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Not a Hero

Pamela Murrin

· ADULT FICTION ·

Jon cowered behind the shrubs and underbrush and stared out at the devastation. Fields and farms were burning. Animals lay silent and still where they had fallen, blood pools and missing limbs visible even from atop the forested hill. Around Jon, the surviving members of his village shivered, whimpered, and wept.

Above the valley, the monster soared, screaming its delight in the destruction it had caused. Black as sin and death, it was covered with scales. Or so it was said. From far below, the villagers could see only darkness in its silhouette. Great bat wings beat the air, and the hideous, horned head swung from side to side. It swooped earthward, and fire shot from its laughing mouth. Another farmhouse caught fire.

"There's no one left to fight it, now," Jon's mother said sadly.

Jon and the other villagers looked at one another. There were several women and a couple of old men. Those of the children who had been clever enough to hide, or fast enough to escape, or small enough to be carried away from danger, huddled around the adults. They wore tattered clothes and numb expressions.

"There's one," Mistress Anne growled. She glared at Jon.

"No!" his mother cried. She threw her arms around him. "No! He's not a fighter! He's just fifteen! And he's all I have left! His sister is dead! His brothers and my husband are all dead!"

"Most of our families are dead, Mistress Faith," old Henry quavered. "We've all given our best beloved."

Jon gulped and stared out at the valley. The dragon swooped again, and up flamed a tree that had stood solitary watch in the middle of a field. There was nothing left to burn, so the dragon flew off to the mountain on the far side of the valley. It disappeared into the vast hole that led to its lair.

"Not my Jon," his mother sobbed against his chest. "There's nothing he could do. Would you have him die for nothing?"

Jon chewed on the guilt that had been choking him for weeks. He wanted to help. He had watched as friends and neighbors had walked off, armed only with sticks or pitchforks, to be slaughtered by the dragon. He had not followed them.

He had heard all the stories that children were told. In some, a powerful man, highborn

and intelligent and skilled, fought against monsters or prevailed against even more powerful men. There were other stories in which quiet and humble men, through their virtue and courage and determination, had won great victories. But Jon knew he wasn't intelligent or skilled. He didn't feel at all good or brave or determined. He just felt scared.

"Our sons have gone to fight the dragon," Mistress Anne said. The other villagers around her nodded. "And our husbands, too. They are all dead."

"And for what?" Jon's mother cried, throwing her arms up. "They did not stop the dragon! Or slow it!"

Little Jason stood up from beside his mother. He pointed across the valley at the castle. Its stone walls stood firm, though scorched and surrounded by dead plants and black earth. "Our lord Richard doesn't go out to fight the dragon. He and all his knights stay inside his castle where they're safe. Why can't they fight the dragon with their spears and their arrows?"

"He is our Lord!" Old Henry sputtered. "We are only peasants! We can't tell what a lord knows or what he is doing! He is wise and he will do what's right! Don't you question him!"

Jason looked at the ground, chastened. He was a bold child, but he knew better than to challenge his elders twice.

"Let us gather wood for fires," Dame Agatha suggested. She was always a peacemaker. "Then we will be warm tonight."

"We girls will go look for berries or anything else we can find to eat," Mary offered. She was the prettiest of the four teenaged girls who had survived the dragon's assaults. The other three, along with several female children rose and followed her into the forest.

Jon slipped into the foliage as the rest of the village decided what they would do to ensure the group's survival. He was shaking as he walked, and his chest ached. He soon reached the edge of the forest, but he didn't want to step into the clearing that was most of the valley. No, he would avoid making himself visible, in case the dragon should erupt out of its lair and spy him. He didn't want his mother to look down, see him, and worry. She would have long enough for that later. But she would no longer be a disgrace before her life-long friends and neighbors.

So he walked along the edge of the forest that bordered all the valley, staying inside the greenery. Nothing could see him. Nothing would eat him. Yet.

Too soon, Jon reached the mountain at the opposite side of the valley. Too soon, he found himself climbing the slopes. It wouldn't be long before he reached the open maw of the cave and then he'd have to go inside. He would face the dragon. And like his brothers and most of his male neighbors, he would find death.

A patch of shrubs to the right of the cave entrance shuddered and waved. Then a mumbling and a screeching sounded from that direction. "Get out of here," Jon whispered, too softly for any animal near those bushes to hear. "Don't you know how dangerous it is here?"

A rumble shook the ground. Jon froze. The dragon was roaring inside its lair. Did it know he was here? He must walk on! He must be a man and defend his village! He thought of his moth-

er. She would no longer be embarrassed, but she would be alone. Would that be better? A wave of guilt swept over him and he felt he was drowning in the churning depths of fear and regret. He remembered his neighbors and the heroes of all those stories. He forced himself to walk on.

Another, softer rumble came. To Jon, the dragon sounded confident and contemptuous. Perhaps death would be better than this anticipation and fear.

“Go!” Jon told himself firmly. He went.

He stopped at the entrance to the cavern. Inside, he could see hills of gold and outcroppings of rock and crystal. Gems glittered on the hills, between darker shapes that could have been chairs or chests. Jon saw that light dimmed with distance from the door. He didn’t see the dragon.

He listened. Nothing. He stepped through the doorway and quietly, carefully stepped toward the hills of treasure.

A high screech shot across the cave and through Jon’s bones, setting him to trembling even more. He looked toward the sound, which seemed to have come from behind one of the hills to his right. It couldn’t be the dragon. He had heard that creature’s loud, deep roar. What new magical evil might be residing here with the dragon? He thought of the tales he had heard. Griffins and trolls and ogres. It wasn’t fair! Wasn’t the dragon danger enough?

Jon walked left, between two hills of treasure. A low rumbling shook the cave. Yes, the dragon was definitely laughing. Jon walked toward this sound.

The roof of the cave lowered before it lifted high again. Jon felt he was in another room of this mountain stronghold. The sun’s light no longer touched him, but a reddish-yellow glow revealed the outlines of more treasure hills. Where had all this gold come from? Not the poor villagers, that was certain.

Something big moved in the room and an avalanche of gold, gems, and knick-knacks slid to the cavern floor. The dragon rumble-chuckled again.

“Dragon,” Jon quavered. “My name is Jon.”

“Jaaaaaaahn,” rumbled the monster. It laughed again. “Jaaaaaaahn is the name of thisss prey.”

Jon knew this giant could hear his heart, beating so painfully in his chest. He must be brave! He must not stop! “You have attacked my village,” Jon said. “You have killed my brothers and my neighbors. You have burned our fields and homes and animals. We did nothing against you. We have nothing. Nothing you haven’t destroyed. We only want to live our simple lives. Is there something you want us to do? Is there anything we can do to make you stop killing us?” Jon shuddered again. He could think of nothing further to say.

The dragon was sitting between two golden treasure hills, and now Jon could see that the glow came from its own hot body. It leaned back and lifted its huge head toward the ceiling, opened its mouth full of knife-sharp teeth and roared its laughter.

“Foolisssh prey!” it said. “Ssstupid prey! Little mousse! Bunny rabbit! Your animalsss were delissshious. Your neighborssss, too! The ssilly huts and fieldsss were fun to burn! And oh! To

watch the idiot villagerssss run away! I love it!"

Jon's mouth dropped open. His family and friends were dead. His whole world had burned, and this beast had done it all for fun. "Please, stop," he breathed.

The dragon laughed again and struck a treasure hill with one front arm. Gold and other valuables felt like rocks raining down on the boy.

"I'm not hungry now, sssilly mousse," the dragon sneered. Then it laughed again. "You're not funny enough. You're not worth the trouble to kill."

Jon staggered backward. He had faced the dragon and survived. And he had achieved nothing. His face was warm and he knew it was red as he walked back the way he had come. He had failed.

Back in the room just inside the entrance to the cave, Jon heard the screech again. There were more, smaller avalanches of treasure, and the boy had to look at the shadowy stretch of cavern to the right of the opening. Then a second scream came from behind another treasure hill. Something was climbing toward him. Was it... or they... giggling?

Jon stood, hopeless and humiliated. What smaller, pettier death could be moving toward him?

They were before him. Two of them. Black as their mother, glowing enough to highlight their silhouettes, scraping the air with their long needle claws and biting nothing with their wicked teeth.

"Baby dragons," Jon sighed. "Two more of them. They will kill us all."

He stepped backward, followed by the screech-laughing babies. Behind him, just outside the cave entrance, he heard shouts and answering yells. There was thumping and pounding. Not villagers. These were men, and there were few of those left from his village. The baby dragons jerked their heads up to stare toward the noise. They turned to each other and shrieked confusion and distress.

Jon took another step toward the cave opening, when another gold slide glittered down a treasure hill. Another baby dragon?

The two little dragons in front of Jon screamed and clawed at one another.

"No, stop!" a squeaky voice called as something slid down a treasure hill. Jon blinked to see a grubby child struggle to its feet. It was filthy, with matted, shoulder-length hair and a tattered, loose tunic. Scars and scratches decorated its bare arms and legs. Jon wondered if some of the stains on its tunic were blood.

"Don't fight!" the child begged, stepping between the two little dragons. It reached out to the creatures with its skinny arms. "Don't hurt your sister!"

"Who are you?" Jon asked, astonished.

"I forgot my name," the child said. "No, please, stop!" One of the dragons hissed at it and lunged forward, slashing one arm. The child jerked its arm back, now dripping blood. Then the arm extended once more, still attempting to separate the rowdy young creatures.

Pounding came from outside the cave, and more shouts. From the huge room where Jon had been humiliated by the babies' mother, the big dragon roared. The ground shook again. The men outside shouted louder.

"We have to go," Jon said. "You have to come with me. Now." He stepped toward the churn of child and junior monsters and seized the uninjured arm. He pulled.

"No, no!" the little one cried frantically. "I must stay here! The dragon mother killed my family! She said I could live as long as I work for her and serve her children! I can't go! She'll kill me!"

"You're just a little... girl or boy? And you're what? Nine or ten years old? These dragons are hurting you. Come with me and you'll be safe."

"I'm a girl," the child murmured. She resisted as Jon pulled her away from the baby dragons. The smaller reptiles were now staring at the cave opening, stomping their clawed feet in distress as knights and guards became visible, piling barrels and boxes on the rocky ground.

Jon hesitated for a moment. He would likely be punished if he, a humble peasant boy, interrupted the work of these men, who must be exalted castle folk. Then he saw a light coming from the cave wall a little to the right of where he'd entered the cave. He pulled the girl toward it, knowing that it must be a smaller entrance. Sure enough, there was a large crack in the rock, big enough for Jon to pull his companion through. They stepped into the bright sunlight and walked out from behind a thick patch of brush. Jon nodded, remembering his approach to this cave. The noise and motion in these bushes must have been one of the baby dragons, watching him. Now he pulled his captive, still resisting and whimpering, down the mountain slope.

"You, boy!" a large man in shiny armor shouted. He pointed at Jon, and then motioned to the little girl. "And you... too. Go home to your mother. This is no place for weak children or lowly serfs."

The man stood straight and haughty, a sword in one hand and a helmet in the other. He tossed his thick mane of yellow hair. "I have conquered the pathetic lord of this valley. I, Lord Daniel, have freed the castle and the army from his feeble leadership, and I will restore this land to its former greatness. We marched today to this place, and now we will utterly destroy the dragon!"

Jon and the little girl looked back at the castle, where the great wooden gate stood open at last. People were passing in and out of it.

Two soldiers ran up to the proud nobleman, all shouts and stomping feet, dust flying around them. "My lord!" one shouted, his face alight with pride and joy. "We are ready!"

The yellow-haired lord grinned and lifted his face toward the vast hole in the side of the mountain. "Do it," he said simply.

"FIRE!" the second soldier screamed toward the cave entrance.

Jon, still holding onto the arm of the squirming little girl, saw the soldiers nearer the cave run a short distance from it before dropping to the ground. The lord and the two soldiers near them braced themselves. Then the mountain exploded.

A pounding noise, louder than any thunder Jon had ever heard, rushed from the cave. Rocks, even smaller boulders, flew into the air and shot across the slopes in a rain of dust and pebbles.

He and the little girl, who hadn't known what to expect, were thrown off their feet and sent rolling down the mountain, the derisive laughter of the lord and his two soldiers accompanying them. Jon wasn't able to hold onto the girl as they went screaming downward. Then, at the foot of the mountain, they came to a stop, and stood on the dry grass of the valley floor. Jon grabbed the little girl's arm before she could bolt, and they both stared back up at the army.

"It's gone," Jon said. "They did something to the cave opening."

The little girl nodded, her mouth open and her eyes wide.

Then they heard the dragon roar her indignation and rage. The ground shuddered and rumbled once more. Jon clung to the child's arm as he backed away and prepared to run.

"She's going to kill us!" the little girl gasped. Tears slid down her cheeks.

At last, it happened. With the loudest roar of all, the dragon's head and shoulders burst through the fallen rocks that filled the cave entrance. She shoved and struggled, but made little progress. Her head swung back and forth and Jon was certain she was getting ready to flame the army. She never had a chance.

The army roared as loudly as she did. Archers encircled the rocky entrance and let their arrows fly. The dragon's next sound was as much moan as threat. Many of the arrows had fallen uselessly on the rocks, but some stuck in her eyes or in her neck. Then the swordsmen charged, screaming again and swinging their weapons. They climbed the rocks and hacked at the imprisoned dragon's neck and head. She screamed her agony. Jon could see, even from the foot of the mountain, the great rivers of blood that flowed from the creature onto the fallen rocks that filled the cavern door. The army cheered.

Jon and the little girl turned and ran across the valley floor toward where the villagers hid in the forest at the far side. Halfway across the valley, they slowed to an exhausted walk.

"You need a name," Jon said. "I think I'll call you Jane. That was my little sister's name." The little girl nodded.

By the time they reached the section of forest where the villagers were sheltered, they had been spotted.

"Jon!" his mother sobbed, rushing to him and hugging him. For the first time, Jon noticed that she was shorter than he was. "I was so worried about you!"

"You," old Henry grumbled. "I hoped you had become a man and gone to kill the dragon."

Gently, Jon untangled himself from his mother's arms. "The dragon is dead," he said. "I didn't do it. But the dragon is dead."

This statement brought a storm of shouts, cheers and mumbles from the villagers who crowded around Jon and the little girl. The child looked longingly at Jon's mother.

"A lord came from somewhere else," Jon announced. "Lord Daniel. I think he attacked

our Lord Richard and led his army and Lord Richard's to fight the dragon. They used some kind of magic or something to knock down the rocks in the mountain and block up the dragon's cave. Then when she tried to come out, they killed her."

"You went to watch this, did you?" Mistress Anne asked. Her eyes narrowed in contempt.

"No," Jon said. He felt his face warm. He closed his eyes in shame. "I went to the dragon. But I didn't know how to kill it. Her. She has babies, so she's a her. Or she was. I couldn't kill her, and she... she knew I was weak and stupid."

"Weak and stupid and cowardly!" Mistress Anne agreed. "And a liar! I'll bet you only went near enough to see the army. If you had gotten close to the dragon like our brave men, you would be dead, too!"

Jon noticed that his mother stepped toward the little girl and wrapped one warm, loving arm around the skinny little shoulders. "Where is your mama, sweetest?" she asked softly. The child leaned into her embrace and smiled up at the woman hopefully.

"My name is Jane," the little girl said.

"You went to see the dragon alone?" Old Henry asked. He shook his head. "With what weapon? Did you think you would be a hero?"

"I'm not a hero," Jon sighed. He remembered what Lord Daniel had said. He was a weak child and a lowly serf. The dragon had called him a foolish, stupid mouse. "I did nothing. I wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to help. But I couldn't." His head lowered.

"No!" the little girl squeaked. She stepped forward, though her hand squeezed the bigger hand of Jon's mother, who followed her possessively. "You're wrong! So wrong! If you hadn't made me come with you, I would have been in the cave when the rocks came crashing down! I would be dead! You saved me!"

The villagers stared at her in surprise. Then they looked back at Jon.

Jon looked at the girl who would be his new little sister. His eyes widened in surprise as he digested this idea. He blinked. At last, he smiled. "Oh," he said. "I'm glad."

Say Hi to Malachi

Ethan Siegler

· COLLEGE FICTION ·

Every weekday for as long as I can remember, at 3:37 pm, when my school bus stops on Irving, Sophie is waiting for me with a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and my Siberian Husky, Gus. Those are my favorite things: Sophie, Doritos, and Gus.

“How was school today, Malachi? Do you want to go home and see Noah or walk Gus with me?”

“Walk Gus with me,” I reply.

At some point or another, I mimic everything that I hear, especially everything that I hear from Sophie. Her Ukrainian accent gives English an irresistible cadence.

We take our normal route – left on Pecan, right on Sylvester, right at the canal. Sophie used to ask me to feed the ducks at the canal a few of my Doritos, but that was before she knew better. The conversation is sparse, which we have both come to enjoy. If Sophie didn’t ask me about school, nobody would. When we get home, she lets Gus off his leash and reminds me to take my Doritos bag to the trash. After turning on the TV, Sophie begins cleaning the floors. She knows that I will sit and watch PBS for at least an hour. The floors will be dry long before I get up.

On Sundays, mom and dad leave my twin brother Noah and me home with Sophie while they go to church. This has never been a problem in the past, since Sophie is able to manage her housekeeping duties and keep us entertained with old movies. But today, when mom and dad got home, Noah was upstairs feeding a baby mouse to his snake Roy, and Sophie was in the alley taking out the garbage. I might as well have been home alone. Mom walked through the front door, yelling “Noah? Malachi? Is anybody here? Sophie?”

“Here he is, Nadia.” Dad found me obsessively opening and closing the closet where Sophie keeps her cleaning supplies.

“Whatabunchofslobs” I said, opening the closet door. I took out a broom and replaced it immediately, slamming the door. “Whatabunchofslobs.” Mimicking what I had seen Sophie do numerous times, I opened the door again, put on a pair of rubber gloves and grabbed the toilet brush. “Whatabunchofslobs.” I was stuck in a Sophie loop, unable to break myself free from the obsessive repetition. Her unique Ukrainian accent gallivanted through my mind, flirting with every syllable that rolled off of my tongue.

Immediately, dad grabbed me by the forearm and spun me around. He threw the toilet

brush back into the cleaning closet and pulled the gloves off of me. “Snap out of it, buddy.”

“Snapoutovit, buddy!” I yelled back, and ran upstairs to my room.

I can’t help it, always repeating back what I hear. I’ve been doing it since I was old enough to speak. When Noah scolds me, his words echo in my head, as if he were shouting into an empty cave. “For the last time, Malachi! Don’t. Stand. On. My. Bed!” Cue instant reverberations. Noah’s words become the only thing in the universe worthy of my attention. The walls of my skull facilitate the repetition, allowing the words to bounce rapidly from side to side. As the sounds make their way through my nervous system, my mouth begins to piece together an intelligible sentence. Now, every time I see Noah, I am inclined to yell “Malachi! Don’t stand on my bed!” That one took less than twenty-four hours to make its way into my repertoire. If I could stop myself, I would.

Later that night, mom and dad’s conversation echoed through our home. I wish I could have prevented it. “Listen, babe. I like Sophie just as much as you do, and I understand how hard it is going to be to get by without her until we find a replacement.”

“That’s just it, Dan. We won’t find a replacement. No other housekeeper is going to agree to watch the boys while we are at work. And she gets along with Malachi. Every therapist who’s ever met him has left within three months. I know she is just a housekeeper, but she has been with us for four years. I consider her part of this family, and so do the boys.”

“What do you want me to say, Nadia? I won’t have her walking around my house, slamming doors and calling us slobs. She’s gone. I’ll break the news to Malachi tomorrow.”

Monday morning was the same as every other day. I woke up to the sound of mom’s high heels, clicking and clacking up the hardwood stairs. She opened the door to my room, employing the same words as always. “Time for school, sweetheart. Come downstairs and eat your eggs.”

I’ve eaten the same breakfast for the past two and a half years: three eggs, scrambled, with a handful of melted cheese. I despise those eggs, but mom doesn’t understand that. I used to eat Cheerios with sliced up bananas and 2% milk every morning. Dad tried to make me eat them once with no banana, and that was the end of that. Mom thought I was over the Cheerios phase, and started offering me other choices. She started with bagels, but I can’t stand butter, cream cheese, or pretty much anything that can be formed into a brick and spread. She tried making me eat yogurt and granola instead, but I refused, since yogurt is disgusting. By the time I had skipped breakfast for five straight days, I was willing to try anything. I was in a good mood, and Sophie was coming over later to walk Gus with me and dust the blinds, so I ate the eggs. Now mom and dad think that I want eggs every day for the rest of my life. Wrong.

On the way to school, I read all of the signs out loud, just like always. It’s the only way to drown out mom’s phone conversation – something about a merger.

9th Ave, 3 miles. “Target, Bed Bath and Beyond, Rubio’s.”

“Yeah, buddy.”

9th Ave, 1 mile. “McDonald’s, Taco Bell, Chevron.”

“Mmhmm.”

9th Ave, Exit Only. “Starbucks, McCarthy’s Irish Pub, River Crest Retirement Center.”

As we approached school, I began to read frantically. Everything I decoded became a mechanism to calm my nerves.

“Horace Place. 8th Ave. Wendy’s!”

I didn’t want to see my teacher. I never know how to respond to her enthusiastic bids for attention.

“QuikTrip! Jackson Elementary! 7th Ave!”

“Shush, Malachi.”

I didn’t want to deal with the horrific cafeteria food.

“6th Ave. T.G.I. Friday’s.”

I just wanted to get home and see Sophie.

“5th Ave. Comstock Park.”

I didn’t want to go to speech today. The speech therapist hates me. I heard her tell my math teacher last month.

“4th Ave!!!”

“Shut it, Malachi!”

“Don Bosco’s Autism Academy.”

“We’re here, honey. Looks like we’re five minutes early. Dad wanted to talk to you this morning, but he had to rush off to work. We fired Sophie. I’m really sorry, buddy. We’ll have to find a new housekeeper.”

Spontaneous language is hard for me, so I thought of every phrase and every word and every accent that I had ever heard. *Labyrinth* came to mind. Sophie and I have watched it together a dozen times. I leaned forward so mom knew I was serious and yelled, “It’s not fair!” just like Jennifer Connelly yells at David Bowie in the movie.

“I understand, Malachi, but your father left me no choice. Have a good day at school, honey.”

Every once in a while, people tell me something important. I know it is important because they only say it once. Important things only need to be repeated to people who are stupid, and nobody thinks that I am stupid. Important things go deeper, as if they need to sit in the dark and contemplate their role in my life. But like all things that go in, they eventually come out, often with less than perfect timing. That’s why last year at Thanksgiving dinner, right in the middle of grace, I said, “Pappy’s dead. He’s not coming back, Malachi,” and that’s why Monday at school, for the rest of the day, I walked around saying, “We fired Sophie. I’m really sorry, buddy.”

I knew I had to get Sophie back, but it was an impossible task. Mom and dad fired her because of me, and that was that. I was the one who copied her in front of them, so they knew Sophie thought we were slobs. I began to think about every nice thing that Sophie ever said. I thought about all the things that I repeated over the past four years that *didn't* get her fired, and I decided to start rehearsing these lines, day in and day out, until mom and dad got the idea.

"Walk Gus with me," I would say after school.

Mom rolled her eyes. "You can walk Gus with the new housekeeper, Malachi."

I began to repeat this line at dinner and at bedtime, but it didn't seem to change their minds.

"How was school today, Malachi?" I would say, in an attempt to show my parents Sophie's compassion.

Dad let out one of his sighs. "We know you miss her. We're really sorry, buddy."

This went on for weeks. I repeated all of Sophie's best lines, but nothing changed. I had no choice. I needed to show my parents that Sophie was more than just a housekeeper. She was my friend, and she did more than any therapist ever did for me.

"No TV today, Malachi. Let's just talk."

"Your Doritos are at home. It's a little different."

"Gus is sick, buddy. We can still walk."

"Noah, say hi to your brother."

"Sorry I'm sad today."

"Thanks for listening, Malachi."

"I know how you feel, bud."

"Say hi, Nadia."

"Say hi, Dan."

"Somebody, please say hi to Malachi."

The Forgotten

Samuel Burris

· HIGH SCHOOL FICTION ·

I woke up in a dark, cold room. My feet and hands were numb with cold, but every other part of me ached as though a troop of tap-dancing rhinos had stampeded over me. I tried to sit up but heavy metal chains on my ankles and wrists held me down to an uncomfortable mattress.

“What the heck?” I murmur.

Suddenly a wave of panic washes over me. Who am I? Where am I? I felt like an infant, so innocent and unknowing, yet at the mercy of the world. Except in this case I am at the mercy of... what is this place? As my eyes adjust to the dark I can make out the features of the tiny room that I’m in. It’s more or less bare. There is a disgusting looking sink on the opposite wall, a toilet, and the uncomfortable bed I’m lying on.

Am I in jail? No, the walls aren’t gray or made out of cement as far as I can tell. Wait... My breathing turns shallow. The walls, ceiling, and floors are all covered with white padding.

“N-No, th-this can’t be happening,” I stammer. “I am not in an asylum right now. It’s all a dream. That’s right. I’ll just pinch myself and I’ll wake...” I try to pinch my left arm with my right hand but the cold, heavy chains bring reality crashing down upon me.

I felt like screaming, but apparently someone else beat me to it. I hear a bloodcurdling scream from somewhere outside my room. It sounds as if someone is being tortured with a hot rod or burned at the stake.

“Please stop!” I hear them wail. “Aaaaahhhhh!” The screaming goes on for several more minutes.

Up until this point I had never thought that anything could be worse than being locked up in an asylum, but hearing this person’s screams made my whole body want to shut down and die. Tears start rolling down my face as I listen. Is that person in a cell, chained down just like me? Who is making this person scream and why?

Eventually the screams die down and I lie shivering on my bed. Then less than a minute later, the screaming resumes, although this time it seems as though it’s a little closer and coming from someone different.

This goes on for several more times, with the screams getting closer and closer to me. The next thing I know the screaming comes from the room that is right next to mine. My heart is pounding as I try to calm myself down. Surely they aren’t going to torture me, right? I mean, I haven’t done anything wrong, at least, as far as I can remember (which consists of the last hour or so).

The screaming in the next room starts to die down, followed by uncontrolled sobbing. I hear the door in the next room open and then close. Five steps later, my door is being opened.

“Good morning.” A man with a cruel smile, bloody scissors, and a clipboard walks up next to my bed. “My name is Dr. Quintana and I will be performing some, ah, *examination procedures* on you today.” At these words he smiled even more cruelly and a little fire seemed to ignite within the depths of his dark brown eyes.

“No,” I muttered. “NO!”

Dr. Quintana took his bloody scissors and started attacking my stomach. My vision turned red and I heard screaming which I would only realize later was my own. The pain was so bad to describe it would only be stating reality. I closed my eyes as he cut deeper and deeper into my flesh. This went on for what seemed like hours. When he was done Dr. Quintana got out a needle and thread and started ruthlessly sewing together the huge gash he had carved into me.

He stood up.

“Well, everything seems to be in order,” he smiled viciously as he marked something on his clipboard. “I’ll be back to see you again tomorrow,” with that he walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

No, he can’t be coming back again. Surely he won’t be back to torture me again. No one could be that cruel. I thought this as I listened to the anguished screams and cries of others.

I spent the rest of the day sobbing in both pain and terror. I tugged desperately at my chains only to find that they are held together by a strong combination lock. No matter how many numbers I tried I couldn’t get the right one. Eventually I wore myself out and fell into a fitful sleep.

It was horrible. I saw people kicking and screaming, as if someone close to them was being ripped away. The images flashed by so fast I could barely comprehend them. Then I saw even more disturbing things. People in white coats forced me onto a bed and placed a strange helmet-like thing onto me, followed by arcs of electricity. They took it off and beat me until I seemed unconscious. The last thing I remember is seeing one number on the bedside lock turn to the number nine...

I woke up and immediately turned to the combination lock on my bed and turned the first number to the number nine. I then realized to my despair that there were actually four numbers needed. I tried many combinations all starting with the number nine but none worked. The screams of the others started creeping closer and closer. Eventually the screams came from the room next to mine. I could tell it was coming from a girl and it sounded as though an angel was having its wings torn off. I tried desperately to block out the screaming as I waited for my turn of agony.

That night I had a very similar dream to the previous one with people screaming and me being forced into a bed and beaten. This time, however, showed a different number—the number three.

The same routine followed the next day, with me listening to the cries of the others and my “neighbor” if you could call it that. When the cries stopped, it was my turn and Dr. Quintana showed no mercy and my screams echoed that. The rest of the day I spent sobbing until sleep overtook me.

As usual, the same nightmare plagued me but at the end, a new number showed—five.

The next day ensued in the usual horrible way. The screams of others hurt almost as much

as the actual torture itself, with my neighbor's screams being the most heartbreaking of all.

"Hold on," I would mutter. "I promise I will get you out of here."

Right before I fell asleep I turned the second knob to three and the third to five.

"One more night... I hope..."

That night the last number appeared, although just slightly visible, as the number seven.

In the morning I woke up late. The screams were already much closer than they usually were when I woke up. I hastily turned to the side of my bed and fumbled with the last knob until it turned to the number seven. I heard a small 'click' and grinned as the chains fell away from my body.

I stood on the bare floor in my bloody patients' gown and stumbled but caught myself on the edge of the sink. I made my way to the door, and found to my surprise, that it was unlocked. I waited for the screams to resume before exiting into the corridor.

The corridor in which I stood was almost as bad as my room. It had flickering yellow lights casting an eerie glow on the gray, stone walls. On the left and right stood metal doors like the one I had just come from and above each was a combination of letters and numbers. I looked up above my door. The sequence was MAS-30300. I looked away towards the end of the hallway and saw a set of stone stairs stained with something red, too dark to be ketchup.

I shook my head and headed to the door next to mine. I hobbled from the pain of the past "surgeries" but managed to reach the door labeled RIK-12000. If I was going to keep my promise and save this person I had to work fast, because the screams were coming from only one room to the right. I pushed open the door and went inside, closing the door behind me.

The room was very similar to mine. The same walls and plumbing. But then I saw a sight that instantly broke my heart.

The girl whom I had heard screaming was lying on her bed, trembling. Her hair was long and reddish-brown, her pale face was as white as milk from fear, and she looked to be about five feet tall, although it was hard to tell with her lying down. The only unsettling thing about her was that she only had one eye. Where the other one should've been was a sloppy Ace bandage covering the gap. The fact that anyone would do something as horrible as take out someone's eye filled me with rage and determination.

"Don't be afraid," I said as calmly as I could. "I'm going to get you out of here."

She just stared with her good eye, but she stopped shaking so I guess that was a start.

I went over to her bed and tried my luck at the combination lock-to no avail. At that moment the screams coming from the next room started to die down and I could hear the sound of a door opening and closing. I quickly hid to the left of the door so that hopefully the doctor wouldn't see me as he walked in. I didn't know exactly what I was planning but I hoped it worked.

The door opened and Dr. Quintana walked in, staring at his clipboard. I launched myself at him. Normally I wouldn't have been able to take down a grown man like him, being as frail and skinny as I was, but I caught him off-balance and sent him toppling forward. His head banged against the metal bedpost and knocked him out cold.

I wasted no time and snatched up the doctor's clipboard, scanning for a possible combination lock number. I found RIK-12000 and right next to it was a four number sequence: 4123. I rushed to the lock and started fumbling with the numbers. At last I heard a little 'click' and the

chains fell away from the girl's body.

She sat up slowly and murmured a quiet "thank you."

"No problem," I said. "But he isn't going to stay down forever, and I don't know how many others like him are here. Can you stand?"

She started to stand but lost her balance and I caught her.

"Whoa there! Are you alright?" I asked.

She nodded as she steadied herself by holding onto my shoulder. I bent down and picked up Dr. Quintana's clipboard. I removed the papers and tucked them into a small pocket in my gown.

"Alright, let's get going." I said and we started making are way out of the room, holding each other for support.

"Should we try and free the others?" The girl asked.

I paused and thought about it.

"No, we have to concentrate on getting ourselves out first. If we can do that then we can contact police and have them come back for all these people. Plus, it's more likely that someone will spot a larger group."

She nodded and we continued on down the hallway, trying to be as silent and stealthy as possible with our injured bodies.

When we reached the stairs, I looked over the railing and saw at least four floors below us. Each floor seemed very similar to our own and on the floor right below ours I saw a person in a white coat sweep into one of the rooms. Moments later we heard screaming.

I swallowed hard and we started descending the stairs, our stitches and wounds screaming in protest. When we reached the floor below ours we quickly kept descending until we were almost on the ground floor. On the last few steps we stopped because we heard a door open and close. We could hear a patient inside, sobbing hysterically.

"No please! Please! I—" His words were cut off there as the sound of a sickening slice cut through the night.

The girl tightened her grip on my arm and I saw a tear roll down her cheek.

"Don't tell me they just did what I think they did," she whispered in a trembling voice.

"Then I won't say anything," I muttered. "When he comes back out, we both need to jump on him at once. We will have the element of surprise on our side and he will be unbalanced if he is carrying a weapon."

She nodded and together we crouched outside the door, waiting. When the door finally opened a doctor carrying a bloody axe stepped out. We pounced on him and his head hit the concrete floor hard. I took the axe and raised it, poised for the kill... I couldn't do it. As much as he deserved it, I couldn't bring myself to kill him. Instead I used the blunt end and whacked his head, just to make sure he would stay down for a while.

Together, we hurried down the hallway, and I decided to keep the axe just in case we met more doctors along the way. About half-way down the hallway we saw another doctor standing outside a doorway smoking a pipe and immersed in a newspaper. I swiftly ran up to him and he barely had time to look up from his newspaper before I slammed the blunt end of the axe into his head.

I stood there, trying to catch my breath and ignore the growing pain in my wounds. I glanced to the door the doctor had been standing outside of and realized it was much different from the patients' rooms. It was brightly lit and seemed unoccupied at the moment. I peered inside and realized it must be some sort of office.

"I don't think we should waste any time," the girl said quietly.

"I know, but I just want to have a quick look," I replied.

We crept into the room, trying to make as little noise as possible. It was lavishly furnished, with beautiful armchairs and a polished mahogany desk in the center. On the desk rested a small, metal drawer. I walked around and opened it, and to my surprise found a catalog, similar to the ones found in libraries, but instead of book titles there were photos and names of different people.

These were the patients at the asylum! My heart quickened. My eyes raced across the cards for my number.

"MAS-30300, MAS-30300," I muttered over and over.

Finally I found it and I picked it up with trembling hands. *Joseph Smith*, followed by a picture of a teenage boy with a Mediterranean complexion, jet black hair, and hazel eyes. I touched the photo gingerly, as if this person in the photo was a long-lost family relative. I felt as though I couldn't be more different from this 'Joseph Smith.'

"Joseph Smith." I jumped, startled, but then realized it was only the girl speaking. "That's a nice name," she smiled.

"Thanks," I muttered, blushing.

Then it struck me that she was somewhere in here too. I furiously started flipping through the catalog.

"What are you looking for?" She asked.

"You," I replied.

At last I found her card and handed it to her. *Kirsten Foster* followed by a picture that looked almost exactly like her except in this photo, she had *two* beautiful eyes. I tried to contain my anger that anyone could do something so horrible to someone so nice.

"That's a really nice name," I said quietly. She smiled and tucked the photo into her pocket.

I slipped my photo into my pocket and together we started walking towards the door until two doctors rounded the corner and we almost ran right into them.

"What the..." One of them gasped and I wasted no time smashing his head with the blunt end of the axe, but no sooner then he collapsed the other threw me to the ground and jumped on me. Kirsten threw herself at him and managed to throw him off balance enough for us to overpower him and knock him out.

"That was too close," I breathed heavily.

"Let's get out of here," Kirsten said, leaning against a wall.

Together we dashed to the end of the hall and towards the double doors. We burst outside and a surprised doctor yelled "Hey!" but I threw the axe at him and although it didn't kill, it would definitely leave a nasty bruise and stop him from pursuing us.

The entire asylum was surrounded by a dense forest. Since we didn't know what else to do, we plunged straight ahead.

The next part was a blur. It seemed as though we ran for at least ten hours, our bodies still

coursing with adrenaline. Then again, our usual day-to-day routine was so slow and painful this sudden burst of excitement might have only been an hour. Still, by the end of it we were completely exhausted, our wounds were bleeding and more painful than ever, but our minds were full of happiness. *Free! Finally, free at last!*

Up ahead through the trees we saw lights. City lights! We stumbled forward and came face to face with a tall gate topped with barbed wire. Unfortunately, it was heavily padlocked and I left my axe when I threw it at the doctor earlier. I sat down and gazed up at the starry night, hoping for something, anything to help us.

I was about to give up hope when I heard a loud voice.

“Hey! What do you kids think you’re doing?!”

I spun around and saw a burly African-American officer holding a lantern. He looked pretty annoyed to see us but I couldn’t be happier to see him.

“Please officer we don’t mean to cause trouble,” I croaked. “We just need help. Please...”

He raised an eyebrow but suddenly realized that we were not playing any games, and we needed urgent medical attention. His expression softened and he unlocked the gate.

“What’s with the patients’ outfits?” He asked.

“It’s a long story, and I promise to tell you everything, but right now we...” Suddenly Kirsten collapsed and the cop lurched to catch her.

“You’re right. We need to get you two to a hospital.”

The officer carried Kirsten to his car and I stumbled along next to him. When we got to the car he laid her down the back and I sat next to him in the passenger seat. He turned on the car’s flashing lights and siren and we sped toward the nearest hospital.

“I’m sorry we brought you into all this,” I muttered.

“Don’t sweat it. Actually, I’m glad I found you. You didn’t look like you had much left in you. Plus, there have been reports of people mysteriously disappearing, usually with many people around them dead. I think I have a feeling you and her are somehow connected,” He pointed his thumb at Kirsten.

I nodded.

“By the way, what’s your name kid?”

“Joseph. Joseph Smith,” I say quickly.

He nods. “I’m Officer Reyes, or Roberto Reyes, but most people just call me Rob.”

Rob the cop. Interesting name.

I don’t remember passing out but next thing I knew I woke in a soft, hospital bed with an IV hooked up to my arm.

“About time, kid.” Officer Reyes was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, smiling. “How about you explain some stuff to me now?”

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. This was much better than the asylum, the walls were cheery and bright, and there was a big window overlooking the city.

I turned to Officer Reyes and slowly I explained the whole thing, from waking up in the asylum with no memory to escaping it with Kirsten. Kirsten...

“Where is she?!” I was suddenly wide awake and felt sick to my stomach. If she didn’t make it...

“She’s fine kid, don’t worry. She’s in the room right next door. You’ll see her when she wakes up,” said Rob. “As for your story, I need to report this to headquarters ASAP. Don’t worry though, you just rest up. We’ll handle everything from here,” And with that he stood up, ruffled my hair, and walked out.

A Timely Arrival

Carter Sampson

· HIGH SCHOOL FICTION ·

Us clocks really don't get enough credit. Your entire way of life revolves around us. You are totally dependent on us clocks, but we never get the props we deserve. But that's ok, we just focus on entertaining ourselves.

While keeping time is an important job, it is not necessarily very interesting. Much like breathing for humans, keeping track of passing time comes naturally to me without much thought. In order to keep myself occupied and my cogs moving, I've taken on other pastimes. My favorite hobby is to look over the drama that passes by me and just *watch* (get it? If clocks had fathers, that would be a clock-dad-joke).

One would think my station on a classroom wall would preclude any excitement, but it actually provides quite a show. The majority of students are boring to watch, mostly just nose picking and scratching of embarrassing places. However, every class includes a few students that stand apart, and those are the ones that make observing worth *my time* (somebody stop me!).

My personal favorite of the classes I oversee each day is the fifth period group. That's the time of day when the drama really comes to life. Lunch has just ended, so rumors have had time to spread and friends have gossiped about the day's social agenda.

Within this class, there are a few characters who occupy the majority of my attention. Being a clock, I obviously have no ears to hear what they say, but their actions paint a fairly clear picture.

The first is a girl who, put plainly, makes my minute hand tick faster than it should. She is best described as lithe, with blue eyes that I could dive into (I know clocks can't dive, but let's just pretend for the sake of the metaphor). I could spend a full rotation of my hour hand describing her, but I digress. Being a decent lip reader, I'm fairly certain she goes by the name Ashley.

In reality, most nerds aren't really made fun of that much. The ones who annoy others by being know-it-alls get bullied, but most are somewhat respected for their intelligence. They may not have friends, but are usually left alone. The best example of this that I know of is one of my favorite kids to watch: Joshua. Joshua isn't ridiculed for his good grades, he's not really responded to at all. He speaks little, and nobody speaks to him. Joshua doesn't seem to mind, it's just his personality.

But there is one person I can tell he wants to talk with: Ashley. He glances at her and listens like only a head-over-heels adolescent does. You could say she is the *tick* to his *tock*.

Of course, I wouldn't be telling you a story about these two if they were already dating, then there would be very little room for plot development. At the end of the school year's third quarter, their relationship had made little progress (meaning there was no relationship). If asked

about Ashley, Joshua's would probably describe her as "chill". But nobody actually bothered to ask him.

The moment I really started to appreciate the oncoming drama of these two's situation was at the arrival of the girl heretofore called The Oracle of Relationships (or The Oracle). I've never figured out her name, so I gave her the most fitting name I could. She's pretty in a tomboy, careless kind of way.

The Oracle appeared in the class at the beginning of the fourth quarter of the school year. I watched as she sat in the empty seat next to Joshua, and I watched as she immediately befriended him. They seemed to talk every day for the all of fifth period. She brought Joshua out of his shell. Even by body language alone it was clear they shared a sibling-esque bond.

I am thankful high school students' emotions are so easy to read, because without their transparency, I would never be able to follow the events of the day. Due to this plainness, it was obvious that Joshua and The Oracle often discussed his feelings for Ashley. The Oracle was always gesturing for Joshua to make his move, and he was always shaking his head in response. Joshua was clearly upset with his stagnate relationship with Ashley. The Oracle wanted to strangle him for not taking action to fix it.

Of course, a girl like Ashley doesn't stay available for long. A guy by the name of Shayn decided to try his luck a few weeks before school ended. Shayn was fairly popular at the school. From what I could tell, he wasn't exactly a good guy. He wasn't the person to tweet something mean, but he would like the mean tweet. Like most of the guys in fifth period, he had an obvious crush on Ashley. Unlike most of the boys, he had no qualms about speaking to her. Whatever he said when he talked to her, it was clearly charming. For the last few weeks of school, Shayn and Ashley held hands a lot. Up until the last day, that is.

That last day was eventful to say the least. Joshua, after a final pep talk from The Oracle, approached Ashley. He talked with her for a while. Joshua seemed surprisingly comfortable, and Ashley laughed several times at something he said. Unfortunately, Joshua was holding a cup of coffee in his hand as he spoke. Shayn, hoping for a cheap laugh, came up behind Joshua and slapped the coffee out of his hand. The hot liquid soaked Joshua's hair, skin, and clothes.

Immediately, as most teenage boys would, Joshua grasped Shayn by the shirt and cocked back a fist. Thankfully, an enormous lineman from the football team (who I call Barry because he looks like a bear) stepped in. Barry caught Joshua's fist and pulled him away from Shayn. Shayn stood there laughing, not in the happy way, but in a cruel snicker. His laugh was meant to drive humiliation as deep into Joshua as possible.

At that moment, I witnessed a transformation in Joshua. I saw his eyes harden and his fists clench. I knew without a doubt that any courage Joshua had lacked to pursue Ashley had been made up for tenfold by his hate for Shayn. I'd never seen anyone, especially Joshua, so ticked off in my classroom (puns are a bad habit). There was no chance Joshua was going to let Shayn keep him from Ashley.

After the final bell of the school year, the janitor moved me to the outer wall of the school. That way I could be of use, even if my usual classroom was empty. From my new post's high vantage point, I could see Ashley's house, just a few blocks from the school. Just outside the school building, I noticed Ashley chewing out Shayn, clearly chastising him for his behavior. Shayn ar-

gued back, trying to put a calming hand on her shoulder. Ashley slapped it away and stormed off, walking home. Their relationship was obviously in jeopardy, if not already over.

What happened next remains the greatest moment I've ever witnessed as a timepiece, and it warms my cogs to this day:

I saw The Oracle grab Joshua by the shoulders and yell something into his face. Then she pointed in the direction of Ashley's house and released him. Joshua nodded, took a deep breath, and sprinted to his vehicle of choice: not a car, not a motorcycle, not even a bike. It was a scooter. One of those fat-wheeled, ugly, two-person scooters that you push with one foot.

As Joshua began scooting towards Ashley's house he was passed by a speeding car, driven by Shayn, who was on his way to patch things up with Ashley. Joshua tried to keep up, he moved quicker than I thought possible on a scooter. Thanks to red light and traffic, he was still within sight of Shayn's car when he reached Ashley's gated neighborhood. The gate was really just for show and opened for any car that passed its motion sensor. Shayn started driving through the gate, obviously going to beat Joshua to Ashley's house.

Out of nowhere, the gate slammed closed, shutting suddenly on the grill of Shayn's car. He yelled in surprise and tried to get out of the car. However, he found his doors held shut by the entire football team. Unable to escape his own vehicle, thanks to the fifty boys holding him in, Shayn slammed the dashboard in frustration.

The team cheered as Joshua sped by on his scooter, waving to them in gratitude. I watched him arrive at Ashley's doorstep, and dismount his metal steed. Just before he rang the doorbell, The Oracle ran up behind him and handed him a single, white rose.

Joshua turned to the door and rapped his knuckles against it. Ashley came to the door and he shyly handed her the flower. She smiled and took it. For half a moment, Joshua seemed unsure of what to do. Before he had a chance to do anything, however, Ashley took action. She wrapped her arms around his waist as she pulled him close. She touched her lips to his. They pulled apart after a moment, and Joshua said something that made Ashley giggle. They both headed towards the park near Ashley's house, holding hands and smiling. Then they rode away: a scrawny knight and his princess atop a war horse with the word "RAZOR" printed on the side. Joshua and Ashley, finally together, on a fat-wheeled, ugly, two-person scooter.

So next time you see a clock, remember how important we are. If you're wondering how to thank us, it's pretty easy. All you need to do is live life to its greatest potential. Make your story a good one. Put on a show. We'll be watching.

THE END

Mekong Delta

Patte Lanus-Ruane

· ADULT POETRY ·

It's not quite dawn in the valley, and you've woken
me again with those dreams of tropical
foliage, rainbow cotillions of agents in barrels
labeled for airborne delivery. I've watched you
these many years dividing your life
into peach quarters; springs spent
noon to dusk in the black dirt of Sussex County
kneeling over sprouts of yellow turnips,
convinced they heed your whispers.

Each summer you bring me bushels of fat raspberries,
picked while ripe breezes blow brown hair
across blue eyes sun-scorched into July.
You take aim against black-faced birds
stealing seeds, pecking holes in fleshy purple
plums, and you never pull the trigger.
I've held you late, pushing you gentle into sleep,
napalm arcs roaring nightmares into huts
defoliated banks along the Mekong River,
silhouettes running
into the water, still burning.

Mountain shadows shift, announce autumn
and you reap rewards of other dusky days
riding golden into oaks and chestnuts in flames,
green and black flannel melting into fall.
Content collecting apples on walks
searching grey November soil for winter,
the pies soon bubble in the oven; but no fire
crackles in the fireplace because
you just can't stand the sound.

Solstice darkness settles us early,
sharing our bed with moon rays obliquely
sliced across the spread like light
through the bars of the cage with you
at the bottom staring up, but this daylight will find you
moving freely through snow-quilted fields captured
and quartered only by stone fences. Gray hairs peek
from under ear-flaps of faded corduroy
as you scrape raised beds disclosing fragments
of shoots crystallized into place as neatly
as seasons through fifty-six years
in northern New Jersey, knowing
the river's memories won't evaporate
like January's ice puddles.

This is Fine

Kat Hofland

· COLLEGE POETRY ·

I found you in the backyard
watering the irrigated grass.
Nothing to fucking lose!
you were screaming
at nobody.

I wandered into the house
with all of the lights on
flashing brighter and brighter
as if to say,
We are here for as long as we want.

In the bathroom,
the water is flowing from the tub,
the toilet, the sink.
We prefer to bathe on the marble floor.

It is ninety degrees outside
but the heat is on
just in case we get cold.
Better safe than sorry.

I look out the window.
The earth is on fire
at the horizon.
*Don't worry, it'll never reach
us.*

Ode to the Poor Man

Peter Surin

· HIGH SCHOOL POETRY ·

Am I given this wealth for boon or blight?
Blessed are you with friends and their delight,
Cursed am I with “friends” and their fake zeal.
Does cash give me love that feels to be real?
Even billions have not done this deed.
For when I’ve blabbed of the cash that I bleed,
Greed consumes the other, so that they may
Have love not for me, but the way I pay.
In spite of all the money that you lack,
Joy sweeps your hut, from the front to the back,
Kept alive by your loving folks and friends.
Love keeps you close and fixes all amends.
My love reaches none, not even my kin,
Never gives them support, nor single grin.
O teach me how to live gaily till end,
Poor man, with lots to give and none to spend.
Queer it is, how you live with your close pack,
Rarely spending, yet you all have a knack,
So gainful, and makes your emotions gay,
To live with none and not feel it all weigh,
Up on your shoulders and down on your seed.
Victorious are you on money’s greed.
Whenever you look down on your small meal,
Xerically it’s wee with a cheap feel,
Yet you rejoice in its sad, vile sight.
Zero am I, will you give me your might?

My Identity Crisis

Patricia Senoo

· ADULT NONFICTION ·

“What church are you?”

Not “What church do you attend?” or “What church do you belong to?” but simply, “What church *are* you?”

In this small Southwestern town, the question is always phrased that way, and the question is *always* asked. And, even more than “Where do you live?” or “What do you do?” (or, when addressed to nine-year-old me, “What does your daddy do?”), your answer *identifies* you.

At nine, I don’t know why it matters whether you sit patiently in your pew, waiting to cannibalize your God in the form of a stale saltine and a tiny cup of grape juice as He is passed democratically among the congregation on trays so that believers can help themselves, or you have to get off your butt and line up at the altar, where He’s dispensed as wine and wafer by some guy in a getup that looks like a damn dress. But I do know that it does matter.

And it matters very much to me, because my family doesn’t attend *any* church, my mama and daddy don’t belong to any sort of congregation, and therefore, I don’t.

Knowing I don’t belong, I’ve become adept at dodging the question, at disappearing before it’s asked, when I can see it’s coming. Some kid on the playground starts to tell about something that happened at Sunday school, and before he reaches his punchline, I’ve scrambled up the ladder to the top of the slide, I’m swinging across the monkey bars, I’m spinning around on the merry-go-round, screaming with laughter and fear.

They don’t know about me, most of those kids. Linda knows, though. Linda is the daughter of the Brownie Scout leader, and she and Billie, her mom, are the warm, inviting kind of people. They have slumber parties at Linda’s house. I’ve been. Sometimes just one or two girls are invited for a sleepover, and if it’s a Saturday night, the girls tag along to Sunday school the next morning. I’ve done that, too. I’ve had a cracker with grape juice when the tray came around; I’ve put a dime in the collection plate when that came around, too.

I wouldn’t have been prepared with the money if Billie hadn’t mentioned the church thing to Mama when I was invited. Mama used to go to a Sunday school when she lived up in the mountains, way back before my daddy set his sights on her at one of the dances where his band was playing, so she knew you had to pay for the grape juice when the collection plate appeared. I guess a dime was a generous contribution back then, during the Great Depression. If it didn’t look like much when I anted up at church in the fifties, I didn’t notice. I was just grateful to have been prepared.

All that was several Sundays ago. Today is Monday, or Tuesday, or some other school day. This is Silent Reading time, and I’m engrossed in a story about “The Good Cat Jupie” when I hear

Mrs. Wallis call softly, “Kay.” I almost miss hearing my name, since it’s been my label only since last year, when my third-grade teacher declared it was too confusing to have two Patricias in the class. Apparently Patricia the missionaries’ daughter, just returned from doing God’s work in darkest Ethiopia, had priority over Patricia the heathen, so I got demoted to my middle name.

“Kay. . . .”

I look up. Mrs. Wallis is beckoning. I approach her desk as if coming forward to the altar, for I worship Mrs. Wallis. She is not young, but she is just so damn beautiful. Her short blonde hair is perfectly permed in the latest style. She wears a diamond ring and golden earrings (small, tasteful) and some kind of perfume that compels me to breathe in deeply, like I’m about to dive in deep and don’t know how long till I’ll come up. She’s wearing that soft blue silk blouse—I don’t actually know what silk is, but I’ve read the word “silken” in fairy tales and I just know that this is it—and although I can’t see them at this moment, I noticed earlier in the day that her high-heeled shoes are also *blue*, to match her outfit. I’ve never seen such a thing outside of a magazine.

She’s holding a white index card. I don’t know it yet, but last week at Parents’ Night, she handed out index cards to all the mothers in attendance, asking for pertinent information such as phone numbers and is anyone home during the daytime and *what church are you?*

Mama, of course, sitting there at my schoolroom desk in her cotton print dress and sensible oxfords, would never have been so disrespectful to a teacher as to say out loud that our religion, or lack thereof, was nobody else’s business. No, she just bent over the desk, brushing back her long hillbilly hair, and filled out the card—leaving the church part blank. So now it falls on my shoulders to fill in that blank.

I *cannot* say, “Nothing.”

I have worked so *hard*, stayed up so *late* doing all my homework to absolute perfection, drawn *gorgeous* pictures to accompany my oral report on moths and butterflies, done *every* extra credit assignment offered—and Mama, too, had stayed up half the night with me, cutting out umpteen hundred silhouettes of ants from red construction paper for the damn poster for our class’s ant farm project for the Science Fair. After all this, I am Mrs. Wallis’s favorite, surely. All her smiles, her nods of approval. . . I *cannot* lose all this now.

It comes out as a croak. A whisper. A croaking whisper: “Church of Christ.”

Mrs. Wallis smiles and fills in the blank with her perfect penmanship.

That afternoon, it’s raining, and Linda offers me a ride home when Billie comes to pick her up. She’s wriggling with excitement, she can’t wait to tell her mom: “Mrs. Wallis asked Kay what church she was and she said Church of Christ.”

“Well, that’s *good*,” Billie says. The look on her face tells me she’s already picturing me in Full Immersion Baptism.

And I can see myself leaning back into the preacher’s arms as he dunks me, and Jesus claims me as his own, and meanwhile, back at the house, Mama is breaking open another roll of dimes.

Disoriented

Briana Bryant

· COLLEGE NONFICTION ·

Blink. My eyes fluttered open. Darkness surrounded me. This was not my bedroom. In attempt to determine where I was at, I scanned the desolate room only to recognize nothing. My body ached from head to toe and I desired to sit up but I could not move. My wrists were secured to the sides of the plastic frame of the bed I was lying on. I felt as though I was resting on a pile of rocks. The worst part was the fact that I was alone; I could not have been more horrified in the moment that I realized I was alone and had no idea what was going on.

With an urge to scream, something held me back making it impossible to even let out a sigh. There was a tube in my throat and my mouth was fixed open. To be more specific, tubes were everywhere. The pain felt too real to be a nightmare but I remained hopeful that I would awaken in the warmth of my home. I realized by now I was in a hospital acknowledging the computers measuring my vitals and by the sound of the beeping monitors. My mind was dissatisfied; I wanted to know what was happening. How did I get here? What happened to me?

The door flung open allowing a rush of cool air to pour into the already chilly room. A petite young lady in blue scrubs stepped up to my bedside and shined a small light directly into my eyes inspecting my pupils. She could tell that I was startled.

“You were hit by a truck on March 3rd at your dance car wash. You are in the ICU of the Scottsdale Osborn Hospital.”

The words echoed in my head but I could not reply. My eyes watered and my body was weary so I closed my eyes and hoped because that was all I could do, even in a time where I felt so hopeless.

Days passed but I had no sense of time. A constant feeling of disorientation was upon me. Family members I saw probably twice a year went out of their way to visit me on my death bed alongside my more immediate family members. People who claimed to be my friends started to show up less and less as time went on. The amount of friends I had in general seemed to be dividing. It seemed that the majority of them did not genuinely care. They were simply curious. I questioned my continued existence often and wondered why I was living through this torture as I silently fought for the return of my life. What was my life before this and why did this happen to me?

Amnesia excluded remembrance of the accident leaving me in grief over my own stupidity wondering how I could have allowed myself to be hit by moving vehicle. I was overwhelmed by my own remorse. I wanted to remember. I tried to reflect on every last detail of that day anxious to find a memory of the accident. I could vaguely recall the morning of the car wash. My last memory was of my cousin Zach and me sitting in a car listening to music. The Black Eyed Peas

ballad that claimed “tonight’s gonna be a good night” blared through the speakers as we planned for the evening to come unaware of what would happen in the next few hours. The car wash was a fundraiser for my high school’s dance department which I was avidly involved in. That morning I decided I was going to stay for the entire car wash. I was very committed to the program – I finally felt like I fit in somewhere yet here I was unable to walk, let alone dance.

I was informed that I flew eighty feet in length when I was hit in the crosswalk. Although I admit my wrongs for crossing against the light, the man who hit me was speeding through a school zone at forty-five miles per hour reiterating the fact that two wrongs don’t make a right. Witnesses described me as limp like a rag doll as I was tossed through the air. My lifeless body thumped against the pavement and slid along the surface tearing the surface of my skin and breaking my bones. A woman at the car wash happened to be CPR certified so attempted to bring me back to life as my cousin pleaded that I hold on tight and fight. The paramedics had to cut my clothes right off my back as they rushed me to the hospital. I apparently was able to tell them my name, address, and grandmother’s phone number before going under for the second time. A hushed sound of a doctor recalling that “she” was not going to make it was on instant replay in my thoughts. I did not want people to see me this way. I was weak, I was pathetic.

Unconsciously, I fought off medications that could put a grown man under attempting to break free waking from the sedation and ripping the tubes embedded into my throat out, hence why I woke up with my wrists tied to the bed. My hands were untied as soon as the doctors were convinced that I was calm enough to give up the fight although when I was completely conscious I wished I could nonetheless. This was my own personal Hell and there was no escaping.

“As soon as you’re able to breathe, you’ll get the ventilator removed and soon enough you’ll be out of here,” doctors reminded me. With no way to respond, I nodded my head. Bilateral contusions on my brain caused the room to spin with every movement. I was on a constant merry-go-round. Morphine flowed through my veins continuously; God knows I needed it.

A brunette nurse handed me a clipboard with the alphabet on it to enable me to communicate with people by spelling things out. That day, my aunt Nicolle, who happens to be a nurse at another hospital, visited me.

Curiously, I wrote out, “What exactly is wrong with me?”

She explained aloud, “You were intubated at the scene of the accident. The right side of your clavicle snapped in three, your right shoulder is fractured, and seven ribs in eleven places on the right side of your back are fractured. Your right lung collapsed and you have some internal bruising (i.e. liver, kidneys, brain). The tubes in your throat are part of a ventilator and are breathing for you. The tube in your nose is a feeding tube providing you with the steroids and nutrition to sustain your body. A titanium plate has been inserted behind your clavicle to hold the bones together and allow your ribs to possibly heal properly. You’ve had two blood transfusions and are very lucky to be alive right now. The doctors have attempted surgery multiple times to get the ventilator removed but you are really struggling to breathe on your own. Hopefully it will be removed on the next attempt...”

Hopefully – everything was always hopefully. There was never a for sure. Nobody was ever positive. I glanced down at my right shoulder, my skin stained purple, and the two lonely stitches on either side of my horrific incision. My life was changed forever and it was then that I realized

I would never be the same in several ways. I wondered if I would ever be able to dance or sing again. I wondered if my interests would change and I would leave a completely different person. Tears streamed down my face irrepressibly and she grabbed my hand. I could hardly grasp back. My hands were as torn as my feet and any bit of muscle I had prior to the accident was gone. Road rash covered my body. I was composed of merely skin and bones. I lost a lot of weight and my skin tone was that of a corpse while my supporters claimed I still looked beautiful.

I spelled out three agonizing words, "It's my fault."

"No it's not, Hun." She sobbed and brushed her hand along my cheek. Nobody understood. I couldn't not blame myself. With a mind clear of commemoration, I had no idea what happened in those few seconds that drastically changed my life. I didn't know if I could ever forgive myself for putting my body through this.

I was sleeping on and off throughout the day and night. I was always scared as to whether I would wake up again. My lips were dry and flaky and my skin was ice cold. The doctors would ask me to rate my pain on a scale of one to ten but I never had a real answer. I don't think I know what pain is anymore. My body was being monitored by various machines to make sure that I was still alive at all hours of the day.

The doctors questioned the outcomes. If I lived, the side effects were unknown. They thought I was likely to end up with a tracheostomy, an external hole in my neck that would allow me to breathe, as seen on tobacco addiction commercials. Maybe I would walk lopsided or be blind or deaf and have serious brain damage. All I knew was that I wanted my life more than anything I ever desired. I wanted to feel alive and like myself but I don't think I knew who I was anymore.

March 14th, 2012 was the day I had surgery to determine whether I would ever be able to breathe on my own again. I was doubtful about whether I would make it through surgery in addition to the fact that the doctors and nurses could not answer my questions. Terror was fixed on my sickly face all day long. At random, waterfalls of tears fell from my eyes while I pondered the outcome of this terrifying operation. I felt unconditionally depressed and had completely lost control of it. None of the encouragement from anybody could make me feel any less afraid. Everybody kept calling me strong and brave but I had no choice. The surgeon came to see me and briefly explained the procedure hours before it would happen.

"We will attempt to remove the ventilator one last time and if you are able to breathe, there will be no tracheostomy," he explained.

My family asked what the odds were looking like and he claimed that there was a 50/50 chance. I appreciated his kindness but the odds were in favor of the tracheostomy and we all knew it – it was more like 80/20. I was convinced that I would be handicapped forever. The day lagged on as my visitors came and prayed for me. A nurse along with two members of a Christian church gave their blessings as oil was dabbed onto my forehead. Two of my friends, Kierra and Mary, left me with rings to wear that merely symbolized "good luck" as I tried to keep my faith throughout this awful journey.

Finally, nurses came into the room informing everybody that they'd be transporting me for surgery. They rolled the bed through the pallid halls of the hospital as I laid there fretful and sick to my stomach. My anxiety provided the nurses with an urgency to drug me quickly. The

anesthesia was a blur; my vision became hazy then I was out.

Eventually I awoke to see the hospital walls moving once again as the nurses returned me to my room. Everything was cloudy. Relief washed over me in realization that I had at least survived the procedure. My hand traced my empty throat delicately as I realized that I beat the odds – the ventilator was gone and I also had no trach. A simple oxygen tube was in my nose alongside the feeding tube.

I took a breath of life and let out a tiny raspy whisper as my lungs cackled, “I did it.” My vocal chords lacked strength excruciatingly. My eyes filled with tears, as did my family members. I had so much work to do and I knew recovery would become more tedious from here as I weened myself slowly from the hospital, but I had come so far already. Something tells me that I was meant to go through this and survive. On March 3rd I wrestled with a truck. We all know who won that day.

Two Halves or Two Wholes

Madi Margolis

· COLLEGE NONFICTION ·

Was Katelyn looking at me? Yeah, she was definitely staring. She tilted her head, eyes squinting like she was trying to decipher a lost language. If she kept this up, Mrs. Harvey was sure to notice. I didn't want to give anything away, but I couldn't risk Katelyn making a scene. I gave a furtive wave in acknowledgement and Katelyn's eyes widened as if I'd just revealed the secret of the universe. But, to her credit, she just shook her head and turned away.

I sat in the back of the classroom. The desks formed a semi-circle, and it felt like facing a lion without the protection of an enclosure. Why weren't there any kids in front of me? I glanced at the whiteboard I saw every day, the same one I had stared at just earlier this morning. *AP Junior English*, it read. Such a familiar place, but at a different time and with all different people. It was like a dream, like a parallel universe, *like someone else's life*, I thought—this decision so unlike my everyday routine. I fidgeted in my seat as Mrs. Harvey strode through the door and headed towards the front. Jenny and Shannon gave me reassuring nods. I wasn't reassured.

"Good afternoon, everyone!" Mrs. Harvey welcomed. Her eyes scanned the classroom. I tried to project my most 'Tara' face. *That was just my face, right?* "Has anyone had any good April Fools' pranks pulled on them today?" I attempted to contort my features into a neutral and innocent expression. Then settled for staring down at my notebook and avoiding eye contact. Students murmured of the standard sticky-note-under-the-mouse and fake-bug-on-the-wall tricks.

"All right, all right." Mrs. Harvey called the class back to order. "Get with your groups from yesterday and finish your *Gatsby* rhetorical analyses." I inhaled sharply. Tara had told me she was with Tanya, Cami, and Erin. I set my backpack down a few desks over. *Do I let them in on it, or do I pretend?* I knew Tanya, but I'd never talked to Cami or Erin. Was there a way I could quickly and discreetly confide in them? I was sure they'd notice as soon as I opened my mouth. Maybe I could get through the whole period with only nodding.

"Tara," someone breathed, interrupting my thoughts. I froze.

"Did they switch?" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hannah leaning over and whispering to Johnny. Both sets of eyes locked on me. I whirled around to the front of the classroom, spying a preoccupied Mrs. Harvey passing out a worksheet. I sighed. *I don't think she heard.* Still keeping an eye on the two whisperers, I angled myself towards my group.

I can't believe I'm here, I thought. *So few people are able to do this.* I couldn't suppress my smile. I peeked at the clock in the front of the room. Only fifteen more minutes. I could make it.

"Good job today, everyone," Mrs. Harvey announced five minutes later. "Before you go, I'd just like to introduce one last assignment." Hesitating, she tucked her hair behind her ears. In my mind, I was already out the door and heading to math. "Although," she paused. "I'm sure Jane can

explain it to us all, considering she's already heard this once today."

All heads whipped to face me. Erin let out a gasp, as if I'd betrayed her personally. I was underwater: movements dragged and heaved. Words pressed against my ears in an indistinct gush. I couldn't breathe. My head finally plunged above the surface.

"I knew it!" Johnny shouted, jumping up out of his seat and pointing. That seemed a little excessive to me. A din filled the classroom. Everyone started launching questions at once.

"So then where is Tara?" someone demanded.

"Are you sure that's Jane?"

"When did you switch?"

"I wish I had a twin!"

Everyone surrounded me. My laughter spilled like an overturned inkwell. Everyone wanted to hear the story. Everyone wanted to *be part* of this story. My nose crinkled and my cheeks started to ache. Mrs. Harvey sauntered over. She crossed her arms, but her eyes shone.

"When did you realize?" I raised my eyebrows and my lips twitched upward.

"I've known since the first ten minutes."

"What?" My hand flew to my open mouth. "How could you tell?"

"Jane," she chastised. "You smiled even when you were writing your journal. Tara wouldn't have done that. You never stood a chance."

...

I sat alone on my bed. I stared at the bare, cream walls as I unfolded my clothes. A growl wrenched my stomach, and I hurled my hanger to the ground. *I shouldn't have to do this alone*, I seethed. My head collapsed into my hands. I was trapped in this new place, surrounded by all these new people. Who knew when my roommate would get back? The rumble grew louder. I pushed off my bed and walked the ten-step length of my room. *Tara's supposed to be here, too*. I picked up a flowered blouse from the ground, holding it up. We'd fought over it last Thursday. That was the day she told me she wasn't coming.

"I changed my mind," Tara had said nonchalantly, tossing her hair over her shoulder. Two identical red suitcases lay open on the ground between us. We had been in the middle of negotiating a hostage situation of our shared clothes.

"No going back," I argued. "We already decided. You got the lacy socks, so I get the flowered blouse."

"No." Tara rolled her eyes. "I changed my mind about ASU. I'm going to GCU instead."

I blinked. "But you can't do that," I said lamely. I'd already prepared for another four years of being *the twins*. Originally, I had never wanted to go to the same school. But in the last few months, I'd come to accept it. I could wait a little longer to be my own person—what was the rush? "I mean," I recovered, "you move in on Sunday. It's too late." I tried to flip my hair—I could be the casual one, too. My fingers got stuck in a knot.

"I already talked to Mom and Dad. And arranged it with GCU. I just have to withdraw from my ASU classes tomorrow." She shrugged. "Are you sure I can't take the flowery top?"

Back in my new, sterile dorm room, I crumpled up the shirt and condemned it to my

empty closet. It would have been so easy: if Tara were here, I could call her up and we could walk to the dining hall right now. We could scope out the options together (Tara was the only person I knew that was as picky as I was), wait in the same line, and get the same foods. There'd be no rushing to find something suitable as everyone else left. There'd be no awkward search to find an empty table. I'd never have to sit alone.

I peeled the lid off my third cherry yogurt of the day and checked my phone. No new messages.

...

I gave an indignant huff. I could see my breath. It may as well have been steam coming out of my ears. *How could Mr. Taylor do this to us?* We were headed to the same place, but Tara walked ten feet in front of me. It seemed like our walks home were going to be the only time we had apart.

"I want you to get to know someone new," Mr. Taylor had announced in Sophomore Drama Class earlier that day. "That's why you don't get to pick your partners for this next project." I surveyed the room, nodding to myself. There were a lot of talented students, and I would be fine working with almost any of them. "So I've paired you up by alphabetical order."

I cocked my head. *Wait a minute.* I stared at Tara. She stared back. I stopped nodding. "Let's see, we have Jenny and Tayler, Miles and Ridge, Jane and Tara..." I didn't need to hear the rest. Chairs scraped against the tile like the grates of a jail cell locking in place. Laughter and possible lines rang out.

But Tara and I were still just watching each other. *Quarantined*, I thought. *Can't have the twins getting loose.* I was beginning to anticipate a full two weeks of watching. Because that's what happened when we were alone—sometimes, it seemed like we were only both alive when there was a witness there to prove it.

I stepped over a pile of leaves and zipped up my jacket. *It's not fair that Tara is always with me.* I was sick of sharing a life. Tara disappeared around a bend. And I realized, for the first time, that life *wouldn't* always be this way. I stopped walking. Of course I'd always known. I knew it unobtrusively, the way a person knows they can't live forever. It seemed distant and removed. Irrelevant. Because until this moment, I'd never considered a world past high school. *I won't always be a twin.* The expiration date on our lives as duplicates had always been there. We'd go to different colleges, get a fresh start, and no one would ever know that I used to have a sister that looked a little too much like me. *I won't always be a twin.* I picked a dried leaf up off the ground. I figured this had to be close enough to a dandelion, and that my vow was close enough to a wish: *when I get to college, I won't tell anyone.* I blew the leaf out of my palms and kept walking. I turned the corner. Tara reappeared at the end of the street.

...

"Destination," Siri cooed. I glanced around. All I saw was a dumpster. I gave my phone a little shake. Maybe that would help?

“Destination.” I ran a palm down my face. My pulse was starting to quicken. I had seven minutes to find the building, find the room, and find a seat. *Should I ask someone?* It was only the second day of classes, and ASU seemed more like a labyrinth than a school. I swallowed.

Tara and I would have had this class together. Before she’d *changed her mind*. I rolled my eyes. In a different life, we were wandering these paths together.

But right now, I was alone. I shook my hair out, then started walking past the dumpster. My fists unclenched as a building appeared that matched the one in the picture. I paused, then went inside. Scanning the rows, I debated where to sit. A girl met my gaze and smiled. There was only one open seat next to her. *Well*, I reasoned slightly derisively, *maybe it’s a good thing Tara’s not here*. I took the seat.

...

Tara slid onto the chair across from me in the dining hall. Two salads without dressing, two oranges, and two plates of French fries lay in between us. I grinned. I would visit GCU next weekend.

“I had a close encounter with my roommate the other day,” I teased. Tara raised her eyebrows, inquiring. “Theresa asked if I had any siblings.”

“And?”

“Well, I said yes. Then she asked what your age was, so I said you were a little older. Which is maybe not a lie,” I equivocated. Tara smirked. Our parents had never told us who was born first—they didn’t want us using it as leverage. “I said you went to GCU, then quickly changed the subject to the gelato from the Barrett dining hall. She couldn’t resist. Works every time.” I picked up a fry.

“Do you remember when we switched classes junior year?” Tara asked.

“Of course.” It was hard to believe we’d already spent a month apart. I was slowly starting to adapt. Being back together, though, it was like performing both parts of a piano duet: each sounded pleasant on its own, but when they were played in unison, then you could hear the melody. “I think we can do better.”

“Oh yeah?”

I flashed Tara a smile. “Tell me when you’re ready to switch schools.”

...

I’m glad Tara and I didn’t go to the same college. When I finished writing this, one of my first thoughts was, “Thank God there’s not going to be a memoir written by Tara to compare this to.” For my entire life, I’ve been conditioned to see ourselves in terms of the other. When people made observations, they entered us into a compulsory competition. *She’s the smarter one*, they decided. The prettier one. The funnier one. It was the way Mrs. Harvey differentiated me as *the one who smiled more*. Every first impression was a contest. Every grade was a ranking. But there would be no *better memoir* this time.

Finally, I get to be my own person. I get to have those essential individual experiences, like

making my own friends and exploring campus by myself. For so long, our identities have shaped one another, rocks sanding down each other's edges. Like the way Tara always preferred the front seat, so now, even when she's not in the car, I sit in the back. Or how sometimes I just order whatever she does at restaurants. It's easy—just like it would have been to go to school together. But it would have been too easy. If I didn't want to, I'd never need to think for myself.

I'm glad we didn't go to the same college. It's time to finally be whole, instead of just one half.