

# ASHBELT

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Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up our seventh edition of *AshBelt*. I am so excited for you to see what is inside. Within these pages you will find tales of love, loss, magic, and talking spiders all while the smell of coffee fills your nostrils.

The *AshBelt* team of student editors would first and foremost like to thank our founding faculty advisor and editor, Professor Eric Wasserman. None of this would be possible without you, and we appreciate your advice, guidance, and support every step of the way. We would also like to thank Amy Freels and Dr. Jon Miller for your infinite knowledge and guidance in the book design and printing process. We appreciate your help and cannot begin to express our gratitude.

This year's faculty interview is with Rich Heldenfels, who has given this edition a gift of some amazing advice, tips on writing about film and pop culture, and some awesome movie recommendations. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your thoughts and experiences throughout an impressive career.

We would like to congratulate and thank the winner of our cover design contest, Nadia Alnashar. Your artwork not only captured the heart and soul of *AshBelt*, but it perfectly represents the University as a whole. We love it.

I can proudly say I was able to work with the best people anyone could ask for. To my editors Natalie, Dylan, and Amanda and my readers Jared and Pooja, I'm so thankful to have each of you on my team. I appreciate all the hard work you have put into this journal, from reading submissions, to advertising, and reminding me that everything will be okay.

To our readers, while the world has been unpredictable and chaotic, I hope *AshBelt* can bring a bit of light in your day, and you find something here that resonates with you.

Buckle your seatbelt and get ready for the "read" of your life.

Sincerely,  
Kaylie Yaceczko  
Editor in Chief

## KEVIN RICKLY

### A Midsummer Nightmare

I eased on the brakes of the three-and-a-half-ton van to slow down for the stop sign about two hundred yards ahead, but the pedal went straight to the floor with no resistance. I let up on the pedal and pressed it again, harder this time . . . still nothing. Again, I jammed on the brakes, this time pushing down as hard as I could, but the van still didn't slow down. In fact, it seemed to be picking up speed. The road had a slight downhill grade just before crossing Main Street, and the weight of the twenty canoes in tow was creating additional momentum. In a panic, I began pumping the brake pedal up and down, desperately hoping to create some type of friction. It wasn't happening. My heart was racing and my mind was searching for a solution that wasn't there. Wide eyed and white knuckled, I squeezed the steering wheel and braced myself for the impact of the collision that was about to occur.

\*\*\*

Working at the Loudonville Canoe Livery was my first real job. I was fifteen years old the summer I started. At the time, it was owned by Senator Richard "Dick" Schafrath. Schafrath was a local legend because he was born in the area and played football at Ohio State University and with the Cleveland Browns. He was a member of the Ohio State team that won the national championship in 1957, and the Browns team that won the NFL championship in 1964. His house sat within 100 feet of the canoe livery and every now and again he'd come over and help out. He was probably in his early fifties at that time, but he was still a monster. His arms were so long they seemed to drag the ground as he walked, and he could toss canoes around like they were toys.

This was my second summer working at the canoe livery. I was working with two guys I had worked with the previous summer, Bill Owens and Leo Lennington. We had all gotten jobs at the canoe livery after hearing an announcement at school that they

were hiring summer help. Bill was a small-town country boy who worked mainly so he could afford the souped up truck he drove. Leo was naturally dark skinned and had curly black hair. He was mature beyond his years from working to help support his mom and siblings.

We were at the first landing point with Randy, an old guy with a beer gut and ponytail. His job was to shuttle canoes and passengers back to the livery. He drove a rusted out fifteen-passenger van with a twenty-capacity canoe trailer attached. He was notorious for coming to work smelling like stale booze and nursing a hangover. No canoers had arrived at the landing yet, so Bill, Leo, and I sat under a shade tree and waited. Meanwhile, Randy sat in the van alternating between napping and smoking. It was a beautiful Saturday in July which meant we were going to be busy once the canoers started arriving.

Bill took out a can of Skoal, took a pinch of it, and put it in his lip.

Leo looked at Bill and shook his head in dismay.

“I thought you were quitting,” Leo said.

“Yeah, I tried. But I figure we’re all going to die from something someday anyway,” Bill replied.

I smirked.

“Apparently, you’re trying to hurry things along.”

Bill spat and shrugged in response.

I got up and walked down to the riverside to look for signs of canoers headed our way. It had rained heavily earlier that summer, so the river was churned up, muddy, and running fast. That meant the seven-mile trip from the canoe livery to the landing would take less time than normal.

Within a few minutes, we were wading into the river to catch canoers who were drifting past the landing. After working together for two summers, we were used to people missing the landing, so we had adopted a routine. Every man had a role. One person would grab the bow of the canoe and the other would grab the stern, and together we’d steer the boat to the landing. We’d

hold it steady until the canoers got out, and then drag the canoe up the bank and out of the way to make room for the next canoe. Meanwhile, the third man remained in the water to catch any others.

Most weekends, this routine went on for hours without even getting a chance to dry off between trips to the river. When there were three of us, it made things a little easier because we could take turns dragging the 80-pound aluminum canoes up the steep and slippery river bank. After pulling the canoes up onto the bank, we still had to load them on the trailer. Each trailer could carry twenty canoes, with two stacks of five canoes on each side. Getting the canoes onto the trailer was a two-person job that involved flipping the canoe upside down, then taking a step sideways to wedge it between the racks. The canoes were usually wet and slick with mud from dragging them up the bank, so it wasn't unusual for one or both of us to lose our grip in the process, resulting in a bruised shin or smashed foot. The highest rack was the most precarious because we had to flip the canoe up and over our heads and then stand on our tip toes with fully extended arms to reach it.

When we lifted the canoes to reach the top rack, we'd often get the remains of muddy river water, beer, and cigarette butts dumped on our heads. Bill had the distinction of getting doused with puke once. I didn't see it happen, but I tried to be more cautious after hearing about it. It didn't surprise me that people were getting sick and throwing up in the canoes. I can't count how many times I had to assist people out of the river because they were too drunk to walk by themselves. Sometimes, they would show up at the landing with no canoe at all because they had flipped it over and lost it en route. Other times, people would reach our landing, and have no idea as to which canoe livery they had rented their canoe from, or if they were at the landing they were supposed to be at.

When the first trailer was fully loaded, Bill used his two fingers to give a loud whistle to Randy. The noise apparently woke Randy from his slumber because the van sputtered to life and then

backfired once or twice as it made its way down the gravel drive toward the main road. After the first shuttle, Randy came by with the van and trailer about once every half hour to pick up more canoes. On weekends, another guy, Fred, drove an old powder blue school bus back and forth to transport passengers. This strategy allowed Randy to come and go with trailers as he saw fit, and Fred could pick up canoers from multiple landing spots with the bus.

In July, it didn't get completely dark until after nine o' clock, which made for long work days. Often times, canoes were still landing at dusk. When Randy showed up for the last pick up it was about 8:30. Fred followed closely behind him in the bus and loaded the passengers. Then, Randy climbed out of the van and informed us that he was done for the day and was going to ride back on the bus with Fred.

This was not how things usually worked and I had questions, but decided to keep my mouth shut. Randy didn't like to be second guessed.

"I don't care which one of you boys stays to bring the van back, but one of you is going to have to wait here until 9:00 to make sure no other canoers come in. Everyone else is going back on the bus."

No one replied. Bill looked at Leo and Leo looked at me. I looked back to Bill.

Randy was getting impatient.

"Well, who's it going to be?"

"I guess I can stay."

Randy motioned for Bill and Leo to get on the bus.

"You two come with me. There's a bunch of canoes that need stacked back at the livery."

I was glad that I had volunteered to stay after all.

That last half an hour went by slowly. I was still wet from a combination of river water and sweat and my body ached. I looked upstream. Trees loomed over the rippling brown water, their shadows fading as the sky darkened. Other than the sound of water lapping gently against the river bank, it was completely silent.

I looked at my watch. It read 9:00. I was relieved that no other canoers had shown up. I had never driven the van and trailer with passengers before. Plus, I was only sixteen and looked it. I wasn't sure how comfortable passengers would be with me chauffeuring them while pulling a 35-foot-long trailer.

\*\*\*

I sailed straight through the intersection and dropped down over the sloped driveway that led to the livery. I couldn't believe that no one had T-boned me, but now I was headed for a collision with either the livery office on the right or a stack of canoes on the left. Beyond that, the ground leveled out again. I decided to take my chances and squeeze between the narrow opening between the office and stack of canoes. Fortunately, since it was almost dark, there weren't any canoers mingling about. I squinted at the gap ahead and aimed the van toward the center of it.

There was a loud metallic screech and then the sound of canoes tumbling like bowling pins. Then, the van stopped.

"Oh shit."

I jumped out of the van and looked to the rear. I could see that one of the racks sticking out from the trailer was bent, and the canoe that was resting on it had fallen off. Next to the trailer, the pyramided stack of canoes had collapsed and canoes were now spread out all over the place. Bill and Leo came running over.

"Damn bro!" Leo laughed. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I lost the brakes and couldn't stop, so I was just trying to dodge whatever I could."

"I'm sure glad I didn't get stuck driving that damned thing," Bill spat.

Within a minute, Mr. Schafrath showed up.

"I heard it from the house. Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I replied. "I am so sorry."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're all right."

"What happened? Why are you driving? Where's Randy?"

I stammered.

"Randy left and had me drive the van back and then the

brakes just stopped working.”

Mr. Schafrath’s face went from white to red instantly. The three of us stood watching as he took a lap around the van and trailer, surveying the damage. He came back around the other side of the van and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“Okay then. Let’s get these canoes out of the way.”

\*\*\*

“I know, Dad. I saw them.” Alayna said, shifting to a more upright posture in the driver’s seat.

Another car had just cut into our lane without signaling. She took a deep breath and exhaled. It was relaxation technique I had been teaching her long before she had gotten her driver’s permit a few weeks ago.

“You see what I mean?” I said, gesturing to the car in front of us.

She knew what I was about to say next, and beat me to the punch.

“I know. I need to practice defensive driving,” she groaned.

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re prepared. You never know what other drivers might do.” I added.

She sighed.

I relaxed my foot off the imaginary passenger brake.

“So, where do you want me to go next?” she asked.

It wouldn’t be long before she would be on her own.

“You decide,” I said.

She gave me a bewildered look, but I resisted the urge to give her further instructions.

“Wherever you want to go. Just keep driving.”

## Undetermined

As I was brushing my teeth, I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My eyes were bloodshot and puffy from the night before. I had argued with my wife Aimee until after midnight and didn't sleep well afterwards. Alone in the dingy apartment I had moved into earlier that day, I spent most of the night lying awake wondering if I had made the right decision.

I was still in the bathroom getting ready for work when I heard the phone ringing in the other room. It was my work cell phone. I didn't own a personal cell phone at the time; most people didn't in the late 90's, but as a Children Services caseworker, I had to be on call for emergency situations. When it rang, I wasn't sure what to make of it. It was 8:00 in the morning; I wasn't supposed to get emergency calls on the cell phone during normal business hours.

I picked up the phone and answered. It was my work supervisor.

"Kevin, it's Lori. I'm calling because I just got a call from your father-in-law. He is at Joel Pomerene Hospital. He said that you should get there immediately, and he'll be waiting for you on the first floor."

"What's this about?" I asked.

My first thought was of Aimee. Did she hurt herself—maybe take some pills or cut her wrists? I could see her doing something drastic to get my attention, to make sure I didn't leave her. She had threatened to do as much before, but she hadn't made any threats like that last night.

"I don't know. He didn't say. He just said to get there as soon as possible."

I ended the call and tried to remain calm. A lump was forming in my throat. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. Aimee could be manipulative; I knew that, but I hope she didn't do

anything stupid. I grabbed my coat and jumped into my truck. The hospital was only five minutes away.

\*\*\*

Aimee and I started dating our junior year of high school. We spent all of our time together, to the extent that some of our friends started to refer to us as one person – “KevAimee.” We took the same college prep classes together and were both selected to be in The National Honor Society. She wore my varsity jacket and jersey to my football games, and I supported her at her softball games. Our relationship wasn’t perfect though; we had our share of arguments. She could be extremely jealous. She didn’t like me hanging out with my guy friends and I wanted more freedom. If I broached the subject of breaking up, she often became irrational and told me she would kill herself before she’d let that happen. Nevertheless, we did break up a time or two in high school, even dated other people briefly, but we managed to find our way back to one another.

When she informed me that she wanted to go to college at Ohio University, I agreed to apply there too. She wanted to be a teacher, and I planned to major in journalism. When I did not get accepted into OU’s School of Journalism, I was devastated, but I refused to break my promise to Aimee, and went to OU anyway. We lived in the same dormitory our freshman and sophomore years and then got an apartment together our junior and senior years. To help with the cost of living off campus, my friend Travis lived with us too. Aimee’s plan for us after college was to get married and move in with her father, Larry, who had lived by himself since his divorce from Aimee’s mom, Linda. Aimee still had her own bedroom there and her older sister, Heather, had gotten married and moved out years ago. Aimee concluded that living with her dad would allow us to live rent-free while we secured jobs and paid off a good portion of our student loans. I was not thrilled about the idea, but I went along with it because I liked Aimee’s dad and didn’t foresee any major problems.

We were married on June 25, 1998 on an isolated beach in

Maui, Hawaii. It was Aimee's dream for just the two of us to get married and honeymoon in Hawaii. There were only two other people at our wedding, the officiant—a middle-aged man dressed in a flowered Hawaiian shirt—and a photographer. Against the backdrop of the ocean and setting sun, Aimee looked angelic in a long silky white dress with spaghetti straps. We were barefoot and wore flowery leighs around our necks. We held hands and exchanged vows as the wind tousled Aimee's auburn hair, and ocean waves tumbled and splashed in the background. I would remember that moment for the rest of my life.

After returning home and throwing a huge wedding reception, we began settling into domestic life with Aimee's dad. We lived in a small two-bedroom, one-bathroom ranch on Main Street in Killbuck, Ohio. I soon found out that our new living arrangement didn't afford Aimee and me much privacy. We had our own bedroom, but that was about the only place in the house where we could be alone together. Larry owned the Quick Chek convenience store just down the street and managed the books and other details from home, so he was there more often than I had anticipated. Aimee didn't seem to mind. She enjoyed her dad's company, but for me, it felt like I had to compete for Aimee's attention. She spent evenings watching TV with her dad in the living room, while I sought solitude in our bedroom. It didn't feel like we were married. To me, it felt like it did when Aimee and I were still in high school and I'd go to her house to visit. Larry cooked all of the meals, and Aimee kept up with cleaning the house and doing everyone's laundry, but I didn't seem to have a role.

In the fall, I began working as a caseworker at Children Services and Aimee started substitute teaching. Her goal was to eventually get hired as a home economics teacher at our alma mater, West Holmes High School. As the months went by, I realized that our living situation was not working out. Aimee and her dad had an enmeshed relationship; there were few personal boundaries. Aimee had fallen into the role of being Larry's de-facto wife, while I was more or less a third wheel. She confided in him things that she

didn't even share with me. Often times, when I got home from work on Fridays, they would already have our entire weekend planned. To complicate matters further, Aimee had become extremely jealous of a woman I started working with. It was someone who had a crush on me in high school and Aimee was outraged when I told her she had been hired. Aimee was certain the woman had purposely sought a job there because of me, and her immediate response was that I needed to quit my job. I reassured her that she had nothing to worry about, and promised to keep my distance. However, with only four caseworkers on staff, we worked in close proximity of one another and often as a team. I soon realized that avoiding her altogether was not realistic. I tried to explain the situation to Aimee, but she was obdurate. She proclaimed that she trusted me, but the problem was she did not trust my coworker. At the end of each work day, Aimee wanted to know details of every interaction I had with her. To me, her jealousy was irrational; I wasn't doing anything inappropriate. Despite her claims that she trusted me, it was obvious she didn't, and that issue became a sore spot between us that never healed.

I grew tired of Aimee's nightly interrogations, but with her only working part-time as a substitute teacher, I didn't think quitting my job was a reasonable solution. I had only been working there for a few months and I didn't want to jeopardize my future by quitting my first professional job so quickly. Plus, Aimee wouldn't consider moving out of her dad's house, let alone to another area where there were more employment opportunities. For Aimee, there was no urgent motivation to move. She enjoyed living with her dad. She wouldn't move until she got the teaching job she wanted and we had saved enough money to put a down payment on a house. However, she was not willing to pursue a position anywhere outside of West Holmes High School. It felt like a no-win situation. With Aimee limiting her employment options to one school, our chances of gaining financial and residential independence were slim. We argued about our living arrangements many times, but ultimately, Aimee stood pat and her dad supported

her on the matter. Eventually, I threatened to move out whether she came with me or not, but she became hostile and told me she would prevent it by whatever means necessary.

Over the next few months, none of my begging and pleading had convinced Aimee that we needed to find our own place. Yet, I knew if I tried to move without her, she might do something irrational. She claimed she could not live without me and threatened to hurt herself if I tried to leave. Yet at the same time, she refused to do anything to help us reach our goal of getting our own place. Finally, I determined that the only option I had was to move out without her knowing and then deal with the consequences after the fact. In a short amount of time, I secured an apartment to move into that rented for \$250 per month. It was basically a garage that some savvy homeowner had turned into a rental property by installing a bathroom and erecting a few pieces of plywood. Next, I found a day when Aimee was scheduled in advance to substitute teach and her dad would be gone all day. It wasn't easy, especially with Larry often working from home, but he had a calendar on his desk with his work schedule. The date was set. I called my old college roommate, Travis, explained the situation, and he agreed to help me move. We would have less than eight hours to do it before Aimee and her dad got home from work. The day before, I called Travis to confirm the plan. We would move everything that was exclusively mine from Larry's house and then go to my parents' house to get my old bed. My parents didn't know what was going on either, but I knew they would both be at work. Like Aimee, I would tell them what was going on after the fact. I didn't want anyone to convince me that what I was doing was a bad idea. I could have been easily swayed. I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing, but I didn't see any other way to change our course of direction. I felt trapped living with Aimee's dad and I hoped my moving out would motivate her to seek a full-time job so we could be independent. That wouldn't solve all of our problems, but it would be a start.

\*\*\*

Nine months after our marriage on the beach of Maui, Aimee and I faced one another at the door of my apartment. Her freckled face was blushed and the pupils of her hazel eyes were dilated. I glanced over Aimee's shoulder at my landlord's house a few feet away. There was a light on in the window and I could see the shape of a person standing there. I hoped they had not overheard our quarreling.

"How could you do this without telling me?" she asked, as she wiped tears from her cheeks. "You must not truly love me."

Over the last couple of hours, she had asked that question and made that accusation numerous times. I did love her, but if I had told her I was moving out, would she have allowed it? Would she have agreed to come with me? She couldn't give me a definitive answer as to how she would have reacted, but after hours of arguing, she had finally agreed to move. I still had doubts that all of our problems could be resolved. What about her jealousy and trust issues? What did it say about our marriage that I had to go to such extreme measures for her to finally agree to move? Would she finally resign to working wherever she needed to in order for us to be independent? It was the middle of the school year, there wouldn't be any full-time teaching jobs positions open until fall, and she had never worked anywhere else prior to substitute teaching. I needed to hear her say that she would be willing to do whatever it took to help support us, even if it meant getting a job she didn't like. I didn't particularly like my job at Children Services — which involved taking abused and neglected children away from their parents—but I did it to help support us. I wanted her to be willing to make sacrifices too. I didn't want empty promises, I wanted to hear a plan of action. By the end of the night, I felt raw and hollowed, like a shell of who I was nine months prior.

"I think you should leave now," I said. It was difficult to say those words, but I was exhausted and I could tell she was too.

"Please let me stay here with you tonight," Aimee pleaded.

It was apparent to me that all of our problems were not going to be fixed by staying up all night and rehashing the same

arguments we had been having for months.

“It’s late and I have to work tomorrow. Just leave me be for tonight.”

It sounded heartless and I knew it. It didn’t reflect how I actually felt. I wanted to hug her and tell her everything would be okay. At the same time, I felt we both needed time to calm down and reflect on everything that had been said.

“Please?” She clasped her hands together as if praying.

“No . . . I think it would be best for us to be alone tonight.”

“Will you at least call me as soon as you get off work?” she asked weakly. Her voice had gotten hoarse, but she wasn’t ready to give up. I knew she wouldn’t leave unless I told her I would call, but I was so emotionally drained, I didn’t even want to think about it.

“We can talk more tomorrow,” I replied.

She was still facing the door when I shut and locked it. A few moments passed and then I heard her car start and the crunching of gravel as she turned down the driveway.

\*\*\*

I parked in front of the hospital and went through the emergency room doors. There didn’t seem to be anyone around. Or maybe there was, but I didn’t see them. The only person I was looking for was Larry. It was a small hospital, so I just continued walking down the hall. I rounded the corner and saw him standing there. He was speaking with a man in white scrubs. When Larry saw me, he started to walk in my direction. I looked at his face, but failed to read his expression.

“Kevin. It’s Aimee. She passed away this morning.”

“What?” I trembled. I couldn’t have heard him right, but he looked at me unflinchingly.

I grabbed my chest. It was like I had been hit with a sledgehammer. All the air escaped my lungs. My legs grew weak and my knees buckled. Larry grabbed me under the arm to keep me from collapsing. Tears immediately flooded down my cheeks.

“No,” I gasped, as if that word could erase what he had just told me.

He closed his eyes and nodded solemnly.

I didn't believe him. My mind was grasping at incoherent thoughts and images. First a thought: she was perfectly fine when she left my apartment last night. Then an image: Aimee waking up next to me in bed. Then another thought: she is too young to die. Interrupted by another image: the two of us holding hands walking on the beach in Maui. Followed by another thought: I need to call Aimee after work today. We are going to try to work things out.

I was still in disbelief. I had to catch my breath before speaking.

"How? When?" I asked, wiping tears from my eyes.

"I'm not exactly sure when. She slept on the sofa bed last night because she didn't want to sleep in you guys' bed without you. When I left this morning, she looked like she was still sleeping, so I tried not to wake her. I went to the Quick Chek and when I came back, she was still in the same position. Her color looked off. I tried to wake her and that's when I noticed she wasn't breathing. I called the ambulance and tried CPR, but. . ."

"How?" I repeated.

"I don't know," he responded.

My head felt like it was under pressure, like a million fragmented pieces were wanting to explode out of it. I was suddenly freezing cold.

"Where is she?"

"She's in that room there," Larry answered, motioning to a closed door.

"Can I see her?" I asked.

He pulled me closer and spoke to me in a hushed tone.

"Yes. But listen, Linda is in the hospital chapel down the hall. I think it would be best if you stayed away from her."

I was confused by his statement. Why would I need to stay away from Aimee's mom? I didn't want to think about that at the moment.

"Okay," I replied. "Can I see Aimee now?"

Larry nodded.

I opened the door. It smelled like disinfectant, bleached linen, and death. I shut the door behind me before turning to see her. She was lying on a polished steel gurney with a white sheet pulled up to her chin. There was a lone chair in the small room, and I pulled it next to her and sat down. Other than the slight bluish-purple tone of her skin, she looked as if she were sleeping. Her eyes were closed and I found myself wondering if she died that way or if someone had closed them afterwards. I hoped the former where true and that she had died peacefully. The fluorescent lights reflecting off the white tiled room made her freckles stand out, and her long sanguine hair had been tucked neatly around her shoulders.

I don't know how long I had been sitting there when Larry opened the door and another man entered the room. He was heavysset and wore a brown tweed jacket. He smoothed his mustache and then extended his hand to introduce himself. He explained that he was a detective and had a few questions to ask me. A detective? What was he doing here? It was like a scene out of a movie. He took out a small notepad and pen and began to ask me a series of questions. When was the last time you saw Aimee? What were you doing? Did you settle things on good terms? Despite my internal outrage from the questioning, I answered them dutifully and honestly. I had more questions than he did. The last time I saw her, she was emotionally upset, but physically, she was perfectly fine. When the detective had finished his line of questioning, he offered his condolences and exited the room. I never saw or heard from the detective again, but in my mind, he had set into motion an irrational thought that maybe I was somehow to blame. That thought pushed its way into the deep crevices of my brain and would remain lodged there for years to come.

I turned back to Aimee and recalled some of her last words from the night before. "You must not truly love me," she had said. I hoped she didn't truly believe that. I hoped that wasn't her final thought.

I put my hand on her arm and leaned over to give her a kiss

on the cheek.

“I really did love you”, I said.

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Later that day, an autopsy revealed that Aimee had a condition referred to as Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (or ARDS according to the death certificate). However, the cause of her death was listed on the certificate as “undetermined.” There was no explanation for her death, and whether rational or not, that left nothing and no one to blame but me.

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Three days later, at Aimee’s calling hours, I stood in the receiving line next to Larry. Aimee was on display at the front of the church, lying in the casket that Larry and I had picked out the day after she died. There had already been a two-hour viewing earlier that day, but still hundreds were lined up to say their goodbyes and offer their condolences. It made sense that there were a lot of people there. It was a small and tight-knit community. Everyone seemed to know one another.

Aimee’s mom, Linda, and sister Heather stood at the front of the receiving line, closest to Aimee’s corpse. Heather had remained cordial to me after Aimee’s death, but Linda was still keeping her distance. Larry hadn’t provided any details as to why Linda was so upset with me, other than she was having a hard time dealing with everything. I couldn’t help but wonder if she blamed me for Aimee’s death. As the procession made its way from Aimee and then to us, it occurred to me that others may be feeling the same way as Linda. Suddenly, I felt even more nervous and self-conscious despite the fact that I was surrounded by people who proclaimed to be my loved ones. In retrospect, I often wonder if Larry may have shared my concern. At one point, he suggested that I go outside and “get some fresh air.” I’m not certain what prompted him to remove me from the receiving line at that particular moment. Maybe he had simply noticed how exhausted I looked, or maybe he noticed someone in the line who he feared might share a few unpleasant words with me. Either way, I suppose I’ll never

really know.

The line of mourners never ended. The first calling was supposed to last from 2 to 4 and the second, from 6 to 8. In reality, there was someone at Aimee's casket that entire time. I don't know how many people had visited to show their respects, but if I had to guess, it would be somewhere around three hundred. I never felt as tired and depressed as I did after it was over, until the next day at the funeral, when the minister's final words were spoken and Aimee was lowered into the ground and gone forever.

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After Aimee's death, I tried to move forward with my life, but I wasn't used to being alone and it was painful. I was only twenty-three years old, but Aimee and I had been together for over seven years when she died. While still grieving, I soon found myself jumping from one relationship to the next, searching for someone to fulfill my need for intimacy and companionship. The relationships never lasted, perhaps because I was too scared to get close to anyone. Nevertheless, in the small community where I lived, my philandering did not go unnoticed. Rumors circulated and grew exponentially. Sometimes, I heard the rumors through the grapevine, other times I was confronted about them directly. Not long after Aimee's death, I ran into her sister, Heather, at a local bar. She stomped up to me and said, "I can't believe you would show your face around here!" Obviously, Heather, had bought into whatever rumors were circulating. Either that, or Aimee's mom had turned her against me. It wasn't long before Larry stopped speaking to me too, and most of the friends that Aimee and I shared began to fade away. Apparently, some thought that I left Aimee for someone else, others thought Aimee committed suicide because of me. One of Aimee's friends even told me that I was to blame because Aimee had died from a broken heart. Finally, I had had enough, and decided I needed to get away from it all. As a result of college debt, I couldn't afford to leave my job and move away, so I joined the Army instead.

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There was no running away from it. As the years passed by, I still harbored feelings of guilt over Aimee's death. Maybe if I had known the cause of her death, I could have some semblance of closure. I researched ARDS many times over the years, but never found anything to help put my mind at ease. I kept looking back over our time together, trying to recall if there had been any warning signs. Without answers, I became more and more depressed. I thought about all the dreams Aimee had that would not be realized. I thought about all the things I got to experience that she never would. I thought about the anguish that Aimee's family was going through. Most of all I questioned my role in it all. Did my moving out have anything to do with her death? Certainly people have gone through worse moments in their lives and survived. The one thing I just couldn't get past, though, was the timing of it all. It seemed too coincidental that she died just hours after leaving my apartment that night.

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My wife Mary and I pulled up to the church where I was to meet with Larry. It was the same church where Aimee's calling hours had taken place twenty years ago. There was a single car parked out front.

"It looks like he's already here." I said, taking a deep breath and exhaling in an attempt to calm my nerves.

"You can do this," Mary reassured me.

I turned to her in the passenger seat and gave her a hug.

"Thanks for setting up this meeting. I just hope he doesn't cuss me out."

She smiled.

"I don't think he would have agreed to meet just to cuss you out."

I probably would have never seen Larry again if it weren't for Mary setting up the meeting with him. Mary knew I was still struggling with Aimee's death and it didn't help that we still lived in the small community where she had died. Over the years, I had developed anxiety about going out in public where I might run

into Aimee's mom, sister, or anyone else who might have had it out for me. Every year, my anxieties were rejuvenated when the Aimee Frenette-Rickly Memorial Golf Tournament took place in town, an event to which I was uninvited. Finally, after years of deliberation, I summoned the courage to have Mary contact Larry on Facebook to see if he would meet with me. He agreed to meet, but with the condition that under no circumstances was I to tell anyone. He especially did not want Aimee's mom or sister to know about it because they would perceive it as an act of betrayal toward Aimee.

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Mary and I sat across from Larry at a small card table inside the church. He had aged over the years. His peppered gray hair and mustache had turned completely white and he looked tired.

"Thank you for meeting with me," I said.

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

"First, I want to tell you how sorry I am . . . for everything."

"I know you are," he responded.

I waited for him to say more, when he didn't, I continued, "I have two daughters of my own now and I can't imagine losing one of them."

He looked down at his empty hands, his fingers laced together as if holding an infant.

"I don't think any parent should outlive their child," he said.

I shook my head in agreement.

"Have you learned anything else about the cause of Aimee's death?" I asked.

"Kevin, all I can say is that when she came home from your apartment that night, she was upset. We had a long conversation and by the time she went to bed, she was at peace. She was hopeful that you two could work things out."

I looked at Mary for reassurance. I wasn't quite sure how to continue.

"I also want to apologize for my behavior after Aimee's death. I was young and selfish. I really wasn't thinking about anyone else's feelings but my own."

I shook my head, disgusted with myself just thinking about it.

“It’s okay, Kevin. When I was in my twenties, I did some things that I’m not so proud of too.”

It was a relief to hear him say that.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

He reached his hand across the table and placed it on top of mine.

“I forgave you a long time ago,” he said.

I tried to hold back the tears, but I couldn’t. It felt like an unbearable weight had been lifted off my shoulders. For a brief moment, I thought his forgiveness was all I needed and everything would be okay after that. The truth is, I still carry a lot of weight; I think about Aimee every day. The weight is just not quite as heavy as it once was, or maybe, Larry’s forgiveness just made me a little stronger.

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Shortly after that, I returned to the cemetery where Aimee was buried. I hadn’t been there in nearly twenty years. I never felt as if I deserved to mourn her death. A part of me figured I was somehow to blame. The timing of her death was just too coincidental for me to not feel responsible. I stood over Aimee’s grave. The engraving reads:

Aimee Frenette – Rickly  
 August 1, 1975 – March 2, 1999.  
*Gone to Live with The Lord*

Leaning against the tombstone is a smaller stone with the inscription:

*A Daddy Holds His Daughter’s Hand A Little While, Her Heart Forever*

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I think about that quote and I think about my own

## NONFICTION

daughters and how much I love them. I hope I'm not alive to see their deaths. Then, I think about Larry's grace and how much his forgiveness means to me. Maybe with his forgiveness, I'll be able to forgive myself . . . someday.

## Volunteer

We fell into formation and stood quietly as the drill sergeant slowly paced in front of us with his hands clasped behind his back. His wide brimmed hat sat low on his forehead. His uniform was freshly pressed and his black combat boots gleamed in the midday sun. His square jaw was clenched tight as usual. When everyone was present and standing at attention, Drill Sergeant Christiansen turned to us and stared. His gaze could cut right through a man when that was his intent, but today his expression was off kilter. His brows were pinched together and he looked to be in deep concentration. After a week in his presence, I still hadn't grown used to his mustache. According to military grooming standards, "no portion of the mustache will cover the upper lip line or extend sideways beyond a vertical line drawn upward from the corners of the mouth." Christensen took this regulation a bit too far; his blonde mustache was so neatly trimmed that it appeared to be penciled on. After a moment, he addressed us in his Texas drawl, "Men. There has been a slight change in plans this afternoon. I want you all back inside the barracks. Go in the day room and turn on the television. Something has happened that I think you all need to see for yourselves." I could tell from the looks of the bewildered faces around me that we all had questions, but no one had the nerve to ask. We were in the Army's Advanced Individual Training (AIT) course, and normally after lunch, we went back to class until dinner. A change in this regimented schedule was typically not a good sign. Usually it meant that we were in trouble for something. I thought maybe this was a trick to get all of us inside the dayroom where Christensen would then point out what a lousy job we did of cleaning the barracks.

The day room was a small area where soldiers could relax during the few minutes per day when there was actually time to rest. It was designed to seat about fifteen people, but somehow over twice that many managed to cram in there on this particular day. It smelled like sweat, boot polish, and sour breath mixed with

the musky odor of testosterone. Someone turned on the TV and cranked up the volume so everyone could hear over the chatter. On the screen, a distraught looking news anchor was doing her best to commentate as replays of some sort of disaster were displayed in the background. Scrolling along the bottom of the screen were the headlines. It was difficult to see around the heads in front of me, but it said something about terrorists hijacking planes. Then the news anchor clarified the scenario. She explained in a trembling voice that four planes had been hijacked by terrorists that morning. Two were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Another plane was flown into the Pentagon and the fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.

In the background, an amateur looking video showed the twin towers billowing smoke. It looked like two huge chimneys except the smoke was coming out the sides instead of from the top. It was as if a bomb had exploded in the upper stories of the buildings. Someone flipped through the channels to check for additional news coverage and it was a similar scene on every single channel. The Twin Towers appeared to be on fire. Another video shot showed scenes on the streets of New York City. It was pandemonium. People were covered in ashes and running in all directions. Police officers, firefighters, and paramedics were already on site attempting to triage the situation. It was a surreal moment and I had never seen anything like it, even in action movies. How could something like this happen in the United States?

I looked around the room to see the other soldiers' reactions to what we were seeing. Some, like me, were just watching in disbelief. Others were already plotting how we would get revenge. I heard one guy use the term "camel jockey" and assumed he fell in the latter group. Another soldier ran out of the room. I'd later learn that he had family living in New York City. I also heard a few snuffles in the crowd, presumably from those who were trying to stifle back tears.

What I did the rest of that day remains somewhat hazy to me. In AIT, most of my days were spent either in physical training

or in the classroom, but I can't recall many particulars about class that afternoon. I remember that most everyone else was talking about the attacks, while I was quietly processing what I had seen earlier. I kept thinking about all of those people burning alive. A few images really stuck with me. One was of people nearly falling out of the tower windows to escape the smoke-filled air inside. People were literally climbing on top of one another to get a breath of fresh air. They appeared to be screaming for help, but there was no way they could be reached from the ground.

Another image was of a man falling from the upper portion of the tower. I remember he was dressed in a white dress shirt and dark pants. It was strange because he wasn't flailing around like you see in the movies. From what I could tell, he looked at peace. Apparently, he chose to jump out of the tower rather than await his death inside the burning building. To think of a situation so desperate that jumping out a window nearly 100 stories high is the preferred recourse is beyond my imagination. These images are still so vivid in my mind that I can't remember if I am recalling them from that day or if I saw them again more recently. Either way, it's difficult to think about what was going through those people's minds at that time, knowing that their deaths were imminent.

That night, I remember discussing the terrorist attacks with my roommate, Private Graybill. I had known Graybill since basic training. He couldn't be considered a poster boy for the Army by any stretch of the imagination. For over 11 weeks we had spent most of our time doing rigorous physical and mental training, yet somehow Graybill remained out of shape and undisciplined. He also had a reputation for acting more macho and knowledgeable than he really was. Despite not always getting along, it was nice to have someone to talk to as we lay awake in our bunks trying to make sense of it all.

I was staring at the ceiling with my hands clasped behind my head. Graybill was doing the same.

"What do you think all this means for us?" I asked.

Graybill rolled over in his bed to face me. His beady eyes,

upturned nose, and pale skin reminded me of the pigs my grandpa used to raise on his farm.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “But I hope we get some revenge on whoever did this!”

I rolled over and propped my head up on one elbow so I could get a better read on Graybill’s body language. His pale skin took on a pinkish tone whenever he got angry or excited. It was pink more often than not.

“Are we even sure who did it?”

I wasn’t sure why I asked Graybill that question. Of course, *he* knew who did it.

“All the intel points to Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda,” he said confidently, as if he had just got off the phone with Donald Rumsfeld himself.

“I’ve never even heard of Bin Laden until today, have you?”

That stumped him for a moment.

“Well . . . no, but from what I heard, they’re pretty sure he’s behind this.”

He was fluffing his pillow and getting agitated that it wouldn’t cooperate.

I was getting uncomfortable watching him and sat up in bed with my back against the wall.

“So, what now? Do you think we’ll go to war?”

That was the real question. The one that every soldier in the barracks had to be thinking about that night.

“It’s hard to say. The drill sergeants aren’t saying much, so I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“That will suck if we have to go to war.” It was an understatement, but I didn’t know how else to put it.

“Why, are you scared?” Graybill grinned.

Even if I was scared, I wouldn’t give Graybill the satisfaction of knowing it.

“It’s not that, I just don’t like not knowing what to expect.”

He gave me a skeptical look, then nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I hear you, but look at the bright side. If we go to war,

at least we'll get combat pay!"

After Graybill had fallen asleep, I continued to wrestle with the idea of going to war. As I stared at the ceiling, I could smell the piney scent of floor wax coming from the hallway. Every night some unfortunate soldier got designated to wax the floor. Normally I dreaded doing it, but tonight I should have just volunteered because I was too restless to sleep anyway. Graybill was snoring while my mind was still reeling from the images I had seen earlier. How could the U.S. not retaliate? Am I really prepared to go to war? How did I wind up in this situation? I'm sure that all the other soldiers in the barracks were having similar thoughts that night.

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Volunteering for the Army was never in my plans. After graduating from college in May 1998, my plan was to get married that summer to my longtime girlfriend, Aimee, get a job as a social worker, and start paying off my student loans. Most of my plan went as expected, until Aimee passed away suddenly nine months into our marriage. The cause of her death was undetermined and that unresolved issue lingered on for years. As the months turned into years, I became increasingly depressed, grew to hate my job at Children Services, and had barely made a dent in repaying my college loans. My life needed an overhaul.

In my search to eliminate college debt and start a new chapter of my life, I was drawn to the adventure and benefits that the military had to offer. One of the Army's benefits was the Student Loan Repayment Program (SLRP). If I served a minimum of three years in the Army, all of my student loans would be paid off. Suddenly, the idea of joining the Army became a realistic option. The U.S. was not involved in any major national conflicts, so threat of going to war was low. Also, I felt like I needed a challenge to rejuvenate my life. The Army's catch phrase at the time was "Be all that you can be in the Army." In my current state, I wasn't maximizing my potential and the idea of being the best person I could be was appealing. I knew I could handle the physical aspect—weightlifting and running were a part of my daily routine anyway.

The most difficult adjustment would be the mental challenge. At my age and with my educational background, I knew it would be difficult to take orders from less educated, and perhaps younger, drill sergeants. I also recognized that giving up everything I owned and moving to another state would take some getting used to.

One day, on my lunch break from work, I stopped by the Army recruiting office and spoke with a recruiter. He explained that as a college graduate, I had two options. I could enter the Army as an enlisted soldier, skip three ranks, and immediately become a Specialist/E-4 upon entry or I could sign up for Officer Candidate School (OCS) and become a commissioned officer. If I made it through OCS, I would then become a Second Lieutenant. A Second Lieutenant is the lowest ranking commissioned officer, but still technically outranks even the highest-ranking enlisted soldier. The decision to become a commissioned officer would have been an easy one, however, if commissioned, I would have been required to serve six years in the military. I wasn't about to commit six years of my life to something I wasn't even one hundred percent sure about doing in the first place. In addition, the SLRP was not available to commissioned officers, which meant if I went that route, I would still need to pay off my student loans.

I eventually opted to enlist and join the rank and file soldiers. I took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and received a high enough score to choose any occupation in the Army. Nevertheless, when it was time to select my Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), I kept the possibility of going to war in the back of my mind. Jobs with the infantry, artillery, or combat engineers were out of the question. Unfortunately, that left few options for a three-year enlistment; most MOS's required at least a four-year commitment. Any job that required a lengthy training period, also required a longer stint in the Army. Eventually, I settled on becoming a Wheeled Vehicle Repairer, or "63 Whiskey" in military jargon. I had no experience working on vehicles other than changing the oil and tires on my car. However, the way I saw it, vehicle maintenance would be a

practical skill to have regardless of whatever career I pursued after the Army.

As a college graduate, I had the added bonus of choosing my duty station, and I chose Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It wasn't too far from Ohio, which meant I could drive home whenever I was on leave. I also relished the thought of milder winters. Finally, when all the official paperwork was completed, I learned that my ten weeks of basic training would take place at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and my advanced individual training would be at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland. When I finished the four months of training, I hoped to remain at Fort Bragg for the remainder of my enlistment period.

When I joined the Army on June 22, 2001, the U.S. was not at war. Our limited involvement in Kosovo had just ended and there were no major conflicts looming. I was twenty-five years old when I joined and turned twenty-six in August, while still in basic training. I was a grandpa by military standards. Most of the other recruits in basic training were under the age of twenty. It was even more unusual that I was ranked as a Specialist while everyone else was a lower-ranking Private. As the highest-ranking soldier in my platoon, I was consistently targeted for leadership positions, extra duties, and ultimately, more punishment. If my men screwed up, I suffered the consequences along with them. In the Army, when a soldier is punished with extra physical activity, it is referred to as getting "smoked," and I got smoked a lot.

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Throughout the remainder of AIT, the reality of going to war became less of a distant thought and more of a certainty. I learned that troops at Fort Bragg were already getting deployed to Afghanistan in support of The Global War on Terrorism. When I joined the Army, I knew that getting reassigned to a base overseas was a possibility—someplace like Germany or South Korea where there were permanent Army bases—but I would never have predicted that I could get deployed to the remote mountains of Afghanistan. By that time, I realized that my age and education

made no difference. While at war, everyone in my class at AIT would be treated equally. Every soldier I trained with faced the possibility of getting deployed as soon as we graduated and were shipped off to our respective duty stations. Suddenly, our training took on a whole new level of significance. As an Army mechanic, there is zero tolerance for mistakes. In combat, if a vehicle breaks down due to a mechanic's oversight, the driver of that vehicle could get killed as a result.

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Burning petroleum filled my nostrils and the heat was so intense that I felt like I was being engulfed in an inferno. For a moment, I imagined myself in a room filled with smoke and fire with no escape.

"Specialist Rickly!", Sergeant Williams yelled, startling me into reality.

I pulled myself from my cot. There was a ring of sweat around my collar. I was in an inferno all right, but this hell was the tent I lived in, and the heat was coming from the brutal and relentless sun. The fumes I smelled were actually diesel fumes wafting from a nearby generator. I was in the desert in Kuwait. It was early spring and it was already over 100 degrees outside. Sun rays peeked through gaps in the tent, highlighting the sand and dust hanging in the air.

"We need you out there filling sandbags!"

"Yes. Sergeant," I replied, as I slowly rifled through my footlocker for my entrenching tool.

"Double time it, Rickly!"

"Roger that, Sergeant!"

Outside the tent, the makeshift Army base was alive with activity. Troops were running by, singing an all too familiar cadence. As the Sergeant sang, the soldiers responded:

Sergeant: Ain't no use in lookin' down

Soldiers: Ain't no use in lookin' down

Sergeant: Ain't no discharge on the ground

Soldiers: Ain't no discharge on the ground

Sergeant: Ain't no use in lookin' back

Soldiers: Ain't no use in lookin' back

Sergeant: Jodie's got your Cadillac

Soldiers: Jodie's got your Cadillac

Sergeant: I used to date a beauty queen

Soldiers: Now I love my M16

Sergeant: I used to drive a Chevrolet

Soldiers: Now I'm humpin' all the way

Sergeant: Misery, misery

Soldiers: Misery, misery

Sergeant: Army life is killin' me.

Soldiers: Army life is killin' me.

As the cadence continued on in the distance, I made my way to where soldiers were already filling and stacking sandbags around the tent's perimeter. My buddy, Private Lapin, was there sticking out like an easy target. Lapin was a tall good old boy from Bland, Missouri. He was smart and witty and I admired him for calling out authority on some of their nonsense.

"You look like crap, Rickly," Private Lapin said as I joined in filling sandbags.

I had been wearing the same uniform for about a week because the only way to wash clothes was by hand with a bar of soap and bottled water.

I was in no mood. "You're not looking too good yourself there, Lapin."

"Nice to see you could make it to the party!" he laughed.

"I wasn't even supposed to be on this detail," I replied.

I unfolded my entrenching tool to its full length of 24 inches and started scooping sand.

"This is ridiculous!" Lapin said, "You'd think we could at least get some real shovels around here."

"I know. This is pretty stupid," I agreed. "I'm so glad I went through all that training just so I could fill sandbags all day!"

Later that evening, four soldiers, including me, were huddled around a large wooden spool that doubled as our card table. We were playing spades and talking about what we would eat first when we got back home. We had been eating MRE's for at least one meal a day, and everyone was craving real food.

"I'm going to get a huge T-Bone steak and fries," one of the guys said.

"I'm going to get a pizza with extra pepperoni and cheese," another added.

"Rickly, how about you?"

"Huh? Oh, I don't know. I'd have to think about it. Maybe a double cheeseburger?"

I was daydreaming again. Thinking about all the sacrifices we were making and wondering if it was really worth it. How many more people would be killed before the war was over. I wasn't even exactly sure what we were doing in Kuwait. Why was Iraq and Saddam Hussein suddenly the target while Bin Laden was still out there somewhere? We heard rumors about Saddam having weapons of mass destruction, but what did that have to do with the 9/11 attacks? Thoughts like that intruded my mind often when I started missing home. However, without any answers, I refocused my thoughts on the next round of cards.

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My company flew in to Kuwait on a commercial airliner. The only other passengers on the plane were soldiers headed to the same destination. After stopping in Frankfurt, Germany, to refuel, we finally landed in Kuwait on March 3, 2003. We spent a couple of days at a reception camp near the airport, then travelled through the night to reach Camp Pennsylvania, a staging encampment in the Northern desert of Kuwait, near the Iraq border. My company was one of the first to get there, and at that point the camp consisted of nothing more than several sleeping tents, a mess tent, armored vehicles and artillery, generators, porta pots, and soldiers. The only items we had with us were the things that could be carried on our bodies, in our duffle bag, and in our rucksack.

After stuffing our bags with the necessities – extra boots, socks, underwear, hot and cold weather uniforms, sleeping bag, sleeping mat, etc. – there was barely room for anything else. I managed to fit one book to read and a notebook to write in. Any other personal items were packed in a footlocker and transported to Kuwait aboard a cargo ship. We wouldn't get our footlockers for over a month. We slept on the floor of our tent on a half inch thick foam mat and sleeping bag and used our rucksacks for pillows. With nothing to do besides wait for the war to start, soldiers were getting bored, restless, and agitated. It was difficult adjusting to living in the same tent with thirty or more other soldiers. Plus, we had no idea from one day to the next what was going to happen. The lower enlisted soldiers, like me, were typically left in the dark until the last minute. Consequently, all we could do was wait and speculate. We assumed that U.S. troops planned to invade Iraq, but when? Did that mean our company was going with them or staying at Camp Pennsylvania? I thought it was strange to have hundreds of troops collected in one place near the Kuwait-Iraq border. We would be sitting ducks if Saddam Hussein ordered the release of the chemical or biological agents he had been known to use. In the early days of the war, I learned to sleep with my M40A1 gas mask tucked by my side just in case.

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The war on Iraq was not officially declared until March 20, 2003, and by then we had moved from Camp Pennsylvania to Camp Victory, Kuwait. I was relieved to get farther away from the Iraq border. However, the cargo ship carrying all of our mechanics tools, personal belongings, and additional gear had still not arrived. So, we spent most of our time fortifying the camp and training. We ran in formation around the camp and did other physical exercises before sunrise – while it was still under 100 degrees – then practiced drills throughout the day. In the desert where sand found its way into every orifice, keeping ourselves and our rifles clean was also a daily challenge. At night, we often pulled guard duty in the towers surrounding the perimeter of our camp. Even

with these duties, there was a lot of down time, which left plenty of opportunity to contemplate our situation and long for the comforts of home. We were ordered to remain vigilant for any type of threat including chemical, biological, and radiological warfare. We carried a gas mask and M-16A2 rifle everywhere we went, including to the port-a-pots and chow hall.

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I woke to sirens wailing. “Gas, Gas, Gas!” someone yelled. It was the middle of the night and inside the tent it was pitch black. I only had 9 seconds to get my mask on or I would be a dead man. This is when all of my training kicked in. I grabbed the mask beside me and held it to my face with one hand. Then used the other hand to pull the elastic harness over my head. Once the mask was donned, I tightened the two straps under each ear to ensure a tight seal against my face. It was something I had practiced at least a hundred times. I kept a small LED light in my pocket while I slept—for moments like this—and for making my way to the porta pot in the middle of the night. I grabbed my pack of MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear and used the light to make my way through the tent, then followed my comrades outside to the nearest concrete bunker.

Once in the bunker, we went to MOPP Level 4 which consisted of wearing a heavy, weather-proof, charcoal-lined jacket and pants, as well as rubber gloves and boots. The suit is worn on top of everything else—in these early stages of deployment I slept in my desert camouflage uniform (DCUs) and combat boots—to provide protection from chemical agents. In the bunker, with just the light of the moon, it was a struggle to get the rest of my MOPP gear on within the 10-minute limit. With the gas mask on, I had no peripheral vision and I couldn’t sit down to put my gear on due to risk of contact with potentially contaminated areas. Even in the cooler temperatures of night, the suit and mask were hot and suffocating, especially with my adrenaline pumping. I worked up a sweat in no time, breathing heavily, and fogging my mask.

I finally got my suit on and then looked to help others who

were still struggling with their suits. Once everyone was completely dressed, the questions started flying. It was difficult to breath or speak well through the masks, but I quickly learned that this was not a drill. A Scud missile, possibly loaded with a chemical agent, had landed or was going to land, in our vicinity. I found myself thinking back to my experience in basic training when we were made to go into a chamber filled with tear gas and then ordered to remove our gas masks. The drill sergeants said the purpose of the drill was to make sure we knew what tear gas felt like. It was terrible, like taking a steam bath in pepper spray. We came out of the chamber with our lungs heaving, mouths drooling, and tears and snot running down our faces. That's when my mind started to play out various scenarios. If tear gas was that bad, what would it be like if I were exposed to nuclear, chemical, or biological (NBC) agents? Was my suit really going to protect me? What if the missile landed close enough that we were killed by the initial explosion? I wasn't supposed to die. Joining the Army was supposed to be a means to an end. I would serve my three years, get my student loans paid off, and then get back to normal life.

Over the next thirty to forty minutes, I was terrified, but not necessarily panicky. We had practiced Scud drills in basic training, at Fort Bragg, and also since our deployment to Kuwait. For that reason, I was able to keep my mind somewhat under control. I thought about all the unexpected events in my life that had brought me to that point. When I was still in high school, I seemed to know exactly how my life would turn out. I would work hard and as long as I did that, everything else would fall into place. I would go to college, get married, land my dream job, and raise a family. The time spent in that bunker, more than any other time in my life, made me realize how much of my life was beyond my control. At that moment, all I could do was stand there and wait for whatever was going to happen.

LAUREN KNIGHT

The Original Sin

the original sin was simply a woman eating  
I watched from atop the wall, white feathers drooping so low as to skate  
the ground  
and the serpentine form draped in coils from the tree smiled fondly and  
asked  
*do you want to know what fullness feels like?*

she took it from Her grasp and I couldn't help but notice  
how deliciously her black scales contrasted the skin of the fruit  
and I wondered how it would taste from her hand  
an ache deep within me demanded my attention  
insisted on being felt, but the robes I wore  
did nothing to mask the gnawing inside  
the questions I had

I could hear the faint sound of teeth biting fruit  
the scent hung like chorus bells in the atmosphere  
I could hear the ringing long after it stopped  
to feel cold my whole life, the rigid halls of heaven  
ensuring the separation of ranks  
only to be warmed by the sun beating down on us  
settling as a weighted blanket around my shoulders  
above my wings  
I wonder what else I'd been deprived of

she slid down the trunk to sprawl on the garden floor  
her golden eyes blinked slowly like the pull of honey  
and as if she'd said my name I approached  
hand outstretched, I slid trembling flesh to hers  
and our joined hands reached out to pluck the apple  
*Honor* she hissed, breath unbelievably hot in my ear  
as if she'd sheltered me from the rain in the stretch of her voice  
*do you want to know what love feels like?*

## Pas de Trois

every time I tell someone  
they feel the need to ask

*how does it work?*

and I never know how to explain it  
in a way that is satisfying  
to a person that will never  
understand that for me, loving  
the two of them is like finally breathing  
when before I was forced to the ground  
from smoke charring my esophagus

they needle me, they want  
to know about jealousy

they think

*this is it, I have her now*

and sit back as if I haven't  
entertained jealousy  
my entire life  
letting her sit in my parlor  
while I pour her hot tea  
ankles crossed like the good  
little catholic girl I was  
raised

I pat my hands gentle  
in my lap and whisper, thin  
harp string sighs, that  
watching my women love each other  
is the gift Sappho granted me,  
knowing I was to be born in a world  
decaying and mean,  
numb and disjointed

they preach  
*sharing is caring*  
but  
*no not like that*  
and I want to ask them  
when in my life have women  
been left alone  
to live as they pleased  
silence coats their tongues

my girls feed me  
almond tea cakes  
from the farmer's market  
and take me dancing  
on friday evenings  
in the warmth  
of our living room,  
one at my front  
and one at my back,  
holding my waist  
and hands  
they ask me why

POETRY

I have to go so far,  
why isn't one woman enough  
femme lesbienne?

and I want to answer  
that I have yet to hear  
of an un  
without a  
deux and a trois

## JAE PHIPPS

## The Trials

Frankincense burning assaults her nose  
smoke obscures her eyes  
ash dripping from her mouth  
the priest demands an answer  
his smooth pages bid her hands to bleed.

The soft grass under her feet tastes like  
charred human steak,  
sweet and horribly wrong.  
All of Salem burns  
at Governor Phips discretion.

The priest cannot make demands.  
Not of her.

The tarot deck shuffles in her fist,  
demanding retribution.

Little shop on the corner  
covered in moss  
children scream  
throwing rock after rock,  
a legacy continued.

It is because of the tea  
she thinks  
tea leaves scorch  
their consciences.

## POETRY

Earl grey is out of style.  
*It's just Sod's law*  
he screamed  
to make her understand.

The rotting chaise of  
society,  
pyre burning brightly,  
gave way to  
life.

She rolled him up  
like a blunt  
and smoked  
until he was quiet.

The boastful  
and arrogant  
doe sighs,  
burning  
and flaming  
rebirth.

You cannot know yourself  
until you have written  
a million verses

*A beard does not constitute a philosopher,*  
the pages flay  
themselves open  
as the flames scratch  
her ankles.

The wood cuts  
and again  
the deck shuffles.

## A Prayer to Saint Jude

*Mom, what would you do if I was a lesbian?*

I'll never forget the look on her face  
shock turned to anger and then  
something else entirely,  
as she stated

*That is not the life I want for you,  
that life is lonely, it is miserable,  
it is a life you will have to live  
alone.*

I felt like a discarded sock on the sidewalk  
and vowed to myself  
that I would do everything in my power  
to never have that life of loneliness.

At fifteen, after years of praying  
and crying, I came home to my parents  
sitting solemnly in our living room.  
*Your sister told us something very interesting.*  
They looked disappointed  
*She told us you were a lesbian.*

They took me to their church that day,  
and they made me pray,  
to try and change the person  
I had barely just accepted that I was.  
I would not pray for them.  
I would not be the daughter  
they desperately craved.

When I was twenty,  
I prayed to whomever was listening,  
may I find a family that loves me,  
may I find friends that care for me,  
may I find acceptance and joy  
where I have been warned there is none

That prayer has not been answered.

I did not find them,  
but, by some miracle  
they all found me.

## DASHONDA SMITH

### The Critics

Assault isn't most likely what is perceived  
when her work is rejected by peers.  
Their sly remarks, the mimics underneath their breath  
like an itch just out of reach  
but shreds her flesh.  
The sight of her is enough to piss them off  
their eyes cling on like leeches  
or a dead animal with the lingering stare she can't unsee.  
I would hate to be around them too if that's all I can feel.  
But she remains masked, she's alright for now  
their voices are the least of her worries  
she doesn't really care about what they have to say.  
It is the voices inside that haunt her,  
telling her that she will never be anything  
voices like her mother,  
who tells her that she wouldn't even make it two weeks  
in the land that couldn't hold them both together.  
Voices telling her that everyone hates her.  
The stress is built up inside like a balloon meant to be popped.  
The restraint is soon vanished, the mask is unveiled  
as soon as the door shuts for the last time  
the flow of tears can then succeed.  
Hopefully she can find a land where no one lives,  
no one who will call her feelings make believe,  
no one who can't judge what they can't see or hear.  
But the intuition logged deep into the soul of a recovered body  
knows that everything isn't alright with her.

## Are You Okay?

It feels weird to say the least  
Fake smiles to deceive them all  
Until you say, "Are you okay?"  
But I can't forget the memories we've made  
I can't unsee what I've become  
It's my mistake  
Now everywhere I see is you  
And I let you to  
Haunting my mind  
It seemed all too soon  
But I wanted more  
And you gave me everything  
In the end both of our minds  
Were sore.  
Are you okay? Tell me if you still  
Think about me as happiness.  
Sore mind, the illusion of love  
Through a moment of lust  
It wasn't there, nor was I  
Still wondering who got the better end of it all  
Are you okay? Fake smiles  
To deceive them all  
It's weird to say the least

## A Quarter Till

At a quarter till two  
Where will you be  
When that time comes  
I will already be long gone  
I killed myself last year  
Looking for you  
Now where are you  
In the middle of nowhere  
There's a tree by a house  
By the house is a grave  
That used to belong to me  
In that grave is my coffin  
In the coffin is a note  
Saying the games have just begun  
At a quarter till 3  
Where will you be  
When that time has come  
I'll be searching for you  
I know that you're hiding  
Time to pay for what you have done  
Run, you can run, that's fun  
Confess what you made me do  
Join me in the realm of everywhere  
And nowhere  
Help me, help you  
It's the least you can do  
I mean, I killed myself for you  
Now where are you  
Where will you be  
At a quarter till

## SCOTT BRADY

### Geoff, Ellie, and Boris

I worked almost eighty hours that week, transporting racks and kegs of beer and liquor around the various vending stalls set up throughout Floret Music Center's stage pavilion. My days lasted fifteen hours apiece, with a twenty-hour shift in the middle of the week. By Friday, I was exhausted, craving only the soft embrace of my mattress and the cool caress of a ceiling fan on my body. My arrival to my two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment unit at one in the morning took me immediately to my bed. I stripped myself down to my T-shirt and boxer shorts and collapsed atop my sheets, the world fading into a peaceful blackness before I even hit the pillow.

I wished it would have lasted the entire weekend; unfortunately, such intentions were not realized as a faint call began to sound in the back of my mind. "Geoff," the voice beckoned in a fevered attempt to pull me from my well-deserved slumber. "Geoff..."

I wanted so badly to ignore the allure of the enchanting, angelic tone trying to grab my attention, to bring me back to the land of the living. "Geoff," it continued, accompanied by a pressure against my left shoulder and a push and pull that afflicted me in my sleep. Just a few more hours, please, that was all I wanted.

I could feel it, the rocking, my whole body feeling like I was on a boat jumping over the roughest of waves, swaying about in the intense winds and unsteady currents. There was nothing to grab onto as I slipped over the non-existent edge I had begun stumbling towards. "Geoff."

I gasped, the jolt nearly giving me a heart attack. As I looked around my darkened room, the silhouettes of my dresser, my cluttered desk, and my nightstand coming into view, I could see the black outline of panties against a pair of slender, pale legs. They led up to Ellie, my roommate – Lucile Esther, L.E. – who was standing over me, clutching one of her red Chucks in her hand.

There was a wild look in her eye, as though she were ready to beat me senseless.

“What?” I groaned, trying to ignore her as I laid my head back down in a puddle of cold drool.

“Geoff,” she explained, her voice shaky, filled with fear, “I need help. There’s... there’s a spider in my room.”

“Kill it,” I told her, barely registering.

“It’s huge,” she exclaimed, peering over her shoulder occasionally, as though the arachnid might sneak up behind her and break her neck. I would have applauded the beast, if it guaranteed me an uninterrupted sleep.

“Put a glass over it,” I suggested, slurring my speech as I shut my eyes. “I’ll get it in the morning...”

“Please,” she begged, shaking me until I batted her away. “I can’t sleep with it in there. What if it gets out? What if there are more? Just check, please.”

I gave up and gave in, rising from the sweaty crater indented in my beige blanket to follow her back into her room, past my bathroom in the hall. We stood in the doorway of her bedroom, illuminated by the light of her overhead fan, whirring at top speed like mine.

“There.” She pointed to the interloper, her shoe at the ready.

I approached the creepy-crawly slowly, spotting it as soon as she directed me to it: some eight-legged mutant with black and yellow stripes, a smoothed goiter saddled on its back. It was big, as she said, its size catching me by surprise. I had expected all the fuss to be an overreaction to a common house spider. My skin started to crawl when I saw it, and I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck beginning to stiffen.

“How’d you find it?” I asked her, the two of us staring motionless as it appeared to stare back at us, probably at Ellie more than myself. Some skinny punk with neat hair and a Budweiser shirt probably was not the most intimidating thing for it to behold, whereas the busty redhead in a Modest Mouse tank top standing nearby would have surely captivated its attention.

“I was in the bathroom, and when I came out, it was just

there, crawling across the floor,” she explained as it started inching forward again. “Oh, God, it’s moving again!” She chucked her shoe at the intruder, missing by a comparable mile as the footwear bounced and knocked over her bag of golf clubs that had been sitting untouched next to her dresser, by the door.

“Will you calm down?” I said to her, still struggling to keep my eyes opened. “You’re gonna wake someone up.”

“Can you shoot it?” she suggested, shrinking back behind me as the spider continued to skitter around its spot on the faded carpet.

“I’m not gonna shoot it,” I replied, backing away a bit in lieu of its timid approach.

“But, you can? In fact, you should.”

“Ellie,” I told her in an agitated tone, “I’m not gonna use a forty-five to kill a spider.”

“Why not?”

“Because, this isn’t the time or place. It’s a matter of principle.”

“When would there be a better time?” she asked.

“When there’s an intruder,” I replied, sarcastically.

“This is an intruder,” she tried to reason.

I sighed, pinching my nose, as I tried to think up a suitable reason that I could give to calm her down and get her mind off shooting the damned thing.

“Okay,” I eventually said, having reached my wits’ end with the argument. “I will give you three reasons why I’m not gonna shoot the spider: number one, it’s three in the morning, and everyone else in the building is asleep. Number two, I don’t wanna pay for the holes in the floor. And three, I’m not in the mood or the right state of mind to fill out a fucking police report about gunfire in the apartment.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, do you have another idea?”

“Put a glass over it.”

“And then what?”

I thought a moment, back to when I would run to my

mother or father about a similar situation. They would bring a clear drinking cup and place it over the arthropod, then slide a magazine or some cardstock underneath to create a makeshift floor. Pick it up, carry it to the toilet, and then watch with a sadistic grin as it was sucked down into the abyss by the whirlpool, so the cycle went.

“Well?” She poked at my arm, still cowering behind me.

Without a word, I left down the hall and went rummaging about in the kitchen for a drinking glass, a clear one. I also swiped a bank statement from the table and returned to trap the beast under the dome. We could now see it up close, and we looked into its six black eyes as it presumably stared up at us, confused and probably scared.

“Hurry up,” Ellie hissed.

“Patience, young padawan,” I jested, my sleep-deprivation beginning to drive me into madness. “You must first sense where the spider is going before you-”

“Just fucking kill it, Geoff.”

Carefully, I slid the invoice under the glass, and it shimmied on top of it, seemingly complacent in the wake of its assured destruction. Ellie watched from afar as I lifted the trap and shuffled to her master bathroom, to the opened toilet bowl.

Unfortunately, due to a combination of my sweaty hands and shaky step, the cup began to slip from my fingers. I snapped to try and grab it, but it was too late. Reflexively, I let go of the envelope, letting everything crash to the floor.

“Shit!” Ellie shrieked as she fled, leaving only myself and the arachnid behind.

We stood solid, eyeing each other as we tried to anticipate our opponent’s next move. I tried to figure out whether it would approach me or flee, and then I considered if I would stay or run. I could have stepped on it, sure; however, I was not wearing shoes, or socks for that matter. Scraping spider entrails off the sole of my foot was not how I wanted to spend any more of that night.

I considered it might start talking and ask me where the nearest exit was.

“I do apologize,” it might have said in a pompous British

accent. “However, I do seem to be lost. If you could be so kind as to show me to the door, I would happily leave you and your friend to yourselves.” I wish I knew why I expected the little miscreant to sound British, it just came to me in that incoherent moment.

It began a hasty retreat towards the bed, opposite the dresser, scurrying just past my feet. I jumped away out of fear and grabbed for one of the golf clubs from the leather bag on the ground. A nine-iron, powerful enough to take on the rat bastard.

Raising it, I delivered a heavy strike upon its exoskeleton, flattening its body and releasing a pulpy red goo onto the faded white fabric of the carpet. The ordeal was over.

The monster was dead.

“Sayonara, Boris,” I said, immediately flashing back to an old song about a similar ordeal.

Ellie returned then, bursting into the room with a Colt, aiming it with trembling hands at the spot in front of me. I glared at her as she approached slowly. “What the hell are you doing?” I asked before swiping the gun from her, the weight of it less than what I had anticipated. Checking the well in the grip, I found there was not even a magazine.

“You didn’t even load it,” I informed her angrily, though I was actually relieved at her forgetfulness in that scenario.

“Is it dead?” she asked, still distancing herself behind me.

“He’s come to a sticky end,” I began to recite. “Don’t think he will ever mend...”

“What are you singing?” she questioned.

I laughed. “The Who. Don’t worry, he’s dead.”

“You’re sure?”

I directed her attention to the scene of the murder. Upon seeing the bloody mess of a steam-rolled corpse left by my impressive swing, she nearly passed out.

“He really is dead,” she said aloud, sounding almost wistful. There was a silence between us as we observed the bloody pancake, as though we were honoring the spider’s life.

I nodded after a time, and I handed her back the club before walking out of her bedroom and rounding back into mine. I stowed

away the gun in my nightstand and gravitated to my bed, falling atop the dressed mattress again, my body melting into the cold sweat soaked into the fabric.

“What are you doing?” she asked me from the doorway as she played with one of the strands of hair hanging from her bun.

“I’m going back to bed,” I responded, my answer muffled as I lay face-down in my pillow.

“You’re not gonna help me clean it up?”

“I killed it for you,” I reminded her, not lifting my head, because I knew if I did, I would be right back in that room, scrubbing spider guts out of the carpet.

“Well...” She paused. “What should I use to clean it up? Lysol? Or bleach, maybe?”

“I am sure you will figure that out,” I replied. “Good night.”

“But-”

I was already out when she tried asking me again.

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Regrettably, I awoke in the late morning, my near-dead phone reading half past eleven. Still tired, I got up anyways to check Ellie’s progress: the Lysol and a sponge were present, but she was missing. Meandering down the corridor, I found her curled up on the sectional in the den, her nine-iron grasped firmly in her hands.

## JACKSON GAGNE

### The Scent of Coffee

Aging veteran Thomas Pritt took his usual place in the corner of the small coffeeshop in which he spent each morning. He said his customary two-toned “hello” and jerked a nod of acknowledgement to the owner, then rested his worn leather jacket beside him. He’d order the same meal as always, of course; a bland grilled cheese sandwich with bland coffee. It certainly wasn’t the coffee that continually brought him back to this mediocre restaurant. It was the smell.

Pritt leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes while the cooks got to work on his order. The aroma of charred wheat bread and cheap coffee lazily drifted into the dining room from the kitchen. First Pritt could barely define the scent; then, stronger, unmistakable, and unavoidable it became. As he inhaled the sickly smell, the man sighed and once more felt himself fall into his nightmare, yet also his addiction.

He suddenly found himself younger, stronger. His head was still covered with hair and his olive-green uniform was tight across his chest and arms. The starry sky loomed above, a great black blanket smothering the world save for a few specks of light. Canvas tents neatly lined the camp. He sat among his fellow soldiers around a small fire; they had just received the news that they were not heading to the frontlines for several more weeks than they had previously thought. It was a joyous night, filled with rabble-rousing and merriment. Those seated by the fire were swapping stories of glorious nights past, arguing theories on how soon the war would end, or simply playing cards.

“Coffee?” Pritt heard a voice both distinct and vague at the same time. He turned and saw a soldier offering a pot of the freshly-brewed liquid to him.

“I’ve never actually had any before,” Pritt replied to the man, his image slightly blurred by the warping of a memory. The

soldier appeared shocked and forced him to try some, immediately pouring him a cup. Pritt held the cup up to his mouth, then stifled a gag from the overpowering scent. “*This* is what you all drink?” he sputtered.

The soldier didn’t have time to answer. Gunfire shattered the tranquility. Bullets ripped through tent and flesh alike. Explosions shattered the hills outside the camp. All the soldiers around the fire were dazed. Some raced for their tents, some threw themselves flat on the ground, others frantically tried to locate the source of the attack and return fire. Bodies began to fall to the cold earth and lay still, dark pools forming beneath them. The air was a mix of smoke and shouting.

Pritt found himself stumbling backwards, away from the fight. He was turning to run when he heard a hoarse voice call out his name. A bloodied soldier, leg bent awkwardly, tried crawling to him, mouth forming the words, “help me.” Pritt desperately wanted to help him. He did. But in this memory, he was only an observer. He could not change the sequence of events. No matter how many times Pritt relived this terrifying moment, he would always turn and run away. He was always a coward.

It was at this point that Pritt returned to reality, eyes filling with tears and fists striking the table suddenly. “Forgive me, God dammit,” he sobbed. The waiters, once scared by this behavior, had grown used to it. They didn’t get much other business.

Tentatively setting the sandwich and coffee in front of the shaken old man, the waiter stepped back. Pritt, in his emotional state, flung the plate into the wall, shattering it in dozens of pieces. Taking a deep breath, he composed himself, muttered an apology, paid for the meal, and left.

He would be back tomorrow. The waiter, sighing, glanced at the shattered plate and then at the cup of coffee. It was untouched from Pritt’s wrath. *Must be something in the coffee*, the waiter thought to himself.

## JOHN ALEXANDER SCOTT MARTI

### Metal Bits

They drove together along the black asphalt road towards the salvage yard a few minutes away from Jim's apartment. His dad had met him there to replace the alternator in Jim's nineteen ninety-four gold Chevy Cavalier that was stuck in the parking lot of the apartment complex not far from the steps to the doorway of his apartment. He met his dad outside when he heard the honk of the Buick Regal carry into the apartment at ten in the morning just as his dad told Jim would happen when they spoke on the phone last evening.

Jim left the apartment and struggled with his jacket as he hurried down the steps from the second-floor apartment door. He jumped in the passenger side of the navy-blue Regal and his dad, Gabriel, peeled away.

"How's Heather feeling?" Gabriel asked.

"Could I have a cigarette?" Jim asked. He rustled through the pockets of his black windbreaker with both hands.

Gabriel pulled a gold pack of Benson & Hedges out of the left pocket of the Cleveland Indians jacket he was wearing and tossed it to Jim.

"This is going to be a mess," Gabriel said.

Jim stared out the window of the Regal. He pushed the button on the door and cracked the window to let the smoke escape. "Thanks, Dad," he said. "What's going to be a mess?"

"The columns," Gabriel said as he waved his hand at Jim's window. "The sewers. They dig up the road to get the drainpipes into the ground. It's going to be a real mess. We won't be able to take Tower Boulevard for a while."

Jim looked past the tar of the road at the massive hollow columns of gray and white stone. The columns lay in a row on the east side of Tower Boulevard and they stretched as far as Jim could see. On the other side of Tower, past the backyards of a long row of ranch houses, ran West Twenty-Fourth Street. Maxwell Middle

School was on Twenty-Fourth just a few blocks from the apartment Jim and his girlfriend moved to a few months ago. His parents' house was about ten blocks from the school. During seventh and eighth grade, Jim walked from his parents' house to a sidewalk that cut through the rowed housing of the west side of town. He had to cross over Tower at the light on the days he walked to school. After he crossed Tower, there was a small park on the fork of a stream and a bridge to cross the stream that was very narrow and would lead to the dead-end street of Maxwell Middle School. The beaten park had a set of monkey bars and a stone basketball surface with cracks and a missing hoop. It was an abandoned area even though a hundred kids crossed the bridge to and from school most days. The whole area looked the same as it did seven years ago.

"We used to run through those drainage pipes," Jim said. "Under the bridge. There was a drainage pipe. One of those." He pointed out the window. "We could walk inside the pipes from the opening under the bridge and come out under the bridge way down on Tower Boulevard."

Gabriel turned the wheel hard at Broadway. His eyes were focused on the road. "Here," he said, and he pulled the wheel hard again and parked outside the salvage yard on Broadway. There was a red brick building with no windows that marked the entrance. "Wait here."

Jim flipped the radio volume up and settled on the Motown stuff that was on the dial. He hummed along and watched for the door on the windowless brick building for his dad to return with a contraption that might offer Jim a clue as to what was up with the car that wouldn't start in the apartment lot.

Gabriel stormed out the single door carrying what looked like a bomb made of metal. The driver's side door swung open and he dropped the bomb into Jim's lap. "Here," he said. He sat to drive and slammed the car door. The Motown volume he left turned up. "How's Heather?" he asked.

"She's dizzy," Jim said. "She gets dizzy a lot. We keep it quiet."

"Leave her alone, son," Gabriel said. "You know?" He

gestured out his driver's window with his hand and said, "They'll be starting all this work in a few days."

"What are we going to do with this?" Jim asked. He struggled to lift the bomb off his lap. "It's cool."

"I'm going to swap it," Gabriel said. "That has a power core that's been fixed. I'll take your alternator out with the dead core and put that one in." He pointed to the bare metal ball-shaped alternator Jim was holding. "When I take that back to the junkyard, they'll give me twenty bucks for the core."

Jim played with the alternator, trying to figure out what the top would be. He felt the car turn and slid in his seat and dumped the alternator back into his lap. The car made a couple turns off Tower Boulevard, and Jim was eager to step out when Gabriel parked the Regal in the apartment lot.

The cool breeze of March on the lake was comfortable enough for Gabriel to begin his work on the Cavalier. The hood of the car was up in no time and he had gotten his red metal toolbox out of the trunk of his navy-blue Regal. He left the window of the Regal cracked with the radio on and the sound of Smokey Robinson singing "The Tracks of My Tears" drifted in the light breeze as Gabriel buried his head inside the engine bay of the Cavalier.

Jim stood at attention with his arms crossed behind him at the passenger door and watched his dad work on the engine. Generally, when his dad worked on cars, he did it within the compact garage of his home. The garage was clean and concise.

"Do you want some coffee?" Jim asked. He knew his dad worshipped that black oily sludge that Jim couldn't stomach.

"No," Gabriel said. He stood straight and stretched his arms over his head. "They got me on nights at the foundry. I've got to get some sleep before I go in tonight. This won't take long. Find me an eleven."

Jim moved to the front of the car and started digging in the toolbox on the ground. He was kneeling on one knee, studying the metal bits for the metal etched numbers. "The little things fall to the bottom," Jim said. He banged metal bits as he tossed miss after miss

back in the toolbox. His dad had already lifted the dead alternator out of the engine bay and swapped it with the clean meatal rebuild. "Eleven," Jim said. He stood and held the bit towards the white light of the lakeshore in March.

Gabriel bent his shoulders back into the engine bay. He motioned with his palm up for the eleven. Jim dropped it flush into Gabriel's hand and stepped back to watch. Gabriel worked fast and sure. Tools clicked and whined, and he pulled and forced and twisted his muscles.

Jim stood with his arms crossed and watched his dad work. Jim looked at his black dusted fingers from the dried oil on the pile of metal bits he dug through. He looked at his dad's thick hands flexing as he worked. Gabriel was bigger than Jim. Not taller. Gabriel was muscled with caramel skin. Jim was scrawny and pale with hair that was thick and black. The two had the same hair, other than the streaks of silver that peppered Gabriel's temples.

"Grab that big, flathead screwdriver," Gabriel said.

"For what?" Jim asked.

"Don't ask questions," Gabriel said.

Jim stepped to the toolbox again and pulled out the biggest piece he felt his hand on. It was a screwdriver long as a ruler and thick as a pipe with a chipped metal point.

Pointing at the metal ball alternator, Gabriel said, "I need you to brace this while I drop this bolt in."

Jim placed the chipped tip of the screwdriver flat against the top of the alternator.

"Not like that," Gabriel said. "Underneath. Hold the alternator flush a touch so I can line up this bolt."

After poking the alternator a few times, the screwdriver caught a groove and Jim could feel the click in his hand. He pushed the alternator with the tip of the screwdriver while Gabriel struggled to pull a rubber belt. Jim felt another click in his hand.

"Got it," Gabriel said. He relaxed his body.

Jim tossed the screwdriver into the toolbox. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stepped back from the car. Gabriel began to connect the battery that had given Jim hell for three days. The

car wouldn't start Monday. Gabriel had told Jim over the phone to begin with the battery. He spent most of the day getting a ride to pick up a new one. The car ran on Tuesday. He had to cook at work that night and the car started after his shift with no problem. Wednesday morning, When Heather had to leave for work for the lunch shift, the car didn't start again. She was upset because she hadn't called off work since she was sixteen. Jim called his dad and asked him if he could come by and look at the car. Gabriel was confident it was the alternator when he checked the Cavalier yesterday, but he couldn't get what he needed by the end of the day. He told Jim to sit tight until tomorrow.

"Thanks, Dad", Jim said.

"For what?" Gabriel said. "It's not running yet." He straightened and began to toss his tools back in the toolbox on the ground behind him. He kept a pair of pliers in his hand and turned to the battery. "Start it now," he said.

Jim grabbed the keys from his black windbreaker pocket and moved into the gold Cavalier. He twisted the key in the ignition and the car buzzed while lights flickered. Gabriel motioned his hand, flipping to signal Jim to try again. The car buzzed and flicked and the engine cranked. Jim felt the key settle.

"Leave it run," Gabriel said. "For fifteen minutes. That'll charge the battery."

Jim nodded and pushed the switch on the door, lowering his window. "I think I'll take it for a cruise," he said and smiled.

Gabriel dropped the hood of the car. He banged the fender twice with his hand. "Get over and visit your mother," he said. "Just because you have your own place doesn't mean you don't come home." He shuffled to the driver's side window and put two-hundred dollars in his son's hand. "Take this. Give it to Heather. She's a hard worker. She doesn't need to worry about money right now."

"Thanks, Dad," Jim said.

Gabriel nodded and turned to pack his toolbox in the trunk of his Blue Regal. He took off his Cleveland Indians jacket before he slid into the driver's seat of his car, gave a wave, and drove off.

## FICTION

Jim flipped the radio dial. He settled on some Motown stuff. He rested his head on the soft seat and hummed to the music.

## LAUREN KNIGHT

### Gods, Actually

Fritz groaned, resisting the urge to chuck his still smoking candles across the room. Nothing! Why wasn't this working? He sat back on his heels, carpet providing a meager cushion. The candles rolled in his loose fist; wax clinking together in a sad toast to his failures.

"C'mon Bro," he muttered. The Marvel Loki figure atop Fritz's makeshift altar stared back at him, eyes sunken behind the Viking helmet adorned with plastic horns. The small offering dish stank of old beer and honey, the closest approximation Fritz could get to mead with his budget. The spell book from the library laid open on the floor, chapter title 'Summoning' inked in a deep red facing up. "I've got the offering, the candles, the 'representation of the deity.' Ugh." Fritz flipped to the next page, as if that would give him a clue as to why Loki hadn't shown up. "I even did it on his day, Friday. What the hell?" Fritz started gathering up his materials, placing them into a shoebox he'd slide under his bed, when he heard the forceful stomp of sneakers through the thin walls. "Aw shit."

"Fritz," called Jonathan, the only warning he had before his door slammed open. "Oh my god," Jonathan said through a laugh. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up," Fritz scoffed, nose scrunching in annoyance.

"What do you want?"

"Are you like, praying to that thing?" Jonathan leaned against the doorframe, narrowly avoiding hitting the brim of his baseball hat against the wood. "That's not going to help you win the frat-wide prank war, nerd."

"I said knock it off!" Fritz could feel his face heating with embarrassment. He tossed the candles in the box and shut the lid. Jonathan glared at the offering dish. "Holy shit, you're wasting our beer for tonight! Don't do that Fartz."

"Fuck off Jimmy Johns. I paid for it, so it's mine to do what I want."

Jonathan rolled his eyes, shifting his weight to the other foot. “Whatever. The girls are throwing a party tonight and wanted to remind you that your crazy ass,” he glanced down at the half empty pack of beer on the floor. “And your booze are invited. See you there?”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see. Bye,” Fritz said, standing up to shut the door. But Jonathan had already turned and gone downstairs. Fritz gritted his teeth, eyes sliding shut. This was not how it was meant to be going! Fritz brought a hand to his face, massaging his temples. Maybe he’d just do some more research and try again next Friday. He heard the gentle ‘click’ of the door shutting and opened his eyes, prepared to cuss Jonathan out for bothering him, but instead let out a high pitched shriek. “WHAT THE FUCK?!”

“Shh,” the stranger hissed, bringing a finger to his lips. He held out a hand to the door, and the commotion from downstairs ceased. “Don’t want any visitors.”

“Oh my god, oh my god. You’re him aren’t you?” Fritz swallowed hard, mouth suddenly dry.

“Gods, actually,” Loki replied. He rolled his neck, joints popping obscenely. “It’s been awhile since I’ve traveled through Yggdrasil.” Loki eyes the dirty laundry piled up in Fritz’s desk chair and groaned. “Clean that up so I can take a seat.”

“Yidd-ra what now?” Fritz asked faintly, moving to the other side of the room to clear up. He watched his limbs pick up the clothes and toss them on his bed, but it was as if he was moving through water, through amber. His brain roiled with the onslaught of questions.

“Yggdrasil, the world tree. Did you even do your research?” Loki took a seat, grimacing at the cheap wood the chair was made of. He ran a hand over his face, short ginger beard rustling with the movement.

“I guess not,” Fritz muttered. “You don’t even look like him.” Fritz sat down his opposite, mattress creaking with his weight.

“Odin’s ghost – ! As if a watered down comic book depiction of me could actually be accurate. I don’t even like the color green. I’m the God of Fire, of Mischief, of Chaos. Bringer of

Ragnarok. Red is much more my style.” Loki leaned back, elbows propped on the desk. His armor was more brown leather than anything else, but Fritz wasn’t going to mention that. “Look, do you want my help or not?”

“Yes,” Fritz hurried to say, leaning forwards. “I need to beat Jonathan this year. He’s been the reigning champ for three now, and I’m sick of it.”

Loki paused, as if to consider. “Sure. I’ll help you. But what’s in it for me? What do I get out of this *deal*?”

Fritz glanced at the offering dish, then back at Loki. He had thought that would have been enough. The book hadn’t said anything more than that. His fingers ran cold, and he rubbed them against his denim-clad thighs. “Uh...”

Loki barked out a laugh. “Oh *that* was my payment.” He tched. “If that’s how you want to play, you’re going to need to buy some real mead. And a proper bust to summon me with. If you want my help, preform the ritual tomorrow, on my actual day, and then we’ll see what happens.”

“Actual day?” Fritz stammered.

“Saturday,” Loki replied, eyebrows raised in disappointment. “See you then.” He rose from his chair, stooped to grab a can of beer, and winked.

“Saturday,” Fritz repeated dumbly.

## An Interview with Rich Heldenfels

*Rich Heldenfels is an associate lecturer of English at The University of Akron. You may have had him for a composition or film appreciation course. Most notably, you might have encountered him in the Akron Beacon Journal from 1994-2016 where he served a large chunk of his forty plus year career in the newspaper business as the TV critic and general pop culture reviewer. He is also the author of Television's Greatest Year: 1954 and co-writer of multiple books, such as Ghoulardi: Inside Cleveland TV's Wildest Ride and Cleveland TV Memories.*

*AshBelt's Poetry Editor Dylan Morris sat down with him to talk about his background, career, the troubles with switching careers, good and bad films, and how Quentin Tarantino is overrated.*

*Interview questions and responses have been edited to enhance conciseness and for economy of space. Find the full version on The University of Akron online repository, [IdeaExchange@UAkron](mailto:IdeaExchange@UAkron).*

**I wanted to ask you about your educational background. For the people who may not have had you for a class.**

My undergrad is a B.A. in English from Princeton University, which I got in 1973. I have a master's from The University of Akron in English. I got the Master's in 2011.

**Since you went to Princeton and Akron is a much different area and culture, what do you think was the difference culturally for you? Especially coming back as a nontraditional student to Akron, even with a huge time gap in between.**

Keeping in mind too, when I was in undergrad, I knew nothing. I was in my late teens, early twenties. Who knows much then? I found Akron to be academically stimulating as all get out. I had

great courses. I'm taking courses from teachers who I now consider my friends and colleagues, and it's been an exciting experience. I can't complain. Not from what I've seen here as a student.

**When did you start your master's degree?**

It was 2008.

**What was it like to be in Akron during the Great Recession?  
Especially with going to graduate school during that time.**

Well, I was going to graduate school because the business I was in (the newspaper business) was looking as if it was in fairly serious trouble, and I wanted to make sure I was in a position that I could move into another area if I had to. And of course, yes, the economy did affect my decision to go back to school. As I said before, my change in terms of environment was simply that I was considerably older than most students in my classes. In some cases, older than the professors, but I came in with a sense of "okay, I'm going to take full advantage of this experience." I'm going to challenge myself. I'm going to see what the standards are. I'm going to understand what the rules are, and I'm not going to mess around. I like to think that all those things happened.

Like I said, it was a really good experience. I read things I had not read and studied things I had not studied. Challenged myself in a way I had not as a writer. Newspaper writing is challenging, but academic writing is a whole other set of tools. When I think about when I first started going back to school just in simple terms of style I did not know and had to learn all over again. Wrote a paper early on and my professor looked at me and was like "well, are you sure that's MLA style?" I had not paid attention to the basics and remedied that quickly. Now I'm the one badgering students about writing in MLA style.

(both laugh)

**It must be an odd dynamic to be even older than some of the nontraditional students. I've seen interactions with a nontraditional student who is the same age as the professor, and it's a different dynamic.**

Yeah, I was a student, and I knew I was a student. I knew that you have to treat your professor with respect. You must acknowledge that they're the ones in charge. I always found them to be very, very gracious for this old guy as they were trying to figure out what to do.

**What was it specifically that drew you to English in undergrad? Was there any moment where you were like “yeah, this is what I want to do!”**

In undergrad, I knew I wanted to write in some way. I was always a reader, and the English Department seemed like the best way to go. I was at a point where I was more on the Creative Writing track than on the—you know—standard English degree. I could have... I'm trying to say, I don't really want to sound like I'm bragging about anything here. But I had been accepted and could have done my undergraduate thesis as a series of poems because I had taken a few poetry classes there as well, but I did not go through with it. I instead switched to a more traditional thesis, and my thesis was on detective fiction. It was mainly from Oedipus up through Ross MacDonald at the time.

I just love words. I love seeing a well-crafted sentence. I'm pretty happy when I manage to write one now and again. It just seemed to be the logical fit for me. I had thought a lot about math coming right out of high school, but I lost the mojo for it real quick when I got to college. English seemed like the right way to go.

**What was your master's thesis on?**

It was on the similarities between Mark Twain and Henry James in a series of parallels between their works.

**What are the similarities between those two? Most people won't think that they're just different stylistically.**

Yet in some ways thematically they were remarkably similar, and in other ways there was this sense that they did not like each other much. Twain said some unkind things about one of James' novels, and James as I can recall all these years later never said much of anything about Twain. If you look at *The Bostonians* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and say *Daisy Miller* and *Innocence Abroad*, you start looking at the works side by side, and see a lot of parallels thematically, and the way they approach characters. As much as we tend to think about James as this emigre living in England and a high-toned writer versus the "primitivism" of a lot of Twain. To the world outside, they were still just a couple of Americans, and the fact that neither won the Nobel for literature. In fact, Twain in particular was shrugged off by the Nobel committee to a great extent as a writer of "children's books." There are some interesting comparisons. Just in how they were received by the world outside. You can find my thesis online. (Laughs)

**That's fascinating! We always think of Twain as this canonical author who you read in school, but even in college, you may not necessarily read Henry James. We always think of him as this high-class writer.**

That's why I wrote on it. I was getting to read James in some of my courses here. I did that with Dr. Chura. It was one of those things that got me thinking in that direction. Since I was reading Twain and James in classes here. I kind of like to do the "let's see what's being said about these things and what can I say that's different from what other people are saying." I did an essay a couple years

ago looking at the Joker as a Marxist. It's in a book of Joker essays. Another book came out about supervillains. I also did in the other book an essay looking at Catwoman's roots in the Sherlock Holmes character Irene Adler, so I try to have fun with it.

**Yeah, and it's always a challenge to try to say something interesting. Especially if it's someone like Henry James who has a lot of scholarly criticism about him. It can be hard to write something new.**

But again, it was sort of interesting to look at Twain and James, who had been discussed sometime in comparable contexts, but in a number of cases were not as I like to think in the way I looked at them.

I just realized what I just said sounded incredibly arrogant, and I apologize. (Laughs)

**No, you're good, but to be able to end on the educational background. Since Akron does have a large population of nontraditional students—or at least a noticeable one—a lot of people do go either the full-on student as you did or audit. What are some pieces of advice you would give to these students?**

(Chuckles) Oh gosh, I'd give them the same advice I give my students, show up and do the work. It sounds simple, but it's remarkable how many people don't do that. I'm not just talking about nontraditional students. I would sit in the lecture hall when I first came back, and I was somewhat high up. The instructor was working away down and had graphics up and everything else. I could see people's laptops and see how many had their emails pulled up, shopping on Amazon, or whatever during their classes. Show up and do the work! I think that's the one thing that older students who come back understand. I'm not fooling around, and there's real money at play here.

**How did you get started at the *Akron Beacon Journal*?**

Well, that wasn't my first job. I finished undergrad in 1973. I worked at newspapers for a couple years. Taught high school for three years. Then went back to newspapering. When I came to the *Beacon* before I had been working at a newspaper in Schenectady, New York since '81. So, twenty-two years sounds like a long time, but that's a small part out of a forty plus year career. I came here because it was a job. I had been writing about television and other things for a long time in Schenectady, mainly television. There was an opening at the *Beacon* for a TV critic, and I had a friend of mine who worked there. So, I interviewed, and they looked at my material and decided to give me a shot. So, I stayed there for around...oh around...06. Then the idea of the TV critic changed with the industry. So, I became a pop culture writer. Where I was watching tv, films, other things. Just did a lot of writing for twenty something years.

**So, for you, what changed especially now that you're in the academic setting. What has changed in the writing about pop culture in that short time span?**

Oh, there was just so much more. There was a story I was told about a colleague of mine. He had a nice career in the newspaper business, and he was getting later in his career. So, they decided oh, he's been writing a long time let's make him the TV critic at a different publication. It would be a nice way to settle into the remaining years of his career. He was good at it. But then, suddenly, there's the Fox Network. Suddenly, cable has exploded. Suddenly, video cassettes are ever more prominent. The idea of what was television and how much you had to write about it increased geometrically. The poor guy just fell apart because of it. Now, I come in at the *Beacon* in '94, and I believe that's around the time before the Fox Entertainment Network. Fox News is coming in. Now you got cable, satellite, DVDs, and streaming. There's just a

tremendous amount of material to cover from everywhere. So, even as the number of people doing/covering things is diminishing, the stuff to cover is increasing exponentially. That was a huge difference.

Of course, the idea of writing for online was not real common when I started at the *Beacon* and became much more so as time went on. You know the idea of responding on Twitter, trying to respond on various social platforms that you didn't wait till something was in the paper. That you put it online were all new demands that came along while I was at the *Beacon*, and it made a huge difference. For instance, with the Oscars you're not just watching it and writing something for the next day's paper. You are real time tweeting about the ceremony as it's happening. Dealing with different efficiencies of space. Having to decide whether to blog or not. I did blog a lot at least for a time there. Just the simple idea of how you process information and what information you got out there just changed dramatically.

**Also, on that same point about just to think about how much more there is out there. It's making it harder for smaller newspapers since they're losing so many things. The bigger newspapers probably had multiple people to do different things to help take off that workload. While smaller papers just don't.**

Well, when I was (at the *Beacon*) it was part of the Knight-Ridder chain, and it was a pretty big and successful paper. We had a separate TV critic and movie critic. We had a classical music writer and a pop music writer. There was a fairly sizable workforce that you were looking at and that steadily shrank over time. Even if there was more to cover. So, then the idea of what you covered changed significantly. There's a piece in yesterday's (February 9) by the top guy there saying how they cover things has to change because their deadlines and everything else has changed.

**You've worked at smaller papers before working at the *Beacon*. How has that affected these small places with getting news or even pop culture?**

Of course, anytime you lose a news outlet the public suffers, whether they recognize it or not. Coverage shrinks the public suffers, whether it's immediate or not. So, you know the loss of the *Vindicator* was a big blow to the Youngstown area. The *Beacon* has some wonderful people working for it. It used to have more wonderful people working for it. But, the economic realities at least as the ownership sees it changed that. Unfortunately, I don't think they've made the wisest decisions. I know some people who worked that and no longer work there but should still be there. So, there are problems, but I've been out of the daily journalism game for years now, about three and a half. It's sad to see sometimes what's going on there.

**What made you decide to leave there?**

Well, I was sixty-five years old you know. It was time. It was time to move on. I was at an age where my wife and I could both afford to retire. We looked at what was going on in the world and decided it was time to retire. Of course, I kept teaching here, so it hasn't exactly been retirement. But it was time to get out of the daily newspaper game.

**Yeah, it's a different pace and a different kind of stress than trying to reach a certain deadline and get a bunch of stuff out.**

There are still deadlines, but if I see a bunch of drafts from students for a Monday/Wednesday class, I want those done by Wednesday. There are still deadlines. There is still that kind of stress.

**Since you teach both composition and film appreciation, what was the experience like first coming in to teach since you wrote about**

**pop culture for a mass audience? What I mean is you're writing and talking about pop culture there, but it's a different arena where you're trying to teach students and talking about film and some of those things. What was that like?**

I've only been teaching film classes over the past couple of years. So, most of my teaching has been in composition. I taught a newspaper feature writing course one semester and a couple independent film courses. Most of what I've taught is composition. It's a matter of getting people to look at a text in a certain way. In that respect, it's not hugely far removed from what I did before. In so far as, when you're writing about film, writing about television, or writing about books, you're saying here is something I've seen in it. Let me explain about why I think it's worth talking about. Let me explain why it's good or bad. So, you're framing arguments, and you're basically writing essays. A good friend of mine has pointed out that when you're in the newspaper game and you go talk to a student class, you say okay we're going to write four essays this term. My other job was I need to write four essays this week. It's not an enormous leap from what I did before in terms of structure and argument.

And certainly, when I was in the newspaper game, I was fortunate to have some really good editors who you could talk ideas through. I had colleagues to talk ideas through. That was mostly to test your argument. How you're trying to say what you're going to say, and do you think you're being clear here. And that's a lot of what I'm doing now. It's the same thing as what is the idea you're trying to express and how you're going to go about expressing it. I don't think it was as big of a leap as it might have been. It was certainly, a different kind of reading, and it wasn't as random as it could sometimes be in the newspaper. Like, it's Monday and what do I feel like writing about? What's going on in the world? But, there's a certain thing about it. Did I answer your question?

**Absolutely! Also, now that you're teaching, what do you love about it?**

It's the students. I just like them. I hope I make them better writers and thinkers. I think that everyone has a different story that is interesting. Some are sad and some are joyous, but I just like being around the young people to talk about these things. It's not always easy for me or them to talk at 7:15 in the morning.

It's always fun when a student goes in a direction you hadn't thought about, or you watch them notice something and build on it. They may be doing something you've already seen, but they discovered it in a cool and interesting way. It also happens in film as well. They're looking at a film and see this idea at work you hadn't thought about, and that's fun too.

**To go off that, people really do love film, but they don't always have the opportunity to take a film criticism course. What are some things that someone who may not be able to take a class with you could do?**

Well, what's happening in my classes so far is you have this film, and you have a strong visceral reaction to it. Why do you have a strong reaction to it? What can we look at in it and see the way it's playing with this. For instance, we were looking at *Crazy Rich Asians* not too long ago in film appreciation. We go okay, what do we make of the music? Why are some of the songs in English, and why are some of the others in Chinese even if they're known to a general pop audience? Why is it and why are we getting an Elvis song at this point and others? We're looking at this movie and it is trafficking in romantic comedy clichés. Up to the couple meeting in the airplane with it about to take off, but what has the movie done to make that interesting for us? How is it done in terms of visuals? Thinking about the glossiness of it and how it looks, but also what it's doing to be different with those clichés.

Then we compared it to *When Harry Met Sally* and asked some

more questions and went from there. Not only that, but going on *When Harry Met Sally*, Nora Ephron has an essay about writing the script for *When Harry Met Sally* that's really interesting. She talks about the place of the writer and the director in a piece. It's not necessarily getting heavy into film criticism, but we can see "oh that's how it is." How the movie is. Or in the case of *Parasite* we can look at that. Or if we go back to say *Vertigo* or *Citizen Kane*, how is the story being told and how are the characters being illuminated and what do we take from that.

**To add to that, let's imagine a "starter pack" for a budding film student. What would you say are a couple of films that you should really see?**

Going to last semester, we watched both *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane*. The two films have topped the BFI's list of greatest films of all-time. *Vertigo* being a relative newcomer, but *Kane* being there for a long time. The problem is people look at films differently than they did forty years ago or sixty or seventy. We expect a different tempo, different technology. When I say we, I mean the current audience. Sometimes they can get over that, and sometimes they can't. The way we view characters has changed. I had to teach the *Maltese Falcon*, and boy did students not like that movie.

**Really? They didn't like *Maltese Falcon*?**

Yeah, it has to do with the characters. The way that film does characters is not what we're accustomed to now these days. But as a starter pack? Oh gosh.

I would start with *Vertigo* and *Citizen Kane* because they're so acclaimed, but to look at why they are so acclaimed and what it does. Of course, now you've seen nine thousand films that have stolen things from those two, but let's see what these guys are doing there. I would throw in Spike Lee. I think *BlackKkklansman* is a

real interesting work. I would put in... I might try *Hurt Locker* just for them to get a sense of Kathryn Bigelow. But, that's the kind of list that would change day to day. Right now, I'd put *Parasite* in there. Again, it would change tomorrow. I taught *Taxi Driver* last term, partly because *Joker* was in the air so much at the time. *King Comedy*, and *Taxi Driver* serve as the template for it, but now that the buzz has died down maybe I would use a different Scorsese. *Taxi Driver* is still an epically disturbing movie.

**Now, to round these out—these aren't exactly simple questions—but who are your top seven directors?**

Gah, I saw that on the list of questions. That's killing me here.

(Both laugh)

Capra.

**Frank Capra?**

Yeah, absolutely. One of these days I want to teach a course on fake news in the movies. Capra is an interesting case in that regard. Films like *Meet John Doe* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. There are several of his movies that traffic in the idea of fake news. Probably, Ford.

**John Ford?**

Yeah, I just watched *The Searchers* a couple weeks ago. Coppola, Scorsese. Spike Lee would be up there. Ava Duvernay has done some interesting stuff. She may not be in top seven, but she is definitely honorable mention and someone you should pay attention to. *Selma*, *Middle of Nowhere* and there's a lot of cool and interesting stuff there. Uh, I'm mentally going through all my DVD stands at home. The Coen Brothers, although they're hot and cold.

They have some good stuff, but there is some bad stuff there too. But, there's a lot of extraordinary stuff there. Same thing with Paul Thomas Anderson. When he's good he is really good, but when he's bad he's horrid. Uh, couple of his works I don't need to see ever again.

(Both laugh)

Oh, that one with Joaquin Phoenix that was adapted from the Pynchon novel.

**Wasn't in *Inherent Vice*?**

Yes, *Inherent Vice*. Unbearable movie. On the other hand, he's got movies like *The Master* and *Boogie Nights*.

**You got at least six and an honorable mention there.**

But, it's such a predictable list (laughs). I mean you look at Spielberg and what he's done. You got to give him attention.

**Yeah, I feel like if they're giving disrespect, they're being disingenuous.**

Again, you've got Kathryn Bigelow, and you've got the director of *The Farewell* out there right now. I want to see what she does next. You've got *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* which was real interesting. Both of those are movies that you think you're in one genre but watch what we do with this. So, there is a lot of cool stuff out there to see. Eric (Wasserman) would of course be irked that I didn't mention Cassavetes. I showed Cassavetes when I taught independent film last time, but you have to be willing to commit.

You'll also notice that Tarantino is not on that list. Deliberately. Tarantino speaks to a certain audience. I know I'm not that

audience, but he speaks to them especially a young audience. A lot of those people love him, and I see it in my film courses. There are big Tarantino fans. My issue with him in many cases is he's so intent on showing how much he knows about certain things that he takes us out of experiencing the movie. In some vague intellectual exercise that I don't need to partake in.

**Which would you say would be in your top seven films?**

I used to have a list on my blog called "Movies I've Seen More than Once." And that was what I went from. Another qualifier is movies you have to stop and watch them. You can't go on about your life when these come on. That would be things like *The Godfather*, *My Darling Clementine*, now that's a tough question to think about on a Monday morning.

**Now, I have one last question, what are some films or directors that are overrated/underrated?**

(Laughs) I think Tarantino is wildly overrated. I'm pretty straightforward about it.

Now, I have no idea where Billy Wilder stands these days, but he is one of my favorites up there. Particularly because he worked in black and white... I think he should be up there. If you look at a film like *The Apartment* which is an incredible work, and you look at *Sunset Boulevard*. There are some Wilder films that end up in the canon, but that doesn't necessarily mean he does.

**Do you have any favorites?**

Well favorites are hard, because what may be your favorite is not necessarily the best, but they're the ones that we love.

**Yeah, *Suspiria* is considered one of the best horror films of the**

**seventies. It's gorgeous to look at, but it has no plot.**

Plot is pretty important.

**Yeah, and the characters are twenty-year old who act twelve because it was originally written that they were twelve. But if they kept them that age the film would have gotten banned in 1978 Italy with all the violence. So, there is that weird disconnect with characters.**

Yeah, like I don't get the love for *Uncut Gems*. It's an incredibly flawed film.

**Sometimes those films are the best.**

It's got a good Adam Sandler performance in the middle of it. But, it's still so flawed. It's one of those things like *Woman Under the Influence* will always be in my head, but that's because I had such an incredibly strong reaction to it when I first saw it. I know it's something you have to commit to. It's not something you expect from someone like Gena Rowlands or a character. Some people have to get used to how a character goes. There are Hitchcock films I love more probably because I went to the theaters to see them in the 70s. You know they're not the best, and they're not major Hitchcock films. But there are scenes in *Frenzy* that are horrifying. Problem is when I go back and look at the movie as a whole now, it's like well that's not major Hitchcock. But there is stuff in there that sticks.

**Yeah, and even then, sometimes bad films end up being influential. Like Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Two Thousand Maniacs*. That film is horrible, but it's so entertaining.**

Absolutely.

*After a couple days, Heldenfels sent a list of his favorite directors and films. Here is his response.*

Well, this is impossible. The problem with choosing favorite directors is that there are many directors I love but who have made movies I don't love. And that I keep thinking of directors whom I love based on a movie or two, but who are so good in those few that I do not want to leave them off a favorites list. So, in a complete cop-out, I am offering a list of directors who to some degree make me pay attention.

It is a list that is heavily tilted toward commercial American film, but then, so am I. In no real order:

Preston Sturges, John Ford, Kathryn Bigelow, Frank Capra, Billy Wilder, Ava DuVernay, Spike Lee, Woody Allen (in the 60s/70s), Robert Altman, the Coen brothers, Wes Anderson, Walter Hill, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Coppola, John Huston, Greta Gerwig, Melina Matsoukas, Bong Joon-ho, Jordan Peele, Steven Spielberg.

So, some favorite movies, and I could barely stop with these:

*It's a Wonderful Life*

*The Godfather*

*The Searchers*

*Love Actually*

*The Great Escape*

*Network*

*All That Jazz*

*Schindler's List*

*Saving Private Ryan*

*The Lady Eve*

*Near Dark*

*Blade Runner*

*The Maltese Falcon*

**Nadia Alnashar** is a junior studying Graphic Design and Illustration at The University of Akron. She's from Syria and grew up in the United Arab Emirates. She is passionate about illustrations and design. Nadia is currently the president of the Society of Student Illustrators. In her free time, she likes to create posters by combining illustrations and typography and even include different languages in her designs. She also likes cats and raccoons.

**Scott Brady** is a senior at The University of Akron, majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. He enjoys long walks with his dog, writing stories, drawing, playing video games, and re-watching episodes of *Mad Men*. While an aspiring writer, he very much needs to read more. His goal is to either write and publish a novel or create a show for television. Despite such ambitious objectives, he has no idea what he's doing, a realization that keeps him up for hours on end. He'll figure it out, though. Cheers.

**Jackson Gagne** is a senior majoring in International Business and minoring in French and Arabic. This story is an improved version of one he wrote for the Sr. Beta Convention Creative Writing contest in 2016. Jackson also won the Ben Auburn Award in Cultural Criticism last year for his short story, *The Foxes and the Wildcats*. He enjoys learning languages, reading, playing soccer, playing board and video games, and writing.

**Lauren Knight** is a psychology student in the Williams Honors College and is graduating in May of 2020 with a Bachelor's in Psychology and Minors in Creative Writing and Women's Studies. She has a passion for reading, writing, knitting, and bees. Her written works reflect her love of fantasy, nature, and her same-sex experiences. She is currently researching different methods to cope with minority stress, and hopes to continue studying the psychology of oppression. It is a goal

of hers to write the stories she needed to read but could never find.

**John Alexander Scott Marti** is a junior at The University of Akron. He is majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. Marti is a developing writer. His favorite authors are Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Edgar Allan Poe.

**Jae Phipps** (they/them/theirs) is a post-baccalaureate English major at The University of Akron, with a previous bachelor's degree in History. Though they have been writing since they were young, this is the first time that their work has appeared in any form of publication. In the future, they hope to continue writing both poems and short stories that they needed to read growing up, but could never quite seem to find.

**Kevin Rickly** lives in Loudonville, Ohio with his wife and four children. He will graduate in May with a B.A. in English. He earned a B.S. from Ohio University and an M.A. from Walsh University. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army. He enjoys reading, creative writing, watching movies and sports, and spending time in nature. He will be pursuing an M.F.A. after graduation. His ultimate goal is to publish a memoir.

**Dashonda Smith** is an English major undergraduate in her junior year. She often writes short stories, poetry, and longer works of fiction in her spare time. She is currently creating her own miniature world that you can explore in her blog, [themorningdewnews.wixsite.com/home](http://themorningdewnews.wixsite.com/home).

## EDITORS

**Jared Charlson** is an undergraduate student at The University of Akron who is double majoring in AYA Integrated Language Arts and English. He enjoys reading, writing, board games, martial arts, and puns. His favorite book series is *The Wheel of Time*, and his least favorite book is *The Hobbit*. He hopes to one day have a novel published.

**Pooja Dayal** is a senior at The University of Akron, majoring in Biology. She hopes to one day work in the medical field, but when she's not studying science and health, she's using her passions to write poetry. She is the current vice president of the Upstart Crows, and some of her favorite memories at the University have been writing workshops and reading the works of her fellow poets. She loves using poetry to help others feel both empowered and understood, and her goal is to eventually publish her work to spread her message!

**Natalie Mitchell** is a BA/MA history student in her sunset year here at The University of Akron. When she isn't hidden away studying, she can be found journaling, knitting, and yell-singing to music in her car. This is her final year working on the *AshBelt*, and every moment has been a joy. She's happy that her friend dragged her into this three years ago.

**Dylan Morris** is a super senior studying Philosophy with minors in English, Classics, and Creative Writing. He is also working towards a certificate in Linguistic studies. He likes to spend his time reading, writing poetry, watching art films (with the occasional exploitation film), borrowing too many books from the library, and searching for his next meal from a fast food joint.

**Amanda Piekarz** is a young writer who is currently a senior at The University of Akron, located in Akron, Ohio. Amanda has worked as the Fiction Editor for the *AshBelt* Undergraduate

Literary Journal and as the Arts and Entertainment Editor for *The Buchtelite* at The University of Akron. She will be graduating with an English major and a double minor in Psychology and Creative Writing. In her spare time, Amanda loves kicking back with a good Stephen King novel, but her all-time favorite author will always be JK Rowling because Rowling inspired her love of reading as a child. Lastly, Amanda loves Ohio dearly but hopes to one day return to the East Coast to complete her graduate studies.

**Kaylie Yaceczko** is currently a junior at The University of Akron, majoring in English with minors in Creative Writing and Human Resources Management. Along with *AshBelt*, she is the president of The University of Akron's writing organization, the Upstart Crows. She can typically be found reading Shakespeare with a second—possibly third—cup of coffee. She hopes to one day explore the world and publish a novel.

Along with the English major, The University of Akron Department of English offers five minors—one general minor in English, one in Popular Literature and Film, one in African American Literature, a minor in Professional Writing, and a minor in Creative Writing!

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Two introductory creative writing courses (Min. Credits: 6.0) from:

- 3300:276 Introduction to Creative Nonfiction Writing
- 3300:277 Introduction to Poetry Writing
- 3300:278 Introduction to Fiction Writing
- 3300:279 Introduction to Script Writing

At least one advanced creative writing course (Min. Credits: 3.0) from:

- 3300:377 Advanced Poetry Writing
- 3300:378 Advanced Fiction Writing
- 3300:379 Advanced Script Writing
- 3300:381 Advanced Creative Nonfiction Writing

3300:457 Writers on Writing

Two additional courses in any form of creative writing or literature from Department offerings, 300 or 400 level.

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