Her shoes match her hair, and again I can't remember a time in our lives that I ever saw her this dirty. She turns and yells over her shoulder as she slips and slides on the acorns littering the side of the hill.

"We gotta get back and get cleaned up, and you gotta get supper started." She takes another look at me. "Lord, honey you are a m-e-e-s-s!"

I bite back my tears. I am a mess. I've never been able to tell a lie. Did I think I could James Bond my way out of this? How will I hold it together? He'll take one look at me and know something is wrong. I catch up with Phanelle, and it isn't long before she can smell my worry.

She breaks the rhythm of our steps on the grass, the squeak of her skin against the rubber insoles of her shoes, and the swaying of our breathing. "If you don't say anything you won't have to lie."

I keep my head down, but in the corner of my eye a sliver of Phanelle steals a glimpse at me. "Lord knows you never could lie." Her smeared hands offer a buffer. "And that's something to be proud of." I count four squeaks of her feet, and then she is speaking again. "I have got to get cleaned up first thing. I can start the beans before I shower. That's what I'll do. I'll throw these clothes in the washer, start the beans,





and then shower." She tries to suck in a deep breath. "And that's what you do, too, honey. In that order. Understand?"

I nod. Even though I know I'm in trouble, her words calm me in a way that only Phanelle can. We come to the back of my property, and at the gate she stops me.

"We've been pulling weeds for a flowerbed along the back. That's our story." She takes my hands in hers and flips them over. "That'll explain the blisters." She snaps her eyes back to me. "Now. What's the story?"

My tongue is too thick for my mouth. "We've been pulling weeds for a flowerbed. That's our story."

She pats my cheek. "Good girl." She grabs my shoulders. "Washer, beans, shower. Got it?"

My head bobs.

"No, wait. Rinse off the shovels, put them back in the barn. Then washer, beans, shower. Got it, honey?"

"I got it."

She checks her watch. "And you should run because you have twenty minutes."

Later that night, I am a repentant, twitching mass on the inside trying to serve his beans and cornbread and sweet tea. I am losing my conviction. I need to confess. I need to beg forgiveness. I need to call Phanelle.

I sneak into the laundry room. "I'm going to hell, Phanelle."

"Just a minute, honey." A recliner snaps closed, and a door squeaks, drowning out the TV. "Okay. You're not going to hell. What he did was worse if you ask me."

I sniff hard and wince at the pressure. "I think God is going to kill me. Moses was innocent, and I killed him. God won't forgive me for that."

"Sure He will, honey. It was a crime of passion, and He's not gonna kill you. But, honey, you can't confess. God help you if you tell on yourself and me because no one can know what I did either."

"You only helped me bury him."

"Honey, I didn't even look at him. I just threw that old tarp over him and rolled him up and helped you stick him in a hole, but I knew it was Moses."

"I didn't want Moses to suffer."

"No, honey. I'm talking about making your husband suffer."

"He's outside whistling for him right now, Phanelle. Moses isn't coming, and pretty soon he'll figure that out. What do I do? I haven't practiced my faces in the mirror." I wipe my nose on my sleeve. "He'll take one look at me and know."

"He'll take one look at you and know you shot his dog and buried it in the woods? I don't think so. Not unless you tell him."

"You're right. I won't say anything." I hear the back door pull to. "Lord help me, Phanelle. He's looking for me. What do I do?"

"Nothing. Just stay cool."

"Stay cool? I don't know what that means!"

"I know, honey. I don't know what it means either." Her sigh cracks through the phone speaker.

"Okay. Do you have a ball bat in there with you?"







I catch myself looking before I realize my mistake. "A ball bat? What for?"

"Just in case."

"In case of what? Phanelle, be serious! I'm having a heart attack!"

"Okay, okay. Let's see. Did you put the rifle back where it goes?"

"The rifle? Yes, I did. I even cleaned my prints off."

"Good thinking. I didn't even think of that, but you should always do that first thing."

"When you kill your husband's dog?"

"Or use a rifle for any illegal purposes whatsoever."

"I think we're getting off track." His boots creak across the kitchen floor, headed right for me. I hiss into the phone. "I have to go!"

I throw the phone into the laundry basket. Just as the door opens, I open the dryer and pull out the clothes I wore when I shot Moses. My hands jitter on my gingham blouse as I try to shake out as many wrinkles as I can.

He sticks his head into the room. "You seen Moses today?"

*Just long enough to put a bead on him.* I turn my head, and my face goes numb. I'm not sure if I look horrified or confused. I'm trying for confused. "You know what? I don't think I have."

"Were you outside today?"

"Just out back of Phanelle's."

"All day?"

"Well, pulling weeds behind the fence for a new bed." I turn back to the shirt and place it on my ironing pile. I pull out my jeans and snap them in the air. "His food gone?"

"His bowl is half-full."

I pretend to be picking at an invisible speck of dirt. "Hmm. Don't know. Haven't seen him."

There is only silence behind me, and like a sucker I turn to see why. He isn't there anymore, but he's left behind his worry, and it slams into my gut. My ears burn, and my heart leapfrogs over itself. In that small room, standing with my jeans held loosely in one hand, my nose full of fabric softener and hot cotton, I hear my mercy tree get snapped in half.

I go over the images in my head from the last two decades, and feel the sting all over again. Following closely behind betrayal, resolution rears its ugly head next to justice. I feel the snap on my jeans digging into my palm, and I drop them to the floor.

He is whistling for poor Moses when I pass through the living room on my way to our bedroom. From my nightstand, I pull out the note I found crumpled in his pocket. I smooth it on my thigh and read the words to myself.

"After all these years, it still feels like the first time. Room 103. I'll be waiting, Jen." I hold the note to my chest, and the tears come. My face burns with the shame of what he's done to me, and the regret of what I did to his dog.

I cross to the closet and drag out our only suitcase and start placing his clothes inside. The closet is nearly empty of his things, except his shoes, and I'm starting on the dresser when he walks in.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I don't turn to face him. "I've been thinking. You don't seem very happy here. I think you should





leave."

He sputters and tries to laugh it off. "Are you messing with me?"

"Nope." I open his sock drawer and fill my hands with the black and white balls. "Would you go in the attic and get the duffle bag? I don't think all this will fit in one case."

"The duffle? Have you lost your mind?" His hands grab my shoulders, and he whips me around. The socks go everywhere. "What the hell is going on?"

I feel tears, but I don't care. I don't care about my runny nose either. I hold up the note.

His face freezes, and he lets me go. "Where did you find that?"

"In your jacket pocket." I go back to emptying the sock drawer. "When I was doing your laundry. You must have forgotten it was there."

He sits on the side of the bed. "Sit down."

"I don't want to sit."

"Sit down, and hear me out!"

"I don't want to hear you out!" I launch the socks at his face. "You stinking liar!"

"I didn't mean for it to happen!"

"You are such a liar! Liar!" I point my finger accusingly, and then jerk it back to my side. "I want you to go."

"I don't want to go." His arms are propped on his thighs and he is leaning on his elbows, staring at the socks dotting the carpet.

"I don't care what you want. I want you to go."

He shakes his head. "Hear me out. I want to stay. I can't leave you."

"Oh? You can't leave me?" I look up to the ceiling, the four walls. "He can't leave me, but he can make a fool of me." I look back at him. "Well then, let me help you."

I grab his chin. "I shot Moses today. I shot him, wrapped him in a tarp, and buried him. There. That should help." I start zipping his suitcase shut and am halfway around before he jumps up and takes me by the shoulders again.

"What? What did you just say?"

"You heard me!"

He lets me go as if he can't bear to touch me. "You shot Moses? Why?" He grabs onto either side of his head, and his eyes mist up. "Why? What did you do?"

I can't speak. The guilt is creeping up my throat and out my eyes. I shake my head, more at myself, and slide the zipper home.

"You shot my dog? You shot my dog!"

"I gave you thirty years of my life. You threw that away." I try to shrug it off, but I look more like I'm cringing. "I took what you loved most, too. Now we're even." I walk into the living room, and he follows me to the doorway. He is ten feet away, but he might as well be a mile. I have failed in my marriage. I have failed to keep him happy. He opens his mouth to say something, but a sound from outside stops him.

We both stand straighter, our eyes lock, but our ears stretch past the walls of the house, reaching for the sound again. Again we hear it. Both of us leap for the front door. My hand is very white in the porch light as it raises and extends to point at a familiar shadow leaping down the driveway.





As Moses leaps into my husband's arms, I unleash a blood-curdling scream; certain he is about to rip out my throat, or follow me for eternity, chained to my ankle as penance for doing what I knew was wrong. I back into the side of the house and squeeze my eyes shut.

It isn't until I hear my husband chuckling that I open my eyes and realize my mistake. It was not Moses I had in my sights this morning. It was not Moses lying in the ant farm four feet below the dirt I stood over. My legs lose their strength and I slide all the way to the porch.

I am still there when my husband walks out of the house with his suitcase. As he drives away, I see two silhouettes through the back window, lit up with his headlights. Moses and the man I married. The gravel pops under their tires, and somewhere in the house a phone is ringing.

*Martha Rose Gragido*





## Beans

I squirm my toes a little deeper in the dirt, moving the flaky brown dust off the top, looking for the cool black earth that I know is just a little farther down than my toes are long. I ain't allowed to wear my bathing suit top when I help Granny pick beans; she thinks it makes me look like a floozy. The sun is baking the back of my neck and I just know I'm gonna have a farmer's tan when we get through of this god forsaken mess. It's been a good year for beans. Just the right dose of sun and rain. This new dirt ain't hurting 'em none either. That's what Chub had said anyways. He busted up in the house yesterday like he, not Granny, owned the damn place, telling us if we'd pick the garden, he'd give us a share of what we picked. Well, Granny ain't never turned down no free food. Not that she ever took charity off nobody, ain't never had nothing gave to her. Hell, I don't think she'd take it if someone tried to give her something. Too damn proud for a handout.

I look up and count three more rows to pick before I can get ready to go out tonight. Tomorrow it'll be the greens, but right now, I don't give a good gosh darn about the greens. I'll pick greens for the rest of my life, even if they make my arms itch like crazy, if I can just get outta these damn bean rows and in the house. Finally got me a date and I'm picking beans instead of something useful, like digging the half-moon of dirt out from under my nail beds or trying to make my hair lay down flat. I got Mama's hair. All kink. I start making a checklist of things I need to get done before six this evening. Jeff will be here at a quarter 'til but Granny always told me to keep 'em waiting a bit, see if they will. I finally, finally get to put some of that unasked for advice to use and she's got me picking beans in hundred degree heat. Once I get my outfit laid out in my head, I add a shower, nails, and blowing out my hair to the list. I'll wear the tight blue jeans that fit just right in the waist and the new, bought specially for this blouse I got yesterday. It was one of those shirts I'd seen girls wear that just kinda spoke to a boy, said "why yes I'll go to the drive-in movies with you and fool around in the back like I ain't had no raisin." At least I hope that's what this one said. This was the first date I'd been on since the church social six months ago and all the parents were at that one so it didn't count as a real date, unless you were talking to the other girls 'bout how many boys you'd been out with and you needed it to.

While I'm trying to figure out whether I wanna wear sandals or tennis shoes tonight, Granny walks up behind me and catches me not picking.

"I swear fo God you couldda done been done with this row if you'd stop dreamin' bout that ol' hairy legged boy."

"Granny! Jeff ain't just some ol' hairy legged boy." I hate when she says that. I roll my eyes at her. I shoulda knowed better than that. "He's the best right guard we've had in a long time. Ask Coach, he'll tell ya."

"So he can play a little bitta ball. Can he work? An' you roll them eyes at me again you gonna be pickin' em up off the dirt. You hear me?"

I bite my tongue, try to look sorry, and say the only thing I can. "Yes'm."

She walks back up the row laughing her dry, smoked-since-she-was-nine laugh.

She beats me back to the house and yells at me when I'm barely in the door good to take my shoes off. Not like you'd be the one sweeping it up, I wanna yell at her. I bite my tongue half off for fear of having to pick it up off a dirty floor.

The house is a small, hot-in-the-summer-cold-in-the-winter one with crooked floors, but it's ours. Granny won't get no air conditioning so I stand for five minutes in front of a Lassco window fan with my shirt





raised trying to dry up some of the sweat. When I'm finally cooled a bit, I jump in the shower and try and scrub every last speck of bean dirt off. After I'm sure Jeff won't see what's left of the dirt, I jump out and get ready as fast as I can. I only got half an hour left and I wanna give my nails time to dry so they won't get that smudgy, shouldta-painted-em-in-the-first-place look. Granny hollers and I run out to the porch as quick as I can without letting my toenails rub against each other.

"You gonna help me shell these beans or you gonna priss around in there all day?"

I look at the beans. We got thirteen wash tubs full of the damn things and I ain't got time for this, my nails will go straight to hell if I so much as touch a one of 'em.

"I reckon I can shell 'til Jeff gets here, but Granny, I *have* to go tonight. If I don't, Jeff ain't never gonna ask me again and there goes my chance."

She just sits there with her roll-your-own smoke stuck between her teeth and looks at me crossways like she ain't real sure who I am. I don't like that look from her. Granny's the only one I got now Mama done run off again. She's been real good about it, trying to make me feel like I ain't imposing too much on her. I know I am. I might be sixteen but I ain't stupid for God sakes. I know she can't afford me living with her again. She done had to sell ten acres to Chub, and he's been a stick up her ass since he knocked Mama up and wouldn't marry her all them years ago. I tried to not let her sell it but she don't ever listen to nobody once she makes her mind up. I told her I'd get a job at the truck stop down the road but she wouldn't have none of it. Said I needed an education. It's my job to go to school.

"That's your ticket outta here LouVertie, you ain't gonna waste away here like your Mama did. I shoulda made her graduate when I had the chance. Look at 'er now! All dried up and ain't good for nuthin'. Now I know she's your Mama, and she's my baby so I love her, but I ain't liked her since she done what she did."

All I could say then was "Yes'm". Seems like that's all I ever get to say anymore.

I hate it when she uses my full name, LouVertie sounds old-fashioned. Just Lou is fine with me, but when she says all of my name, I know she's serious.

She's still sitting there looking at me like she knows what I got planned for tonight when I hear Jeff's truck coming up the driveway. I jump up and run in the house, right on time, fifteen minutes early, Jeff is here! Holy shit, I've got dirt caked in my nail polish. Damn beans. I wash my hands off quick as I can and jump in my clothes without slowing down. I run out to the porch, forgetting Granny's advice about making 'em wait, and Jeff is standing there talking to Granny about the team this year. When he sees me he tells me how nice I look and my guts fall and squish themselves up in my toes.

I grab his arm and try to steer him back to the truck quick as I can. I glance back over my shoulder and see Granny still shelling the beans that shoulda been hers by right, still giving me that same don't-know-who-you-are-no-more look and I just walk that much faster. Soon as Granny can't see us, I saddle up beside Jeff in the middle of the truck seat. He puts his hand on my leg, just above my knee. It's nice. I know what he's got planned for tonight and that's just fine by me. I planned it long before he did.

His fingers, hot through my pants and dirty around the fingernails, start playing with the seam on my jeans. I let them. Since I'd been living with Granny, I'd watched him. How every week he would drive a different girl past our place on the way to the show. Every week I'd watch 'em, her sitting there all prissed up beside him looking pleased as she knew how to be, him with one hand on the wheel, the other one hidden below the window. Well, now I knew where his other hand had been all those times. I didn't mind too much that I wasn't





the first girl to sit beside him in his beat up Chevy, but by God, I planned to be the last. From now on, Granny'd have to be alone on Friday nights. I'd be out at the movies, at all the football bonfires, at each and every field party after the games. Maybe even the girls would grab me up into their circle, once they realized that Jeff was serious about me. Course he is. He has to be. I've waited on this for too long.

Julie-Ann had thought the same thing though. She'd come to school one day all bowed up like a banny rooster bragging about how Jeff, yes, JEFF had asked her to the movies that Friday. She just KNEW that he meant it this time. Mama'd always told me not to trust a boy like that, but where the hell was she? Running the roads with some nasty trucker shooting up every chance she got. She always did that mess when she was with one of them, they did it to stay awake on cross country hauls, she did it so they'd love her more. The last time she was home, she'd run up to the door like she still belonged, like I still wanted her and she was all strung out on that shit, eyes wide, real skinny, ignoring Granny's lips. When her lips get so small they ain't nothing but a line, Run. Granny calls 'em Come to Jesus Meetin's. All they really are is Granny lecturing while the person that done pissed her off gets the hell beat out of 'em with the yellow bell switch she keeps beside her chair.

It ain't 'til we get halfway to the movies when I realize who I seen her give that look to before. Mama. That last time she run off, leaving me and Granny quick, like she couldn't get back on the road fast enough. She'd come out on the porch real serious, acted like she was gonna prophesy to us or some other dumb shit like that. Me and Granny'd been doing corn that day. Mama announced she'd met a man, a real good one this time she said, and they were going to see his family in Arizona. Bull shit. She'd run up on another trucker and was going to run with him 'til he used her up and dumped her back down wherever they were. She's done telling us how good he is, how good he treats her, gets her whatever she wants, blahdey blah. We'd heard all of it before, every time she got her a new one. Granny sits there rocking, just looking at her, not saying a word and I can tell Mama's waiting for it, leaning into Granny, waiting to be told not to go, to stay home, waiting on permission, to be told to get the hell out and never come back, just waiting on something she's not gonna to get. Granny just looks at her 'til Mama can't stand it and runs to the car.

Holy hell. That's the look.

I make Jeff turn the truck around and take me back. He's looking confused and ain't got no idea what the hell just happened and I don't either really but I jump out soon as we get close to the porch and tell him I'll explain it at school Monday, *if* he'll even look at me after this. I stand there watching 'til his dust settles and turn around. I start back up to the porch with my head down, looking as small and little-girl-like as I know how to. I sit on my side of the bean pan and start shelling, not saying a word, trying not to make eye contact. Trying to focus on her legs, but they're so full of veins it ain't really helping much.

"Look at me, Lou."

I look up and try to tell her what I can't really say just with my face. She lights another roll-your-own, pops it between her teeth, takes a drag.

"Change ya mind?"

"Yes'm."

*Keisha Hatfield*





## Two-Headed Boy

My twin is distant and unknowable, like God or eternity. Today, I went through his things. His belongings, all packed neatly in three cardboard boxes. In his will, he specified that all his clothes and shoes be donated to local thrift stores. After that, what little remained went to me and his daughter, with the exception of various trinkets and mementos left to our three younger sisters. It's a strange thing witnessing the cubic reduction of someone you love. A life halted in a moment and forced to pack up on the spot. Three small boxes, and still I shrink and hide, too weary to face my estrangement.

Lilith arrives in three days. It's just a visit, a weeklong stay with her Uncle James. But of course she will never see me like that. As the twin brother of her dead father, I am the bastard patriarch. She's only four years old. Not six months ago she sat before Jason's fourth box, the one he lies cold in, while the ghost of her father wept in the back row.

My fingernails dig and tear at the frayed corners of month old packing tape, stripping away thin layers of brown cardboard with each piece I pull away. The boxes are unmarked, so whatever lies beneath the loosened opening is a mystery. I bend back the flaps and devote myself to the discovery of my dead brother, the person; my dead brother, the father; my dead brother, the man.

I first notice a dusty chrome hubcap standing straight up and packed tightly into the side of the box. When I remove it from the box I find two small tokens taped to the inside that I would still recall a hundred years from now. First is a thin, lime green strip of finish, serrated and uneven at the edges. Next is a metallic emblem, the word *Comet* in fluid script. The first car my brother and I shared was a nice, comfortable Kia or Toyota or Honda with a very respectable safety rating. That didn't keep us from taking out our father's 1972 Mercury Comet every chance he allowed us. Our father was a kind man like that. He seldom deemed his children unworthy to enjoy his own possessions. One of us would climb into the front seat and prime the accelerator as the other stood and waited for his door to be unlocked from the inside. Neither of us ever had much luck getting the green beast started on the first try, but eventually the engine would roar to life.

The Comet was our father's commuter to work. And on a morning drive like any other, he survived the wreck that totaled our beloved vehicle.

Staring at the *Comet* decal and turning the strip of finish over in my fingers, I try to recall how long ago that must have been. Fourteen years? Fifteen? So far, Jason has done well beyond the grave in making me feel old.

The rest of the box contains a few movies, a fair number of books, and multiple medals from his high school swim team. The books surprise me, for a number of reasons. I had never known my brother to be much of a reader. I, on the other hand, flaunted my pedantic, well-read sensibilities every chance I got, including those I invented. In my one-track mind, art and literature wasn't a pastime, wasn't entertainment: it was my identity. And I was never one to hide behind my humanity or my authenticity. My passion was my shield.

If there's one thing you've taught me by dying, Jason, it's that passion is the rust of humanity.

The books are stacked in two columns. They're all paperback, and they each feature those distinctive rough, yellowing pages. That familiar bookstore aroma rises from the box. It puts me at ease, brings a





closeness to my search for Jason. That invisible camaraderie dissolves upon closer inspection of the books themselves. The state of each book horrifies me: highlighting, notes in the margin (handwriting I recognize as Jason's), cardboard front and back covers attached to the rest of the pages by the grace of God alone, and too many dog-ear scars to count.

The pile of brazenly mistreated works of literature is the antithesis of my obsessively organized, ever expanding collection of books in near perfect condition I house in nearly every room of my meager apartment. I find something beautiful in the physiology of books, a tangible admiration for the transcendence of written words.

The next thing I notice, even more shocking than the unforgivable abuse of the books, are the novels themselves. They are all Charles Dickens novels. *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and every other work by Dickens you disregarded in high school. Not only are they all Charles Dickens paperbacks, but there are multiple copies of many of the novels. Some are different editions or feature alternate cover artwork, but some, for all I can tell, are identical versions, tantamount aside from the various wounds and bruises from what I can only assume to be numerous readings by a literate Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*.

At the bottom of the box, suffocated by the great mass of nineteenth century literature above it, lies several gold and silver medals. Each medal has a single red, white, and blue ribbon fashioned into a necklace. Unlike the books, I distinctly remember each medal and trophy lining the shelves and walls of our homes, increasing with each race and competition Jason swam in. He took great pride in his awards, always diligent to maintain their brassy sheen with frequent polishes. And to this day I can quickly tell they have been well kept. Aside from light bits of dust in the surface crevices, these are the same radiant trophies that hung in synchronized, descending patterns down the stairway wall.

This is the Jason I know. The unrelenting athlete — my ultimate antithesis. These medals signify the distance I feel from him, and I made peace with that petty schism long ago. But when I set aside the cold brass medallions and flip through his marred copy of *Nicholas Nickleby*, parsing over the curt margin scrawlings and lengthy highlighted passages, I'm introduced to someone kept hidden and private. There is undeniable love on each page of these Dickens novels, a shameless passion that spans cover to cover. Box #1 has acquainted me with an unknown, unknowable ghost that beckons me towards the unopened second box.

The packing tape on the second box is more recent, the adhesive firm and pulled tightly over the opening. It's a smaller box, similar in size and shape to a shoe-box, but wider. Again I work my fingernails underneath the tape edges enough to remove the bonds. Inside I find a stack of spiral notebooks. At the feet of the spirals lies a short and corpulent bottle of brandy, unopened by the looks of it. I've never been much of a drinker; neither is Jason from what I remember. But I've got my vices, evidenced by the hubcap steadily filling with knolls of cigarette ash, consequence of my apathy and its vague resemblance of an ashtray.

The alcohol stays in the box, while I lift the notebooks out in a large armful, many of them falling and sliding across the faux wood floor. There are twelve in total, all red, each of them college-ruled. Large Roman numerals have been drawn in sharpie on the cardboard backs of each spiral, I - XII. I take this to indicate the order in which Jason used them. I notice the fourth Roman numeral departs from its usual 'I'







and 'V', written instead with four 'I's', similar to how clocks with Roman numerals are numbered. Jason pointed this out to me years ago in a doctor's office.

"Look," he had said. "They put the wrong one for the four."

We must have been eight or nine at the time, waiting in the lobby for the nurse to take us back for our annual checkups.

"Really?" I asked, impressed and jealous I hadn't noticed first.

"Yeah, see, it should be an 'I' and a 'V', not four 'I's'."

The memory of this anecdote makes me smile. When had I *not* underestimated my enigmatic twin?

Sorting through the pile, I locate notebook I.

The first half of the pages begin with headings like "History" or "Math" or "English". Notes from high school or college? Nowhere in the pages is a date or time recorded. Halfway through the spiral I find a mostly blank page with a short note written at the top:

*The semester ended recently. I've been away, in so many ways. I haven't told anyone I'm not returning to the team next year. I'm not sure I will tell anyone. I don't owe people I will never see again the courtesy of disappointment.*

*Someone jokingly referred to me as a "fair-weather fan" yesterday. I would say that's true for most things.*

Reading and rereading the curt passage, it could have been something I wrote myself. The seething alienation, open-sore resentment—once again I'm shaking hands with a stranger.

I close the notebook. I fear what's written within the others. Retrieving my phone from the coffee table, I dial Alice's number from memory.

"Hello there," she answers, pleasantly. I can hear Lilith playing in the background. Talking animal voices join in from the television.

"Hey," I reply. "You sound busy, but can you talk for sec'?"

"Yeah, of course."

The television bedlam fades out.

"Okay. Sorry 'bout that. What's up?"

"Um..." How do I start? Where do I begin? "I was just, uh,"—I clear my throat—"going through some of Jason's boxes. I, uh... I don't know. I didn't know him, Alice. I don't know what to make of any of this."

"What do you mean?"

I tell her about the car mementos, the collection of well-read Dickens novels, and the bottle of brandy. I don't mention the notebooks.

"I mean, you knew him better than I did," I say. "At the end, at least."

The line is silent.

"Did he ever talk about Charles Dickens?"

"No," she says at last. "That is odd."

"Did he ever—did you guys ever talk about—" but I can't get the words out. I can't ask if my dead brother was depressed, if my dead brother was suicidal. I can't ask these things because I don't want to believe it's my fault.





"James?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

"James," she begins, "I love you, but you aren't the only one with . . . an unknowable, beautiful complexity looming behind what you present for the world to see. I don't know what a box of books means, and maybe we'll never know. And that's not your fault."

For a moment, we don't speak. I open my mouth to say something.

"Oh, James— I'm sorry, I've got to get Lillie back to Mom's."

"Oh, yeah, go ahead," I say, slightly relieved.

"I'll call you," she says. "You're my favorite person."

"And you."

We hang up. Her final words linger in my mind. *You're my favorite person.* What began as a tongue-in-cheek way of avoiding the humiliating debacle of admitting you love your brother or sister has become an authentic term of endearment in our family, the staple last remark of every phone call.

The red spirals are spread out haphazardly across the table before me. I leave them for later and lift the box with the brandy still in it into my lap. Through the amber, fun-house distortion of the bottle, I notice a folded note lying beneath it. The sallow paper is old and deteriorating, the creases disintegrating from so many folds and refolds.

It is Jason's handwriting.

*James, he writes, when you were young, you broke many bones and waited for love. And who among us did not? I cannot speak for your ambivalence, but I still yearn, and I still break. I am not as unique. I am not as beautiful.*

*It would seem appropriate to plot out the reasons and events that led to our rift, but why take life so simply? There is an unnamable difficulty in attempting to relate to others what life as and with an identical twin is like. So I won't. Of course, I need not explain such trials to you.*

*Perhaps one day this letter will depart from my possession into your own, but until then it will drift from pocket to pocket, episodically removed and amended as I struggle to determine the nature of our estrangement. I have not the emotional constitution to bat away the defeatist mantra of "It's all my fault"; but I hope you do, James. You're my favorite person.*

*J. Theodore Van de Kamp*

Avery Q. Wood

