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LIT ANGELS #5
WOMEN OF AN UNCERTAIN AGE

Table of Contents

1. Women My Age by Robin Carr
2. A Complicated Woman by Laurel Ollstein
3. The Invisible Woman by Linda Davis
4. Due to Your Influence by Kim Anton
5. Meth, Marriage & The Magic Threshold by Rachel Resnick
6. Poems by Suzanne Dudley
7. Stephanie and The Old Man by Miranda Schwartz
8. The New Mythweavers: Layering Female Archetypes in Myth Retellings by Ruut M. DeMeo

Women My Age

By Robin Carr



One can't really write about age, as only people who are your exact age are empathetic. And also, it's so slippery; I'm 5 seconds older than when I wrote the first line in this paragraph.

What does it mean to be *my age*? I wear shoes designed for teenage boy skateboarders. And my bones have osteopenia, as more than half-century old bones do. But I don't feel old yet. I'm not ready to join AARP, who keep hounding me to get the free tote bag.

My grandma became a grandmother at age 50, when I was born. She wore pencil skirts, cat's-eye glasses, and pointy pumps that had permanently mis-shaped her feet and

those of most of the other women of her generation. From my vantage point, she looked like a grandma. Right now, I'm ten years older than the grandma I was just describing.

People my age watched the moon-landing live on TV as kids, along with our astonished parents.

Milk was delivered to our back door in glass bottles.

I remember the sound of my father's Chevy Impala's curb scraper.

Space-aged Zenith commercials advertising televisions. Chicklets and Ovaltine commercials, without irony. Our black-and-white TV with a white dot lingering in the center of the screen after the set was turned off.

In first grade, girls were allowed to wear pants to public school for the first time.

We recall the eerie sound of the air raid sirens being tested on the last Friday of every month at ten a.m.

Women my age somehow automatically go from wearing a 2-piece bathing suit to a 1-piece.

So what if I can't thread a needle without my reading-glasses? I have so much experience that I can almost do it by feel.

The housewives on TV commercials who used to seem ancient to me are now like girls.

And do I have to groan *every* time I get up from the floor?

My once-sharp-as-a-razor memory is having a few little lapses. Recently, I ordered a gift for someone, but then found that I had bought the same gift for the same person a few months before and had put it away in a drawer.

In another instance, my sister bought me an early birthday present which was delivered to me, which I unwrapped, noted, and put away to thank her later. When she asked if I'd received it...a few weeks later...I'd completely forgotten that it had arrived. So she called the company complaining that it had been lost in the mail, and they sent me another one! Now I own two. (I was going to take that story to the grave with me.)

Back Then

I was conscious of the tail-end of the 1960s. Mad Magazines, and mod fashions. Mom taking us to an evening art-walk on Robertson Blvd. in 1969 and loving the pop-art

of the day, all chrome and day-glo. It was sort of kid-friendly, with the occasional shocking adult image.

My divorced mom was very beautiful and she wore suede mini-skirts with silky blouses. She had a satiny purple bellbottom jumpsuit. We used to go with her to a groovy beauty salon on La Cienega Blvd. where she let the chic hairdresser give her experimental cuts; one was called the “Batman” with the bangs shaped into a point.

I recall that when the calendar turned to 1970, I thought to myself that the zero at the end sounded really futuristic.



My mother drove a red convertible Chevy Malibu with white vinyl interior. It was snazzy. I'll never forget the wobbly sound of the motorized top going up or down with the press of a lever. And my sister and I in the back seat looking up at the sky.

When I was 12, the day finally came when my mom took me and my sister to get our ears pierced at Bullock's, as she'd promised. We came out wearing round gold studs, and couldn't wait to look in the mirror. It did hurt, but how grown-up we felt.

My mom brought home plastic swizzle-sticks and tiny umbrellas from the tropical drinks she ordered on dates at tiki bars. I treasured them and their faint scent of booze; they represented the freedom of adulthood.

We wore our 1970s clothes as a first-run fashion; I had silky psychedelic blouses and green flared pants, and even a pair of red-white-and-blue platform shoes, which I guess came into fashion around the bicentennial of '76. In the later 70s, it was Chemin-de-Fer bell bottoms fitting perfectly over our Kork-Ease platforms as to hide them. You had to have Jack Purcell tennis shoes or Adidas. You had to fall into lock-step with the other girls, fashion-wise. You could not deviate, or you'd be shunned. At 13, nobody dared to be an individual. It was Charlie perfume, blue or green eyeshadow with silver-white highlights, eyelash curlers, candy-tasting lip gloss.

Later, we wore puka-shell necklaces along with our surfer boyfriends.

I had a new clock-radio next to my bed. I felt so ‘adult’ trying out different stations. Listening to the Dr. Demento show on Sunday evenings.

The first record album I bought was the Carpenters, whom I thought were hip at the time. Then I grew up a little, and the must-have was Carole King’s *Tapestry*, which I revered and played over and over. It was sacred music, and we memorized every word and could hum along to every flute solo. She was singing of love and relationships we had no clue about yet, but we understood everything. I gazed at the album cover, a photo of a young, free, barefoot Carole sitting on a large windowsill, wearing jeans, her untamed wavy long hair parted in the middle. In the 1970s, if your hair was curly, we girls HAD to wear it straight, blow-drying it until it was dead as straw, but linear. If you had it ‘feathered,’ that was a plus. We were so envious of our friends who had stick-straight hair. They could walk in the rain and fog, and not worry about it frizzing up. Oh, how we wished we could be that carefree. Carole King could get away with it because she was famous, talented, and a hippie, and it looked cool on her. When you graduated from Carole King, you moved on to Joni Mitchell whose lyrics and sounds were more mature and esoteric.

My first ever arena rock concert was in 1975, when I was 14—Elton John at Dodger Stadium. We had to go with a chaperone. To us, he was truly an idol, the kind you worship. We had all his albums, and kissed the posters of him on our walls.

Datsun B210s and 240Zs raced around the streets. Japanese Honda Civics and Toyota Coronas were the new thing on the road along with the big old cars. Everyone in high school wanted a Camaro or a Trans Am. Our boyfriends drove Plymouth Dusters and Satellite Sebrings. One had a VW bus.

Decades Flitting By

When I was in my 20s, I looked at women in their 40s and 50s and thought “those are the women that are running the world.” And now, I see women in their 20s and 30’s and think the *same* about them. It’s their time to be on stage and lit up with spotlights. Yet, inside, they are unguided and adrift. I *know*...I was one of them. Older women are more anchored and established. I wouldn’t go back to being 25 if you paid me. Internally, those days were so insecure and crazed; I would walk into a crowded room loathing myself. Yet, at that age, you have the adventurousness to be among a group of people who, on a whim one night, drive from Los Angeles to Death Valley to go see a comet, and sleep under the stars in a dry river bed.

Decades that flit by like shuffled cards. Styles flit too, from round to pointy, round to pointy, whether it’s car bumpers or shoes. Hair and skirts, long to short, long to short. You’ve seen it go back and forth so many times, you just give up. Big frame glasses are in, but yours are small. Don’t worry, it’ll all come around again.



Epilogue

When you get to my age,
one of the most
important things you
realize is that there's no
plateau to reach, one in
which everything is
finally perfect and
golden. The ups and
downs continue til the
end of your life. There is
no big payoff at the end!
... Fuck!

I read a quote, “While we had most definitely enjoyed our youth, the best of life might really be yet to come.” I’m not sure if this is true, but I can always hope.

When you are young, you love life and are stuck to the earth with saliva and bruises and lipstick and gritty sand on your knees. But when you get older, as much as you love your life, you must lift one foot off the earth just a little, and begin to prepare for flight. And it’s okay.

Robin Carr was born in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in *The Santa Monica Review*, *The Brooklyn Review*, and the *L.A. Weekly*. Her book, *101 Girls*, was published by Illuminati Press. She appears on the spoken-word album, *Disclosure*, and has performed at Beyond Baroque and at the St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York. Robin enjoys playing her out-of-tune piano.

A Complicated Woman

Essay by Laurel Ollstein



Artwork by Samantha Ollstein

Claire Frances Tannenbaum Ollstein

born Jan. 6, 1924. Died Dec 8, 2013.

Once sitting in our breakfast nook, my mother told me that sex after 50 was even better. I was 12 at the time. And hadn't asked. She enjoyed sex. I know that for sure. But... in writing this I wonder, what did I really know about my mother? I have stories – things I witnessed. I have some anecdotes that I have been told. I have photos. After she died, I was clearing out her things and came across a pile of her journals. I started to read them, but they were so pathetic and whiny that I threw them away.

The things I knew about her...she was a New Yorker born on the Upper East Side with two lawyer parents. She was a secular Jew, a competitive older sister, a mother and a grandmother, a pretty good tennis and golf player, strong swimmer, therapist, sculptor, but most important to her was her role as a wife and sexual being.

While my mother was somewhere deep in the process of her dying, a painful long voyage, I was going through her filing cabinet in her home office, looking through her things as she lay in bed in a diaper and paper-thin colorless night gown, listening to Doris Day singing “*Que Sera Sera.*” I don't know how much of her was still in that casing of wrinkled skin and hanging breasts and wispy gray hair sweated to her head. She'd stopped talking a while before that. Her eyes darted from ceiling to floor and wall to wall like a cornered feral dog. She hated all my dogs.

I would be there almost every day. Her caregiver was also a Doris, an angel of a woman my age. The Guatemalan Doris and the all-American Doris. Both comforting my mother. I didn't know how to be a comfort to her. I couldn't just sit at her bedside. Besides not being a Doris Day fan, I couldn't bear the smell and the silence, drinking in her last breaths, her searching panicked eyes. I would walk around the house looking for any distraction. One day while roaming I peeked through her old gray tin filing cabinet. There under the letter N was a manila envelope with a little white label written in ink in her distinct curly handwriting, titled *Nudes*. There they were. Naked photos of her at different ages. Some taken by my father, I could tell because they were black and white eight-by-tens and had the look of being printed in his darkroom. Very "early *Playboy*." There in all her nakedness draped over a fake bear skin rug in front the fireplace in my father's wood paneled home office/den. In all those photos she hid her face but her body was visible and in great shape. Neatly trimmed pubic hair – perky breasts. Great legs. She always said she had better legs than my stepmother. And it was true. The stepmother had thick ankles. But in all those photos my mother's head is turned seductively and purposely away from the camera. Her arm is draped over her face. I can't help but wonder if it was a direction from my father. He was a world class cheater, my dad – so maybe that way he could place any face there he wanted.

Another set of photos were taken by my stepfather – I assume. A man I never considered a parent. He and my mother married in their 60s. Those photos were five-by-seven, in color and professionally printed. My mother in different seductive poses

lying across a dried creek bed – *nature nudes*. My stepfather was a hunter and fisherman and ex-police detective, also a Republican! Very unlike my father, the psychiatrist. But my mother said the sex was great with both. In these photos she did show her face along with everything else. Not smiling. Smoldering. It felt a bit like looking at their foreplay.



There were other photos that might have been her version of a selfie or maybe they were taken by some other photographer.

Well-lit--staged. Overly dramatic. I couldn't tell if she was seducing whomever was on the other side of that camera, or if these were a love letter to herself.



After her fall, she was in the emergency room wearing only a hospital gown waiting for the doctor. A male nurse and I were in the cubicle with her when her gown opened and there she was, with her great bush of gray pubic hair. The nurse went to cover her up and my mother waved him away saying *"I'm not shy"*.



I didn't know what to do with this folder of mother porn. I couldn't keep the pictures; they embarrassed me. I certainly couldn't throw them away. I didn't want my brother to find them. Then I told my daughter about the photos – she is an adult and a talented artist. My mother had loved being the subject of her work. And my daughter was able to compliment and honor her in ways I could not.

We're all complicated women at every age and stage of life. No one gets simpler. After I'm gone will my daughter read a few pages of my journals and think – *how whiny and pathetic* - and throw them away? I wish I had read my mother's words; I might know more about her. And yet those photos tell me a lot. She loved her body, and in this complicated world that's no small thing.

Laurel Ollstein is an award-winning playwright/director based in Los Angeles. She also directs playwriting programs, writing and arts education in schools, and creates plays on social justice themes. Most recently her play - *They Promised Her the Moon* - had its critically acclaimed West Coast premiere at the Old Globe theatre in San Diego - and almost (just before shut down) a fabulous production at TheatreWorks in Silicon Valley. She's had commissions from The Getty Villa, About Productions, New Jersey Repertory, and Playwrights' Arena, and developed plays with The Actors' Gang. Find more info at laurelollstein.com



Samantha Ollstein is a multi-media artist living and working in Portland, Oregon. She was born in Los Angeles, received her BFA in Painting from Otis College of Art and Design and MFA in Studio Art at Portland State University. Art has been a part of her life since she was a little girl, always painting or drawing and going to museums with her grandmother. As a commissioned portrait artist, Samantha's work is displayed on many walls around Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Her work was the subject of several episodes on the Bravo reality show *Flipping Out*. After graduating from Otis, Samantha went to work for the nonprofit art school, Brentwood Art Center in Los Angeles, CA. At the age of 26 she became the Director and helped grow the program with its new non-profit status. After 5 years, she decided to take a break from the non-profit art community to dedicate time to her art and education.

LIT ANGELS



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invisible
woman

The Invisible Woman

By Linda Davis

Mia Gardner stretched through her downward dog, limbs extended, eyes closed, silently screaming at the yoga instructor, Skye Summers. As Skye made his way around the humid room giving all the students an adjustment, Mia peeked out from her thinning lashes wondering if today would be the day that he would finally adjust her. “Nice, Grace,” and “Good extension, Paul,” Skye said. He never called Mia by name. Worse, he never, ever adjusted her. Mia had become obsessed with this lack of attention. There were people whose practice was not as strong as hers that Skye adjusted.

“Let go of anything that’s pulling at your mind. Surrender to tranquility.”

What could be the reason for being so blatantly ignored? Had menopause given her a new odor? Or maybe she reminded Skye of someone he hated?

“Empty your mind, so you can fill up your soul,” Skye said.

Mia clenched her jaw as Skye moved down the row towards her. She wondered if she’d ever felt this invisible? If only Skye knew who she really was: a well-loved wife and mother, a former marathoner who’d worked at a New York literary magazine in her twenties, read scripts for a famous actor in her thirties, then got her MFA in her forties.

She knew the music of Anderson .Paak, and had worked for every Democrat since Bill Clinton. She'd been to Russia, had adopted a daughter there.

“Today, I want you to do a little experiment for me.” Skye was next to her now, adjusting Kelly, a class favorite who got at least two adjustments per class. Mia watched as Skye pressed against Kelly's temples with the backs of his palms.

“Let go of any bad feelings you have for one person in the world, whether it be a sister, a senator or a sadistic co-worker.”

Was this some sort of cosmic test? Mia focused on the instruction, and tried to let go of her anger. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and imagined Skye massaging her temples. She pictured them becoming friends, having coffee after class, maybe jogging together on the beach. We'll laugh when we look back on this time when he ignored me. ‘You were so mean to me,’ Mia would tell him to which Skye would say...

Just then, Skye padded past her to the young man on Mia's left. The ache from Mia's heart radiated out, over her whole body. She'd honestly convinced herself that today was going to be different. Try as she might to rationalize that this was only a yoga class, that Skye's rejection was not worth the upset, it was all she could do to calmly sit up, cross her legs, and not cry.

“Savasana,” Skye said.

I'm old, Mia thought. I'm old, old, old. Skye would never have ignored my younger self. The loss of her youth, like a death in the middle of the night, perhaps when she was sleeping.

“Namaste,” she heard Skye say, from what seemed like very far away.

#

Mia and Helen were meeting to walk their dogs to the dog park. Helen was younger than Mia, as everyone seemed to be these days, by five years. She had not crossed that defining fifty-year mark. Perhaps it was because Mia used to read scripts for a living that she saw her life in the three-act structure; just starting the last act.

“How are you?” Helen said, walking up.

“Old,” Mia laughed, hoping to force herself into a better mood.

“You’re not old.”

“That yoga teacher ignored me again.”

“Skye Summers. How can you care about anyone with that name?”

“Even lesbians don’t look at me anymore. The other day, I tried my best to catch the eye of two of them at a coffee shop, but nothing. How come no one warns you about this?”

Helen cleared her throat. “All I know is that you look better than ninety percent of women your age.”

“I don’t feel like I’m growing old gracefully. I wish my mother were still alive to ask her how she did it. I’m very cranky. My mom handled it so well. She seemed to be coming into herself as she grew older. Then she got ill.”

“How inconsiderate for her to die before telling us all of her secrets,” Helen said.

They arrived at the dog park, undid the leashes, and rested them on a chain link fence. Helen sat down and faced Mia across a picnic table that was still wet from the morning's dew. "Just be glad you're not me. Imagine being in your late forties and dating in Los Angeles. It's like being an actor. Non-stop rejection. Really, people should call it for what it is: masochism. All the good ones are taken and the others all want a twenty-year old blonde—the kind that grow on trees in this town. Maybe I'll start an online dating service called 'Masochism.com?'"

"That does sound awful."

"I'm competing with the likes of Anya."

Anya was Mia's beautiful Russian daughter, adopted at age five.

"Not for long. There's a boy interested in her. A senior."

"See what I mean about older men liking these young girls."

Mia leaned her head on her hand. "She's a freshman for heaven's sake, and an immature one. This guy is older—a senior. What could he see in her?"

"Is this a trick question?"

"Let me vent. His stats are exactly what we don't want for Anya: rides a motorcycle, has more than five tattoos, and wants to be an actor."

"So, you've met him?"

"Sunday. Paul forbade her from seeing him, but that sort of backfired."

"Aren't you worried about her dating a senior?"

“I’m not. I don’t think she’s the least bit interested in boys. I’m shocked she invited him over.”

“Getting back to you...It’s the scourge of the pretty girl. When you’re used to getting a lot of attention your whole life, it’s hard when it slows. It’s Anya’s turn now.”

Mia considered her friend’s words. She had gotten a lot of attention for her looks when she was younger, had hated it, and did everything she could to avoid it. Which is why her reaction to her new-found invisibility had surprised her. She’d spent a lifetime running away from attention; always wanting to be taken seriously as a person of intellect. Now that she had no choice, she longed to be seen. Trite clichés ran through her mind like TV ads. *Be careful what you wish for. Youth is wasted on the young. You’re as young as you feel.*

“That’s your idea of helpful advice?” Mia rolled her eyes. “But I am seriously worried about Anya. She’s beautiful, precocious, desperate for attention, and living in Los Angeles. Worse, her mother slept around. Is sleeping around genetic? Should we move?”

“Let’s all move. I’ll find my soulmate and you’ll keep Anya away from—what’s the opposite of soulmate? Playmate?”

“Inmate?” Mia hooked the leash back on the dog.

They left the dog park and walked on Main Street past the boutique shops that struggled to stay in business—a gift store, a baby shop and a new tapas restaurant—all of which would likely be gone within three years.

“I’m like one of these shops,” Mia said, averting her gaze from a gift shop-slash-massage-salon-slash-Thai-food-eatery. “Outdated and largely ignored.”

“At least you have one good customer,” Helen said. “The last person who shopped at my store stole about half my merchandise and nearly put me out of business.”

“I suppose.” Mia forced herself to stop and look in the window of the shop. There were odd-looking wooden sculptures and other crude pieces of art.

“Let me take a peek in here. Maybe there’s some hidden treasure.”

A man approached the door. Mia smiled and followed him, but he didn’t notice her, and the door closed on her face. Mia turned towards Helen, eyebrows raised.

Helen nodded. “I don’t suppose you hired him just to prove your point?”

#

“A.J. said he might be late tomorrow. He’s coming from acting class.” A.J. was the senior interested in Anya and tomorrow, Sunday, was the big ‘Meet the Parents’ dinner.

Bad sign! Mia thought, causing her to not come to a complete stop at the actual sign. Seconds later, she spotted the flashing lights in her side view mirror.

“Perfect.” Mia exhaled long. “Just great. Now we’ll be late.” Mia’s son Nick went to UCLA film school, and they’d been on their way to a screening of his sophomore film.

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” Anya semi-shouted.

“What? I never—”

“You made a face. I saw.”

“I’ve already gotten two tickets this year. I’m upset, Anya. This is not about you.”

“So now you’re saying I’m a narcissist?”

Reflexively belligerent, that was Anya. Once, when she’d first been adopted, and Mia had reprimanded her for being oppositional, Anya had put her hands on her tiny hips and said, “But Mom, I’m Russian!”

Maintaining her composure, that was the key to dealing with her daughter; not give in to her attempts to provoke an argument. Mia eyed the policeman in her side mirror. “God, he’s taking forever. What’s he doing?”

Anya’s eyes bored into her mother. “I hate when you ignore me.”

Of course, sometimes nothing worked. Instead of giving in to Anya’s words, Mia focused on the traffic school and court date in her future. Although one of the prior infractions had been dismissed because the cop didn’t show up at court, the chance of getting more infractions seemed highly likely. Police cars and motorcycles hid on every other block, desperate to fill their quota. “Dammit. I can’t afford to get another ticket! I just can’t.”

“Mom! A.J.’s coming from acting class and sometimes it runneth over. That’s all.”

“Runneth over? Where did you hear that?” Mia wanted to laugh, but the shift from confrontation to lightheartedness was too steep.

“What do you mean?”

“Mean? I just didn’t think that sounded like you.”

“Oh, so now you’re saying I’m dumb?”

“What? No! What are you talking about? I’ve just never heard you use that sort of formal language. That’s all.”

“See what I mean? You’re trying to say I’m dumb.”

Mia threw her hands up in defeat. “Well, if I get a ticket, my license won’t runneth over either.”

“Actually, A.J. said it.”

Mia might have said something, but she spotted the policeman taking his long swagger-walk towards her car. The sun reflected off of his knee-high leather boots. Did the boots dictate the walk or vice-versa?

When he arrived at her car, the officer leaned down. “License and registration.”

As Mia retrieved her license from her purse, out of her peripheral vision she noticed the officer lean down and peer into the car to check out Anya.

Anya said, “You’re not going to give my mom a ticket, are you?”

“Anya, shhh!”

Anya glared at the policeman. She had on a black tank top and white cutoffs. Her breasts were much larger than Mia’s and Mia couldn’t help wondering about Anya’s mother’s physique. Though Anya was probably much taller than her mother, a by-product of her U.S. diet, Mia pictured a petite, pretty girl with disproportionately large breasts. Anya had gotten her period when she was ten compared to Mia, at fifteen. Her daughter’s golden hair was blonder now that it was September. She had blue eyes

and although she had started wearing lipstick, the color was a few shades lighter than her own lips that were naturally a deep red.

“Where are you headed?” the policeman asked, looking straight past Mia at Anya.

“To a boring college thing,” she answered. “And now you’re making us late.”

“Anya! I’m so sorry, officer.”

The officer leaned in and laughed. “Is that so?”

Mia sat straight back in her seat and watched, her head pivoting between the officer and her daughter. She felt like she was watching a bad reality TV show—the kind her kids liked but she detested.

“Okay, Ma’am,” he said, finally looking at Mia. “Next time please pay attention to the signage and come to a complete stop.”

Mia nodded, a confusing swirl of relief and apprehension coursing through her.

“Okay, thanks, Officer.”

Mia watched in disbelief as the officer walked away from her car. *The only time I get noticed is when I break the law. No wonder the disenfranchised resort to crime.*

Anya clapped her hands together like a young child. “You owe me, Mom. You owe me big time.”

#

Paul had this unsettling habit of indiscreetly staring at people when he thought they weren’t looking. Tonight, Mia was his target. They were having dinner with their friends, Richard and Marsha. In the old days when he stared, he would follow it up with

how much he loved her or liked her blouse. Nowadays, he said nothing at all. She'd always known he had this superficial side to him, but somehow, she hadn't adequately planned for this day. It wasn't fair that men aged more gracefully than women. The salt and pepper in Paul's hair made him look more handsome, like perfect highlights. Ditto for his crow's feet. Age had softened his looks; the opposite of its effect on Mia. She felt like her eyes, her best feature, were disappearing from her face. Her whole life, she'd eschewed wearing makeup. Now, she couldn't go out the door without coloring herself in.

It was while Mia was talking to Marsha that she felt Paul's eyes on her. As unsettling as it was, she continued speaking. "The guy interested in Anya is a senior. In other words, sex, drugs and motorcycles are something I need to worry about now."

"Are they dating?" Marsha handed her a Grenache, then picked up her own and clinked it against Mia's. "Cheers."

"Cheers. No, they're texting."

"Have you read their texts?"

Mia still felt Paul's eyes on her. What was he seeing? A new wrinkle? Stray gray hairs? What he didn't understand was that all his judgment, as Mia saw it, whittled away at her self-confidence, inhibiting her sexually, which, of course, only hurt him. She'd gone from being the aggressor to a submissive role, which she detested. Alcohol, the only thing that changed that configuration, was fast becoming a prerequisite to sex.

Paul's gaze was so unsettling, she felt compelled to confront him with a question to break his spell.

"Why don't you answer that one, Paul?"

He looked baffled. "Huh? What?"

Mia raised her voice. "Marsha wants to know if we've read Anya's texts."

"I did," Paul said, "And I'm glad I did. Mia and I disagree about it."

"It implies a lack of trust," Mia said. "Anyway, we'll know more tomorrow when he comes to dinner—*if* he comes to dinner."

"What do you mean, if?"

"Anya told me he might be late for dinner cause he's coming from acting class and sometimes it runneth over," she said.

"Forget this guy. If he can't make it to dinner on time to meet the parents of a girl he likes, then he's a loser."

"I agree," Richard chimed in.

"Right?" Paul said.

"Absolutely. Over and out. Next, please."

"Not even a question."

Richard and Paul did their usual male bonding routine: one talking, the other agreeing and back and forth. *Like fucking roosters*, Mia thought every time.

She reached for the Grenache and gave herself a good pour.

Richard talked about how he'd courted Marsha, the lengths he'd gone to in order to win over her and her parents. It was a sweet and funny story and one that made Mia like Richard more except that the whole time he was speaking, he looked directly at Paul, not her, as if she wasn't even included in the conversation.

"As long as a child is under my roof, I'm entitled to know everything," Marsha said.

Mia reached for the Grenache again. She hadn't realized how comforting mindless agreement between friends had meant to her. It was not lost upon her that Marsha's obstinate clashes with her were exactly the opposite behavior of what the two men were doing. The fact that the lemon pasta and broccoli was so delicious only disappointed her more. It made her feel like Richard and Marsha were smart and talented and probably right about having dismissed her.

She felt her jaw clench with every bite. She ate fast and went for seconds, table manners be damned. Suddenly, she looked up to find Marsha staring at her. Judgment, like a banner, hung in her eyes. Mia set her fork down.

"More wine?" Marsha asked.

"Please," Mia answered, desperate for whatever help she could get.

#

Mia heard the motorcycle pull up and walked towards the front door. She'd always hated everything about motorcycles—the noise, the uncomfortable ride, the deaths.

“You’re on time!” Mia smiled at the tall boy leaning against one of two pillars on her front porch. He had longish, messy hair, no doubt from the helmet he was holding in his hand. He removed a leather bike glove. “Yeah. I made it work. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Gardner,” he said, holding her hand for a moment.

They sat in an outdoor area where Mia had put out snacks of rosemary cashews and feta in olive oil with French bread. A.J. helped himself.

“So, acting,” she said.

“Yup. Family business, as it were.”

From behind A.J.’s back, Mia spotted Anya walking towards them. She was wearing a nylon dress, three-inch heels, and heavy makeup. She reminded Mia of the Russian women she’d met on her two trips to the country: the social worker in a floor-length fur coat with black thigh-high leather boots underneath, or the lawyer who, at their trial, wore a dress so sheer, her black thong looked more like a flag than an undergarment. Mia had the impulse to sprint into the hall, make Anya go back upstairs and change. But A.J. had followed her gaze and was now standing to greet Anya.

“Hey,” he said.

Anya stopped before him. “Did you ride here?”

A.J.’s eyes took her in. “You look great.” He hugged her.

Mia watched as Anya pulled back from him. Her daughter had no interest in intimacy, other than with her. Men were still icky. But trying new things excited her. Having a boyfriend fell into that category. “Did you ride here?” she repeated.

“Bike’s outside.”

“Let’s go for a ride before dinner.” Anya walked towards the front door.

Mia looked at the clock. “No, babe. Your dad will be down in a minute.”

“Come on! I want to. Really, Mom? Dad takes forever, and I want a ride!” There she was yelling again.

“How about later?” A.J. mediated.

“It’ll be too late then. Please, Mom?”

Paul had just walked into the room and headed straight for A.J., hand extended.

“Hey, how are you? I’m the dad. Paul. What’s that stand for—A.J.?” Paul asked.

“Achilles Janus,” A.J. said. “My parents are both actors. I think they were going for a stage name.”

“But you changed it,” Paul said.

“I might use it. Depends. The A.J. thing started back in pre-school.”

“Dad, I want to go for a ride on A.J.’s bike before dinner but Mom said no.”

Paul turned and faced Anya. “What the hell are you wearing?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can I, Dad?”

“You can’t go out of the house dressed like that.”

Anya's expression dropped and she followed it into a chair where she rested her head on her hands. "I don't get to do anything."

"Wah, wah," Paul looked at A.J. "Sure you want to date her?"

A.J. laughed. At least he can take a joke, Mia thought. Ever since they'd adopted her, Paul had this running gag about what a handful Anya was going to be when it came to dating, and how sorry he felt for her suitors already. The reality was, Paul already dreaded the day when Anya would leave them.

"Let's sit," Paul said, in response to which Anya released an exaggerated sigh.

Mia sat next to A.J. He had a woodsy smell to him that put her right back in high school.

"So, you're graduating in June?" Mia asked.

"Class of 2023." A.J. took Anya's hand in his and squeezed it.

She snatched her hand away. "What are you doing?"

A.J. laughed it off.

"College?" Paul asked.

"AFI."

"What's that stand for? Adonis Faunus Icarus?" Paul said.

Just as Mia was about to explain Paul's humor to this young man, he laughed again. "Yeah. My entire life is a series of initials."

A.J.'s eyes were slightly close together, which, strangely, added to his good looks, gave him a penetrating gaze.

Mia rose and Anya followed her into the kitchen. “I’m hungry, Mom,” she said in a tone that suggested it was her mother’s fault.

“Good, we’re eating.”

Together, they carried the roasted chicken, curried lentils and a salad to the table.

“Dinner!” Mia yelled. “Go tell dad and A.J. we’re eating.”

Anya stared at her mother. “You just did.”

A.J. sat next to Anya and across from Mia, and Paul sat at the head of the table.

Anya piled her plate high with food and began to eat before A.J. was even seated. She ate more than anyone Mia knew and was thinner than most everyone too. Mia imagined she ate to make up for all those lost meals—Russian orphanage rations, or before that, with her teenage, alcoholic parents who’d, no doubt, barely fed her at all.

Mia cleared her throat. She gave Anya ‘the look.’

“But Mom, I’m...”

Mia gave her the look more intensely, and Anya set down her fork.

Anya clanged her fork on the table as A.J. slowly took sizable portions of everything. When he’d finished, he looked at Anya. “Are you waiting for me?”

“Uh, duh.”

“Sorry. Please, eat.”

Anya frowned at her mother.

“This is delicious,” A.J. said. “Wow. You’re a great cook.”

“You’re so welcome, sweetie.” *Sweetie?* Mia had surprised herself. Endearments were new to her. Since turning fifty, words like “honey, “babe,” and “dear,” were popping out at the oddest times and with people she barely knew. Lose looks, gain endearments.

“You’re so lucky to be done with school. I wish I were done,” Anya said between bites. “I hate school. I hate homework. When’s the next vacation, Mom? I need a vacation.”

A.J. finished chewing. “Santa Monica High School is the best.”

“I hated school.” Paul poured himself more wine.

Mia had gotten her MFA when she was forty, and loved every minute of it.

“There’s no place in the world I’d rather be than in a classroom learning.”

Anya pointed her fork piled with lentils at A.J. “Are you serious? You like SAMO?”

A.J. finished chewing. “Definitely. I had some great teachers. Mr. Neilsen, the 10th grade English teacher, is my all-time favorite. He taught me to like poetry.”

Anya and Paul groaned.

“That’s wonderful,” Mia said.

“Life is too short for poetry,” Paul said.

“Yuck,” Anya said, either about the lentils or poetry, Mia wasn’t certain.

Mia felt embarrassed by her family, not that A.J. cared. He was laughing and arguing his point. “I know, I know. I felt that way too, but, believe me, if you were in Mr. Neilsen’s class, you’d change your mind.”

God, boys are beautiful, Mia thought. Here was this smart, handsome young man who had his whole life before him.

Mia and A.J. talked poetry while her family discussed the dog, beneath the table, waiting for stray crumbs. “Have you read Charles Simic?” Mia asked.

“No, but I will. Neruda is my favorite: Love is so short, forgetting is so long.”

“Nice,” she said. “Even Neruda’s name is poetry.”

“I can’t believe you said that!” he smiled. “I thought the same thing.”

Mia began to wonder more and more what on earth he saw in Anya. What would they talk about?

“Who else do you read?” A.J. asked. “Fiction?”

Mia couldn’t believe that this boy was asking her a question. Kids never asked grown-ups questions. They either talked at them or ignored them. She stood, walked to a nearby bookcase, and returned with a few titles. “Any time you want to borrow one, feel free.”

“Thank you so much. That’s so nice of you.”

Anya had finished eating, “Mom, can we go on his bike now?”

Mia clenched her jaw. “A.J. is still eating. You can wait.”

Anya cleared her throat and stared at A.J. Mia knew now. This thing with A.J. was all about that bike.

A.J. wiped his hands on a napkin and started to rise. Like Mia, he was a people pleaser.

“It’s okay. I’m done.”

“We’re still eating, Anya. Sit.” Mia’s voice sounded foreign to her, low and threatening.

She’d wanted to ask him about C.K. Williams, Jack Gilbert, Margaret Atwood’s poems, perhaps. A.J. hadn’t eaten much food. A silly little thing really, and yet, somehow, she felt crushed. Disappointment sat like a small dog in her lap.

Anya hadn’t heard her or didn’t care. She turned to her father. “Dad, can we?”

“If you change first,” Paul said, without even gazing up from his plate. “Put on a ski jacket, a Hazmat suit; anything to cover yourself up. And only in the neighborhood.”

Mia sat very still as A.J. gathered his gear from the hall, and Anya changed. She counted the colors in her hearts of palm salad: green, red, orange, purple, and off-white. Two minutes later, Mia heard the motorcycle start outside. She looked at her husband, the table, the food on her fork. Still, she remained motionless while Paul scrolled his phone.

Finally, Paul noticed her mood. “Hey, hon, are you okay?”

She didn’t move.

“I’m fine.”

“What’s for dessert?” Paul asked.

Mia rose quickly. “I don’t know,” she said, realizing she had nothing prepared.

Linda Davis' short story "The War at Home" won the *Saturday Evening Post* Great American Fiction contest. Other story and essay publications include *The Iowa Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Literal Latte*, *Gemini Magazine*, *Mothering Children with Special Needs*, *Coverstory* and *Kallisto Gaia Press*. She received her MFA from Antioch University. When she is not editing *Lit Angels*, she is working on her novel, *Nothing is Wrong*.

Due to Your Influence

By Kim Anton

It is because of you that this happened. You are a terrible influence. You always were.

My husband was All-American at Yale. That is how far I've risen or fallen from you. That is the road I chose to travel. Instead of lounging in your apartment, high on coke and weed and eating (when the coke wore off) my weight in ribs, potatoes gratin and chocolate soufflé.

"Druggies don't cook," you said, putting orange slices in my mouth.

"You do."

"I don't take speed, I sell it," you said, indignant.

So I believed that cocaine and weed were just a flirtation, same as you. I underestimated the addictive qualities of all.

I still see you, in the passenger seat of my Mustang, parked outside of Farrell's Olde Time Ice Cream Parlor. I'd skipped school and you'd ditched work. I'm holding a rolled up one hundred dollar bill and some white powder on a picture frame, displaying your ex-wife, naked and sultry. She was so beautiful, I wondered why she'd been left behind.

"Snort it quick, there's a cop right there," you said.

Panicked, I tipped your ex onto the point of her frame. Cocaine snowed over the rust colored carpet.

“That’s abundance mentality right there,” you told me. It took a moment before I could laugh. Thanks to you, I never bought drugs, but I knew they were expensive. Youth and you made me invincible. I wanted to try everything, consequences did not exist.

The last time we spoke was the last time we spoke, on our yearly, update call:

“How is your mom?”

“Sick.”

“How is your sister?”

“Well.”

“How is your (current) wife?”

“Gone.”

“Another one?”

If I’d known, I might have said something different, but I have no compassion for quitters. I’d been writing you into a book. You as the twenty-eight-year-old man I’d loved, making deals in the 80’s. Not you at sixty, after the crash, when you’d been out of a job for six-plus years. You weren’t you anymore, so I was angry.

“It’s all just shit,” you said. “There is no love,” or, “I don’t believe in love,” or whatever you said. I wasn’t listening to your whining.

“You’re still hot,” I argued, probably too directly. Probably the wrong thing to say to a suicidal friend, but like I said, you were pissing me off. “You fall in love ten times a day. Just pick one and stick to her.”

“I should have married you,” you said as if I’d given you a chance. As if at sixteen I hadn’t told you I’d never be staying with a man like you, “You’d be the end of me,” I’d breathed as you pushed my peasant dress up over my breasts and peppered my belly with slow pecks. I pulled your face to mine with both hands, “you’d break my heart.”

“Excuses!” You whispered and kissed my mouth.

Maybe you didn’t believe me. Maybe you didn’t care. If I had married you...if you had been Bernadine’s dad or whoever’s; If you’d been her dad and you’d left us the way you left your sons....I knew what I was doing back then. I am married to the right man.

Today, your ghost was giving me ideas. Like you did that New Year’s Eve, when we fucked in your apartment instead of going to Monty’s Steak House like you’d promised. You’d have a lot to say about what happened today, but if you were here, it wouldn’t have. “If your aunt had balls she’d be your uncle,” I could hear you say.

Francis, the husky and I were asleep at nine thirty this morning when his bladder must have finally woken him so he scratched at the bed. My chest contracted when I saw the time, but I remembered that Bernadine drove herself. She is a mature seventeen. She is too old for you. Bernie is inherently fearful, so she waited until this month to get her license. When she was born, I was afraid of child molesters, corn, home invasion robberies, soy, skinned knees, Drano, sharp edges, peanut allergies, wheat, cruelty,

laundry detergent, bath products, television, depression, mid-life crisis, eating disorders and dairy. I didn't think fear was contagious, but she caught it. I'm sad that I did that to her, but more content at her extreme caution. A little fear is a good thing.

Now I'm afraid she will leave and never come home. She could have a car accident or fixate on some mistake I've made as a mother, or think Jello-shots are a little too much fun. The loss of her for any reason would do me in.

The one thing I don't fear is that she will be lost to an older man, a drug dealer and a chef. She wouldn't do that. There are two loving parents in her tidy home. She does dishes every night without being asked, and the cap is always returned tightly to her toothpaste tube. LaCrosse and grades are her job. She does not need to work in a store like I did, where everyone believed the lie, but you.

"How old are you again?"

"Seventeen."

"Bullshit."

"How old am I, then?"

"Fourteen."

"How do you know?"

"Niece is fourteen."

"Will you tell?"

"No."

"Why?" I'd asked.

“Because you are too good to be true and I was hoping you were older, but I knew you weren’t.”

“Now what do we do?” I’d said, far more flirtatious than I knew I could be.

“What lovers do, I guess,” And I was on fire for you.

That and what you said to my stupid father. When you were half way between his age and mine. Instead of asking why you were seeing in his teen daughter, Dad asked for dating tips. His voice floated in over the running water and the buzz of my curling iron, where I was making myself beautiful for you.

“How are you so attractive to women?” he asked. “I can’t get them to look twice at me. You are much taller but still...”

I wanted to die right there. I wanted to disappear down my pink porcelain sink with the pits in it, leaving you to wonder why you were sitting in a filthy living room with a pathetic middle-aged man.

“Just listen to them,” I heard you say, quietly so I wouldn’t hear. “They want you to know them.” Your tone for my protection, your advice for him, or maybe for the poor women he was trying to woo. Your compassion was so blatant, that I couldn’t help but love you.

I chose my husband because he is not like my father and he is not like you. He is the other. He’s go-to, can-do, nobody’s fool. Except for me. He is a fool for me. He does not ask Bernadine’s friends how to score chicks, and he couldn’t tell you how if you asked him. He likes the one he has.

Francis prefers the dog park to a hike, so I let him choose. I pulled on a cotton dress the color of dirt, Bernie's Adidas, and grabbed the leash.

Days are much lonelier now that Bernie is gone. Gone to parties, gone to sushi in West Hollywood, gone to her room behind a closed door. She is kind when I knock but no longer invites me in. She was nine-years-old when she told me I didn't need to read to her.

"I'll read next to you," she said, patting my forearm, and that was all. Of course, it wasn't the end of our relationship, only our passionate love affair and it's been a long slow goodbye ever since. I'm in mourning for her, and I guess for you. But maybe for me. No one knows that I was a wild girl, a woman child, a free spirited beautiful thing that rode with the top down, and a joint in hand through the canyons of Malibu, dreaming, dreaming, dreaming of a life better than mine. Only you knew. Did the girl I was go with you to the other side?

Because I'd opened Facebook that morning. Because I was missing Bernie. Because of the picture of you. The one I'd taken thirty years ago. Your oldest son must have found it. The origin he would not know. You are lying on a towel after a run, sweaty and glowing on the Malibu sand. Your finger lifted as if tapping your thigh, Nasty Girl by Vanity six on the boombox behind you. Your eyes are closed, face to the ski, a stoned smile on your beautiful lips, all contentment and peace. Your hair is too long for late twenties, blonde and airy like a merman, you look like you belong to the sea.

Your son wrote, “If you are seeing this, you knew my father or he meant something to you at some time. I’m sorry to say that he has passed to the next world. He requested funeral services in L.A. and San Francisco...” I wanted to break something of value, a plate, a piece of art, my marriage. *Requested*, is what gets me. You just quit.

No one else was in the dog park. It must have been the late hour when we finally arrived. It was almost noon.

“Sorry Francis,” I told the white beast, “no mates today.”

The thought of that big park alone was too quiet to bear. But I’d already removed his leash and watched him speed-run half an acre.

When I moseyed around a corner I saw the man on a bench, his pit bulls frolicking behind a cement trash can until they saw Francis and bounded toward him. I gasped. Pit bulls scare the shit out of me. I’m a bigot that way. But the dogs ran in a circle and only growled playfully.

The owner of the dogs was shoeless. His dirty Nike’s sat tidy under the slatted bench. Sweat socks folded neatly inside. Odd choice to be barefoot in a dog park. Even this one in our pristine town. It’s not clean and most of the grass is dead and prickly from being peed on.

“Did you run here?” I asked, looking at his clean feet.

“No,” he said and I told myself to cool it. He was not a friend, he was a guy in the park who thinks pit bulls are a good idea.

Francis was running with the bulls so leaving was not a possibility. I hung the leash on the chain link gate. An oak tree was between the man and me, making conversation awkward. Something told me not to make it easy. Fear. I have so much, it's hard to know what's real.

"That a husky?" he asked, ignoring the tree, not looking in my direction.

"Yes. A rescue, but mostly a husky."

"Not pure, the eye is green."

Francis has one green eye and one blue. Many huskies do. It's not a sign of contaminated breeding.

"Oh," I said.

This guy was good looking enough, in great shape for his age. About your age at your end, *forever* 61. He was sandy blonde mixed with gray. He had a too-long face, sharp edged, with jutting cheekbones and thin lips. When he finally turned to me, I saw the cap on his head said, "Holy Roller" in red. A tumbling white die was the "O."

"I have no problem loving Jesus," you said when you told me you were getting married again. The way you said it. I believed you. You always were a believer, a true Christian, whatever that is. You knew how to love, so I didn't mind losing you to them, her and Jesus. I was long over you, already in love with my betrothed.

The barefooted man was lithe and muscular, which is another reason I thought he was a runner. His strong biceps stretched the elastic on his polo sleeves, which were a bit

dingy. Like a homeless guy who had enough change for the laundromat. I pictured him in our Fluff N' Fold, fastidiously measuring soap, loading quarters.

“Fucker, fucker, fucker,” he said in a machine gun rhythm. Suddenly, I was very present. There was about 400 yards to the gate, I could run there if I was in danger. Francis would follow me. Would my dog attack if he saw I was in trouble? My white knight. My sheep in wolf’s clothing.

“You ok?” I asked instead.

“Fucking cancer, wife’s got cancer.”

“Sorry,” I said, which was stupid. *Never apologize, I tell Bernie. When you feel threatened, act like a bad-ass.* But I was sorry, and scared. He wasn’t talking to me exactly but I felt the blame. Someone died. You. Partly it was my fault but I wasn’t blamed. Someone was gonna die, his wife. Not at all my fault, I could even things out.

“Fucker, fucker,” he whispered but softer.

I could have gotten out of there. He was quieting and Francis was lying in the grass chewing a found tennis ball. I could have sauntered over to our leash. Holy Roller wasn’t focused on me yet. If there was a time to go. That had been it.

Instead, I stepped around the tree and looked at his face. There was less crazy than I expected and a lot more grief. He was in deep sorrow, enough to make a person cuss in public, to remove his shoes in a park full of waste, and to reach out to a stranger just to have someone hear.

“It’s hard,” I said. “Losing people, or the possibility of losing them...really too much sometimes,” I said instead of running.

“We got bills and I don’t know,” he said looking at me for the first time.

Loss was all I saw then. Not danger or madness, but despair. Something important was leaving, it might as well have already been gone.

In my heart, I held him for a moment, tandem to Bernadine. There, I engulfed him in love. I could save him. I imagined Jesus next to me, showing me how to heal him. But it didn’t work that way. Maybe because I’m not a believer. Maybe because there is nothing to believe. This man was so raw, and I was so sad for him, and for you. I silently insisted, he would not be left to his despair, nor me to mine.

“Fuckers took my job. Fuckin’ fuckers.”

“Sorry?” I said again. I wished he wouldn’t cuss. He was engulfed in my love, I couldn’t let him go. But I was nervous. He was so angry.

“Cancer’s expensive. I lost my fucking job.”

“My friend too. In ’08. He was about your age.” Why was I talking about you?
Why was I talking?

He nodded, didn’t answer. I breathed in and sat next to him on the bench. I took his hand. He looked surprised. I held on and squeezed it once to reassure him. He needed soothing. Then the O on his cap reminded me that I didn’t know him. No one in my circle advertised their beliefs or ranted in a public place. I let go and brushed off my dress. I stepped toward the post that held the leash.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jane,” I lied. Stupid. This was my dog park in my small town. I may see him again. Someone I know will say my real name.

“I’m Andrew.”

“Okay,” I smiled. “Nice to meet you Andrew.” I looked to the leash again.

“Jane?”

“Yes,” I answered, assuring us both of the name I’d chosen.

“Can I touch you, Jane?”

“What? No. What?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes then on mine, “I misread you.”

Francis was lying on his side. Too much pit bull. He flicked his tail once, he was running in his sleep. Inert beast, coward, damn dog.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“I’m good at it,” he said, “I can please you.”

“*Run*,” said the voice in my head. But your ghost was louder.

“Why not,” you said. “Who the fuck are you anyway?”

Someone could have been there. Bernie’s kindergarten teacher, the checker from Von’s, my neighbor and her Pekingese. I didn’t even look around.

His eyes stayed on mine and I walked to face him. I took off my underwear and he looked at my legs, his expression as colorless as his skin.

He took me by the hips and pulled me to him. I straddled his legs and pressed into his groin. No hard on.

“OK?” I asked.

“This is all,” he said.

He did not kiss me. He dropped the strap of my dress from my right shoulder and pulled my breast from my bra. He pinched my nipple until I winced then he hunched to put his lips on it. He sucked and licked and pinched. I opened my mouth and pressed down on him. His shorts were wet from where I was rubbing against him but his body did not react.

With his other hand, he reached between my legs and pushed me up away from him. My knees ached a little on the hard bench, I hovered over his thighs. I gasped as he pressed two fingers inside me. He pulled out then pressed in again in a rhythm, his teeth and tongue on my nipple, teasing pain and comfort. It was all I needed, all I could take from a scary stranger, who smelled wrong, and felt wrong, and was sick, and sad, and suffering. The wretchedness of it all tipped me over. I pressed down on his hand so he could not remove it. I grabbed his shoulders and came hard with short gasps of air. I arched my back, stifled my voice, I wanted to cry out, but didn't. I squeezed his fingers inside me until I finished then pushed myself to standing.

I stood, shaky-legged and caught my breath. Now he looked grimy and futile. Shame permeated my body immediately, but that was not me.

“Fuck shame,” you told me when I’d cried to you about being fired from my job, the real one, after college. That’s all you’d had to say and I was over it. What am I supposed to do without that?

He lifted his eyes back to mine and the corner of his mouth twitched up and down.

“Good right?” he said. He showed no joy, not even a wan smile. A moment ago, I’d wanted to save him. Now, I wished him gone. I hated him. His smell was in my mouth, sour and sweaty.

Francis nuzzled my leg protectively but he did not threaten. His furry head was so soft, I stroked it unintentionally.

I looked back at Andrew’s eyes until he looked away. They were so light—a milky gray.

I managed to step into my panties. I grabbed for the leash. It was stuck between two links on the gate. I wrested it free after five yanks. If anyone with a sense of humor had been there, it would have been hilarious. Francis sat obediently for the noose to be slipped over his head.

“Now you’re loyal,” I told my dog. But only you could have saved me.

I snuck a peek at Andrew, but my fear for him was gone. So many things were.

“It’s your birthday,” you said.

It was my seventeenth, but I’d handed you a box.

“Open it please,” I said.

Inside was a thick gold chain for your wrist. It was real, and expensive.

“Where did you get this?” you asked, fingering the shiny thing.

“I asked the guy in the pawn shop to show me a bunch of them, and when he turned his back, I lifted it,” I said with a slow, wide, smile.

You pulled me so close to you, I could smell weed, and mint, and reverence.

“You are reckless,” you whispered like the words were a kiss, “is there anything you won’t do?”

Kim Anton is a fiction writer and essayist from Southern California. She loves cooking, hiking and dogs, and is fascinated by human nature.

Meth, Marriage & The Magical Threshold

by Rachel Resnick



LIT ANGELS

METH, MARRIAGE & THE MAGIC THRESHOLD
BY RACHEL RESNICK

Edited by Francesca Lia Block & Linda Davis
Artwork by Jade Lynn Goh

“Your Man is here,” says the Date Lady, gestures toward the end of the Joshua Tree Farmer’s Market.

“What?” I say, stopping short.

It is Saturday, a day called the Harrowing of Hell, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

My Man, Daniel, texted me at dawn to say he was sad to miss seeing me this weekend but he was in San Diego, visiting his sick father.

“I understand. I love you,” I said.

“You positive?” I ask the Date Lady.

“Shaved head, polo shirt, dragonfly tattoo.”

My stomach drops through the ground of my reality and plunges fifty floors into the abyss.

Time stops.

I want to throw up.

Instead, I buy a bag of dates, the color of cockroaches.

I text My Man.

“If you’re here, you owe me an explanation.”

No response.

I drive to his nearby cabin.

Park behind an unfamiliar shiny blue Miata.

The plate reads Encinitas.

His hometown.

My blood churns.

There is his red-painted cabin with the neat white trim.

There is also a new white shade structure, two seats arranged carefully side by side, a table between covered with a red scarf.

He is an architect.

Who told me he loved me.

Who said we were soulmates.

I sit in the passenger side seat of the truck, door swung wide, my cowboy boots he
bought me planted in the dry dust, desert sun blazing.

It is high noon.

Time for a showdown.

Ding.

“Walking toward you,” says the text.

I look up, see My Man walking this way, with a woman.

Sister.

It *must* be his sister.

He’s getting divorced after three decades, so of course, sure, he’s hesitant about having
me meet his family.

It’s okay.

I can handle this.

The woman has long wavy black hair that gleams almost blue in the beating-down sun
as it swings.

She’s smiling.

In her left hand she holds a bouquet of bright white flowers.

Ranunculus.

Coyote Eyes.

They droop in the heat.

“Joan, this is Rachel. Rachel, this is Joan.”

Then he backs away ten feet, like he's lit the fuse on a bomb, leaves us two facing each other.

Joan is the name of his wife.

*

We met in line at Natural Sisters Café, five months before.

It's a bright, cold day in November, and after 18 years in Topanga Canyon, in the same beloved spot, I am homeless.

I run my business from the road, seek the next right place.

I notice his shaved head first, the well-shaped skull, then the dragonfly tat on his neck.

He's compact and muscular, like a soccer player.

“I like your dragonfly,” I say.

“I like your ring,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say.

I wish my hair wasn't in pigtails, that I wore anything besides sloppy hiking gear.

“I'm going through a painful divorce,” he blurts out.

His eyes tear up.

We're not even to the counter yet.

"I'm camping out in the park. I'm here to heal." The hurt in his voice is palpable.

I feel my heart soften.

I am nomadic. Ungrounded. Rootless.

I don't even know where I am sleeping each night.

Everything I own is in storage or stuffed into my truck.

All I want is to feel at home in the world again.

Like I belong.

I am vulnerable to sad stories.

*

I ignore a field full of red flags.

Namely,

Meth and marriage.

We slow dance under a full Mojave moon, his muscular arms circling my waist, Chris

Stapleton singing raw from the speakers.

"I have to tell you the truth," he says, his handsome face all hangdog.

"Meth is what tore my marriage apart."

"Get out," I say, and lock the door.

When he comes by the next day, I hide in the bathroom.

Pretend I don't hear him, until he leaves.

Later, unable to stay away, I demand he dive into recovery.

"You're not a delicate desert flower," he says. "I was wrong.

You're a prickly baby cholla!"

He goes to meetings, for a while, then tapers off.

I forget.

Or, I get intoxicated by his touch.

Betrayed by my hungry heart.

By the stress of nomadism.

Every Airbnb, every hotel, every place I stay, Daniel makes feel like home.

"I want to spoil you," he says.

Takes me to dinner every night.

Brings me coffee every morning.

Brings gifts to brighten each temporary spot.

Until, I find the perfect new home.

So perfect, I get paralyzed.

Even in meditation, when I visualize this sweet space, golden light pouring through,

boulders to the south, mountains to the north, I cannot cross the threshold.

It is the nicest place I will have ever lived.

“Come on,” he says, “you’ve got this.”

I am stuck, until Daniel stretches out his hand, invites me to cross the magic threshold.

I willfully ignore those red flags flapping.

So when, five months later, the Harrowing of Hell happens, I have no one to blame but myself.

*

Here I am with the wife.

“Well, this is awkward.”

“Why? I know who you are,” she says, smug with years of marriage, “Thanks for helping him in early stages of recovery.”

“Think it’s a little more than that.”

“You been sleeping together?”

“Ah...Yeah.”

We both turn to look at Daniel.

“That wasn’t very nice of you to bring me to the town where you’re sleeping with someone,” says the wife. Calmly. I simply glare.

“We had sexual relations last night,” she says to me. I flinch.

“No we...that wasn’t...” splutters Daniel, as he backs another ten feet down the road — “I should be alone. I’ve lost both of you. Fuck this.”

“I love you,” she says, soothing.

“I love you,” I say.

“I’ve loved you for thirty-four years,” she says.

I look at her. The wife. The mother who bore My Man two sons. How can I compete?

She sounds so in love. How did I step into a lurid desert telenovela?

“Just tell us the truth,” she coaxes.

Daniel pauses.

“I love you,” he says, looking at his wife, then looking me directly in the eyes for the first time, “but I’m in love with her.”

His wife says, “She should know you called off the divorce.”

“Is that true?” I ask Daniel.

“Yes.”

“When.”

“A month ago.”

This morning, the world was still a delicate dusty rose, soft, sexy and sand-colored, full of tender pink-and-blue parfait sunrises and sunsets, sparkling stars.

Now it’s mud.

Later comes, “Stay away from my husband. You bitch.”

Along with vicious slander, hidden car trackers. Surveillance. Poisonous spider bites.

“You’re a fool if you believe his future faking,” she says. “He’s a liar. He’s with me.”

*

I visit the Barking Healer for clearing.

“Your karma is tangled,” says the Barking Healer.

“You were his mother, and he was your son, a soldier, killed in battle. He died in your arms.

And you were his son, a soldier, killed in battle, who died in his arms.

But the wife. She is the danger.

She murdered you. Twice. In previous lifetimes.

Get out.”

*

The last time I see him is August 1st.

He comes unexpectedly to my door.

I let him in.

“Are you divorced?” I ask. “Have you filed?”

“Rachel,” he says.

I burst into tears.

Soon, I am sobbing into my arms.

“Look at me,” he says.

I cannot.

“Rachel,” he says. “Please. What do you want?”

After a few minutes, or maybe hours, I choke out,

“Leave me alone.”

When he goes, a pink-and-blue parfait sunset pours through the windows, paints me in light, enters my pores.

Cut me open and you’ll get blinded.

*

Was it all an illusion?

I visit the red cabin one last time.

It’s been abandoned since he left.

The white shade structure is now a busted skeleton, collapsing into itself.

A pair of tumbleweeds roll past.

I wake one spring morning, alone, drenched in sweat, short of breath.

The quail family file by outside the sliding glass door.

I dreamed I was dying in strange, shrinking tunnels.

I visit the Barking Healer.

She swings her silver pendulum wildly through the dimlit air of the Om Room, in the back of Grateful Desert Herb Shoppe.

Her wire glasses glint.

Deep guttural growls rise up through her throat – sounds both bestial and celestial.

Something smoky and dark lifts from my ribcage, spirals up, vanishes.

“Don’t you see?” she says, this wild wise woman, this ethereal yet earthy snagged angel, she who can release decades-old trauma from my blood and bones in minutes through the mystery and power of spirit-infused desert-born soulsonic throat tones,

“You’ve landed.”

Rachel Resnick is a *Los Angeles Times* bestseller and Yale grad. She holds an M.F.A. from Vermont College. Rachel's also a creative entrepreneur and transformational coach who's run her own storytelling business (rachelresnick.com) since 2006. Her most recent book is *Love Junkie: A Memoir*. This piece is an excerpt from a new book – a hybrid of memoir, personal growth and writing inspiration. Rachel lives in Twentynine Palms, California. You can find her at [instagram.com/rachelresnick](https://www.instagram.com/rachelresnick) and [facebook.com/StoryCoachRachelResnick](https://www.facebook.com/StoryCoachRachelResnick)

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LIT ANGELS



POEMS BY SUSAN DUDLEY



EDITED BY FRANCESCA LIA BLOCK & LINDA DAVIS
ARTWORK BY JADE LYNN GOH

The Moon in Therapy

After Ho Xuan Huong's "Questions for the Moon"

Do you like being called Diana?

Do you like the wolf's serenade?

How does it feel to be eclipsed?

When you eclipse, do you laugh?

Tell me about your phases--

Do you mind living in constant change?

Are you ashamed of your dark side?

Are you jealous of the sun?

Are you lonely for the robins?

Do you yearn for boldness?

I realize you lead,

but when you dance with the ocean,

is it love?

Is it codependency? A crush?

Do you want to be monogamous?

Let's explore this for a moment.

Last night as you nestled in the branches

and whispered into the November wind,

did you notice

the crisp oak leaf doing a jig?

Driving Directions

Turn away from the dark coves
lined with traffic-scarred pavement.

Turn the wheel.

Risk the juddering and wobbling tires
as you steer away from the familiar rutted road.

Search the horizon for the house
tucked in the elbow of ridges,
where there is a hearth birthing
smoke to bring you home.

Savor the summer's water
bursting with each sweet-tart bite
from the firm fist of a September apple.

Roll, revel, and rest in the refractions
scattered from your cut-glass heart
hanging in a window.

Aside from the Yogi, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Shaman

If a mantra is a sacred utterance,
could it be the Divine scatters it
like sparks from a great fire—
ephemeral yet eternal?

Who would deny the sacredness
of a bird's song?
Or the flutter of first life? First love?
The scuttle of a crab across sand.
The autumn aspen leaves, a dazzle of
sequins

draped on the neckline of the mountain.
The scent of frangiapani and earth.
The swirling wake of a wooden paddle
pressed through dark, glassy lake water.
The pivot between exhale and inhale.

What use for chanting
if we cannot grasp the mantras
hanging like ripe mangoes

Suzanne Dudley lives in New Hampshire with her husband and a happy ebb and flow of visits from their adult children. Suzanne's poems have appeared in various literary magazines as well in the collection, *Dreams and Blessings*. She is delighted to be published in *Lit Angels*. Aside from writing, she works as a life and leadership coach.



Stephanie & The Old Man

By Miranda Schwartz

Stephanie picks her teeth with the stem of a four-leaf clover she'd had in her hand when she was kidnapped. It had fossilized during the journey underground and now made a perfect toothpick. She knows something weird is afoot but doesn't really care. Any life is better than being Persephone's sister. Perfect. Beautiful. Magical. Powerful. And so spoiled! My Goddess that girl whined when she didn't get her way. Stephanie's life, up until about ten minutes ago, had been about making sure the little Princess was happy, was comfortable, was groomed, was...ugh. If Stephanie hadn't been picking that clover for Seph, she literally wouldn't be here right now. Seph had wanted the perfect purple clover that grew on the riverbank but didn't want to get her silky ivory frock muddy. Silkworms had been fed goat milk to create that color ivory, just for her Stephanie went as usual, then she found the lucky clover that was in her hand and then something pulled her down through the mud at a fierce speed, like falling off of a cliff

and boom! She's here at what looks like an underground wedding feast in a white dress. A bloody and muddy white dress. Ew. Creepy. She was wearing a gold dress this morning, wasn't she? A large and hulking presence looms in front of her and interrupts her thoughts.

“Ah Persephone, picker of dandelions, at last we are together my darling. I have waited so long for your lovely facade to grace my humble abode. Welcome, my bride, welcome. I shall give you everything you need for a happy and fulfilled life with me, your king, your devoted lover and steed. You shall want for nothing—for sunlight, for daylight, for air, for photosynthesis—they shall all become yours through the blinding light of my love. What is it that you desire that you do not see before you? Jewels? Milk and honey? Mutton? Apples? Cheese curds? Pickled quail eggs? Chocolate frosted macaroons?”

“I need panty liners.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have my period. Fuck. I thought my moon time was over. Yuck. Squishy.” Stephanie does a little hip-shaking dance and continues, “and new panties. And pants. I'm not wearing this stupid toga anymore. Are those ... worms? In the walls? Gross! And who the fuck are you anyway? When my mom finds out about this there will be hell to pay.”

“Persephone my sweet, I can understand you are upset, but language.”

“Oh geez. Persephone huh? Sweet little, whispery, giggly Persephone. Jokes on you, Mud Butt. I’m not Persephone.”

“Yes, you are. My dearest, you were out in that field, picking flowers...flaxen hair, ivory silk toga, hemp sandals, crown of flowers.”

“There’s, like, a hundred of us picking flowers! That’s what we do this time of year. Our mother makes us. Collecting flowers, and pollen, and stamens, and seeds and shit. Been doing it my whole life, since I could crawl and pick flowers with my mouth! So many bugs. I hate bugs! And worms.”

“Dearest Persephone, I honor you by making you my bride. Please take a seat. Have something to eat or drink.”

Stephanie is very hungry. She stuffs her mouth with honey cake and reaches for a drink to wash it down. Soda, or water? She gulps down her cake with a raspberry lime soda. She can get water anytime.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” roars Hades. “Now you are mine forever!”

Steph stares at this laughing, giant, fearsome man-creature. She finds him incredibly stupid but kind of cute. She decides to play along.

“Good. I’m glad. I was leaving home, anyway. I hate my mother. Goddess. How can I live up to that?! ‘Oh Demeter, give us sunshine, oh Demeter, make it rain, oh Demeter, I’m so hungry. Grant me love and life and friendship and lobsters.’ Gah, people

always want things. They don't give you anything." Stephanie takes another bite of cake. "I can make something out of nothing, too!" Stephanie gracefully lifts her arms and floats them down, like a bird flapping her wings. Dried wildflowers shower over both she and Hades.

"Those are usually fresh flowers. But nobody cares about what I can do. They only care about the mighty Demeter and my precious little sister."

"Sister?"

Hades regards Stephanie. She is taller than Persephone. She is built like she swims in the sea. She has platinum, not flaxen, hair. Her ears sparkle with multiple gold hoops and blue gems that glitter in the candlelight, making glowing trails around her head as she turns to peer at the cave.

Steph looks back at Hades and narrows her eyes at him. "Sister," she says.

"So you're not ..."

"Persephone? Ha! That's hilarious. I literally just told you I'm not Persephone. Your eyesight sucks. I'm Stephanie, Mole Man. Persephone's older sister."

Hades steps closer to the girl and peers in her face. It's a strong and beautiful face but not the one he's been obsessing about for years. He takes the cake and soda from her hands.

"I really don't know what to say," Hades mumbles.

Stephanie shrugs. She sits on a dirt bench decorated with beetle shells, cicada husks, dragonfly wings, turmeric roots and pale, papery buttercups.

“Just curious, Steph ...”

“Stephanie.”

“Stephanie. What have you eaten?”

“What do you care? You have, like, a wedding banquet here. What the fuck, Mole Man!”

“Yes, my dearest, it was for Persephone. I know all her favorites from apples to pomegranates, from aspic to halvah. From butter chicken to Funyuns.”

“You think she’d eat? That’s hilarious. She’s been on a diet her whole life. She only eats rice cakes and drinks pamplemousse sparkling water.” Stephanie doubles over laughing.

“I’m still hungry. Ooh, what’s this?” Stephanie grabs the pomegranate and takes a big bite, squeezing magenta-red juice between her teeth, which drips down her chin, onto her chest and white silk dress.

Hades sighs a deep and regretful sigh. Stephanie stands up and turns to look at the pool of red where she sat.

“You have liners and pants, my blind friend? Need some help here. Can ya’ whip some up with your magical magic?” Stephanie waves her hands around. “Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.”

Hades frowns and looks at her. After a pause, he turns and trundles towards another room, disappears into the darkness and is gone for what seems like a long, long time.

Stephanie sits on her bench with her back to the picnic-style table. She picks at loose threads on her dress. She calls out, “Hey! Mud Butt!! Did you change my dress? You big ugly pervert! I’m going to kill you once I get out of here—you are dead! Hear me?”

Hades slumps back into the living room where Stephanie sits.

“Did you change my dress? It was gold this morning! Now it’s white!”

”No, Stephanie. Let me try to explain this to you. You need light to have color. The light down here does not behave as light does above ground. Because of this, you cannot really see color. You see, normally the reflected wavelengths of objects create the perception of color. There are no reflected wavelengths of light underground. Therefore, there is no real color here. For example, the food looks colorful in candlelight but it’s monochrome without it. Everything is white, gray, black, or kind of silver. It’s all, more or less, the same.”

“Sucks.” Silence. “You’re still a pervert.”

Hades nods noncommittally. He raises his hands towards Steph. “Stephanie, here’s what you requested. The powder room is down the hall and to the right. Take a candle with you.”

As Steph cleans herself up and puts on some very cozy, comfortable black drawstring pants, black furry slides, and an oversized T-shirt emblazoned with “I went to Hell and all I got was this T-shirt,” she cheers up a little. Would Demeter be looking for her? Would Persephone know that Stephanie saved her perfect little ass? Probably not. That’s ok, though. Stephanie is the adventurous type, and kinda likes old Mud Butt.

“Muddy?” Stephanie calls from the bathroom.

“Yes, Stephanie?”

“Oh, you can call me Steph. It’s okay. I kinda like your style. We could be friends, you know.”

“Friends?”

“Sure,” Steph puts the box of liners under the clay embossed sink and opens the woven grass bathroom door.

“You seem like a good guy. I mean you have food and lady stuff. Cozy sweats. I’m not the precious Persephone, but she’s a pill anyway.”

“I was hoping for a Queen to help me rule the underworld.”

“Underworld, shmunderworld. You don’t need a queen. You need a partner. We can clean up the place, have some guests. A lecture series! A botanist’s club! Star gazer’s club! With a sky light or two put in.”

Stephanie gazes up thoughtfully, looking at the stars that Hades can’t see. “See?”

“Sure ... but Stephanie?”

“Yeah?”

“You understand the consequences of your actions?”

“Huh?”

“What happens now? To you?”

“Um,” she was distracted measuring the walls with her arms outstretched.

“For someone who’s been kidnapped, you’re in a pretty good mood.”

Stephanie laughs. “I’m not kidnapped, Muddy. I can leave anytime.” She laughs harder, doubling over. Hades isn’t laughing.

“I can ... I can ...” She can’t catch her breath. “I can leeeavvvee!” comes out as a long wheeze.

Hades clears his throat. “No.”

“Ha, ha ... the ladder is right there.” She goes to the wood and mud ladder, reinforced with tiny lizard, snake, and rodent bones.

“This goes to the trap door to the field we were in.” Stephanie climbs to top of the ladder and pounds on the dirt ceiling. “Doesn’t it? I can get out, right?” She looks straight through Hades.

“I. Can. Get. Out. Right? RIGHT?!” She pounds frantically.

“I don’t want to be the queen of the underworld! I don’t want to run an underlord salon! I don’t want to have worm picnics! Let me out!!!”

Steph pounds until her fists hurt and dirt rains down on her and falls in a circle around the bottom of the ladder. She weeps clean tear tracks down her dirty cheeks. The dirt in her hair mingles with her platinum locks and changes to brown. Earth brown, red clay brown, black-brown. Obsidian. Vantablack. Steph is changing. Her flow is stopping. Her uterus is drying up. Her eggs are shriveling. Her fallopian tubes are suckering in like decaying tiger lilies.

Like the fossilized four-leaf clover, Steph’s reproductive system is now a relic, squeaking to a halt inside her body. Steph howls and falls off of the ladder, lies on the floor in the fetal position, hands gently cupping her belly, sobbing.

“My womb!”

“It was the pomegranate, my dear,” Hades says tenderly. “That was the nail in the proverbial coffin.”

Stephanie's sobs slow down and stop. She takes a deep breath and exhales. Steph watches Hades, this myopic fool, crouching and sweeping up the fallen dirt. When his back is turned to her, she slaps the back of his head hard.

"Ouch!" Hades yells and touches the back of his head.

"Oh yeah, you think that hurts? Try this!" Stephanie slaps his ear, and then his other ear, flicks his inner arms as he tries to evade her, and then pulls his nose hairs. Hades had been in many, many fights, but this girl fights dirty.

"Argh!" Hades gurgles and falls over. Yep, Stephanie kicked him in the balls. Nerves twang and tingle and his eyes water, ears ringing and his legs spasm. "I did not vomit," he gasps proudly, "at least I did not ..."

Spit. Steph spits between his eyes. "Fuck you."

Steph wakes up in a very dark room. Where is she? She is so sore. Sore all over, and her legs ache like crazy. Her head hurts so much, her mouth is so dry, she is freezing, then dripping with sweat. She's furious. Then weeping. What the fuck?

"Coffee," she mumbles, "I need coffee."

Stephanie opens her eyes. She knows exactly where she is. In the underworld. A stupid near-sighted man kidnapped her. And her mother would not be looking for her. Stephanie is on her own. Persephone is safe. Little Persy. Little Sephy. Seph-seph. Should

have sent her downstream when she was a baby. Stephanie was a cute, precocious child, but Persephone was magnetic! Her eyes sparkled like sapphires, her hair shone like gold and her ears were tiny seashells and...oh! Stephanie loved her sister so much! Baby Persephone smelled like cinnamon cookies and her laugh filled everyone with intense, pure joy. She was magic. Stephanie was glad she was here and not Persephone. Persephone wouldn't last ten minutes here, let alone a lifetime.

Stephanie reaches into her pants and pulls out a scab-dried panty liner. There is rusty dust coming out of her now. She swears if she sneezes hard enough her fallopian tubes, uterus, and ovaries will poof out of her like the dust of a puffball mushroom. Steph sits up and crosses her legs. *Not yet. I'm not turning to dust yet.* Yesterday she was mid-cycle, craving crispy egg rolls. Her moon had become erratic of late though, coming when it wanted to, staying too long, sometimes not coming at all. When she was young, Steph bled with the waxing and waning of the moon. She hadn't been herself for a few years, but she didn't tell anyone except the Old Crone who fed her milk thistle tea and a mix of white peony, saw palmetto, turmeric, nettles and mushrooms. Stephanie couldn't tell if these plants made a difference but with enough honey, they made a tasty tea. Stephanie couldn't tell her mother, who was still fertile at her age. Demeter was...200? 2,000? 2,000,000? She wouldn't tell. Stephanie pretended her moon cycles were regular. The cramps! The cravings! The pains! But now it's over. A heavy, heavy, heavy sigh, escapes Stephanie. My eggs. My untapped potential and tiny ladders of DNA. She and her sisters could reproduce without mates. Parthenogenesis. Dammit, why did she wait

so long to reproduce? Stephanie can't answer that question. And now it feels like another self is asking "why," a distant memory self who used to want children. Someone she used to be less than twenty-four hours ago.

"Stephanie?"

"What do you want, Mud Butt?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Am I hungry? What the fuck, dude? Yes. No. I don't know. Fuck off. Wait. Come back. Get away from me. Hold me. Uggghhh."

Hades nudges the door open with his foot. He holds a tray laden with apricot nectar, cactus juice, croissants, donuts, macaroons, jelly, jam, chutney, ham, egg and cheese bagel sandwiches, and whipped cream topped mochas.

"It's over, Hades. My reproductive system shut down."

"Well, that happens here."

"You knew?"

"From animals being here. Goats, dogs, and rats."

"What about Persephone? How could she have been your bride here and stayed fertile? I'm sure part of your plan was to have mud babies. Gross."

Hades gently lays down the tray and perches on the foot of the bed.

“I knew your mother. A long time ago.”

“Pardon me?” Sweat drips down Steph’s face. She tears off her sweatshirt and holds a cool glass to her forehead.

Hades drinks his mocha and smokes a clove and cicada cigar. “Let’s sit in the living room?”

“Sure,” says Stephanie and grabs a sandwich, stuffs it in her mouth, fills her pockets with macarons and follows Hades to the main room. She loves clothes with pockets.

“Demeter was my first love.”

“Are you my Daddy?” Stephanie jokes.

Hades smiles. “No. When Demeter visited long ago, she made it possible for a woman to stay fertile here if her cycles were perfectly synced with the moon and she sacrificed a rabbit on the first day of the new year for every year that she bled.” Hades eats a date stuffed with almond butter and dusted with dried, crushed ants.

“Fucking rabbits. That’s what that was about? No one told us!”

“Demeter also created a safe and blessed space. Right here.” Hades lifts a giant vermilion uterus-shaped glass vase, under which is a fresh spring from the River Styx. It even has tiny koi swimming in it.

“I should have told you to drink the water when you arrived. For omitting that, I am deeply sorry.”

“Raspberry lime soda,” Stephanie whispers.

Stephanie is angry. She feels duped. All those years doing the right thing—moon dances, and gagging down fetid mushrooms and scratchy cinnamon sticks. Sacrificing rabbits even though she was morally against it. And just because she’d lost touch with the moon she dried and crumbled like a dead daffodil?

“Demeter was probably trying to protect you.”

“From what?”

“From this.” Hades spreads his long arms and gestures to the cave. “Darling, Stephanie, Demeter never loved me back. She promised me a daughter.”

“That’s crazy, Mud Butt. Why would she do that?”

“She owed me her life. I saved her from a pack of giant wolves one winter equinox. I still don’t know why she was out. I felled them all with one swift swoop of my sword, made them into mincemeat, sliced them like—”

Stephanie watches Hades’ elaborate pantomime of felling the wolves and is overcome by a wave of nausea. His reenactment is balletic, which Stephanie finds both absurd and endearing on such a large being. Stephanie throws up. “I don’t feel good. And I fucking hate you, Hades. I hate you.”

Hades gazes at her kindly, which makes her furious.

Stephanie sits on her bed, sips some cactus juice and thinks about her fate.

Whatever happens, she is not spending the rest of her life underground. Even if her mother doesn't give a crap, she is getting out of here. How do I know I'm not dead? she thinks. "Hades?" Steph calls out, "am I dead?"

Hades is quiet.

Steph can't sleep and has taken to having a glass of warm apple wine before bed. A glass or three. She chews hemp leaves and licorice root, drifting in and out of dreams all night. Steph accepts the shadow people in her new black, white, and gray world. Their shadow puppet stories dance across the smooth mud walls. They are her stories. When she closes her eyes, Steph sees the kaleidoscope of above ground colors, vibrant blue water and sky, fiery flashes of sun, glowing green grass and leaves, the white of her sister's smile, the flow of her flaxen hair in the wind, the yellow crown of buttercups that shimmies as she dances and laughs.

Steph's heavy limbs are suffused with aches and pains. There is no relief. Her muscles are meat jerky. Her ovaries are dried figs, her fallopian tubes, rotten reeds, her uterus, a flattened seaweed bulb. The stiffness radiates from her womb to her limbs and

neck. Her brain is coated with a gray haze that she tries to shake away but cannot clear. As Stephanie searches for restful sleep, her brain conjures dark, ineffable images, and her legs kick frantically all night, running away so that she wakes up naked and drenched.

Time isn't the same. Without her cycle, there is no urgency. No frenzy. No depression. No ennui. Stephanie's moods become subtle. She has to listen carefully. She has to feel her body absorb the slings and arrows against it. Stephanie's legs ache and vibrate where the earth is trampled by animals. Her arms ache where the wind tears at up-stretched branches. Her head pounds as the leaves fall and pirouette through the air. Her temples boom when they touch the ground. Her body aches where the cold autumn rain pummels and rips at the ground. Her toes cramp with the first frost even though the rest of her body is on fire.

Stephanie and Hades become companions as the moons wax and wane. Hades can only observe Stephanie's transformation. He is sad as he always is. He is the bringer of death but he feels it is rebirth. Hades isn't scary after all. He is nothing but a host. Steph comes to know that the roots in the ceiling are shoots above ground. Hades tends to them, sings to them and encourages them to sprout upwards, towards the sun and the stars.

"You're not so different from Demeter," says Steph. And she pulls on a green onion root that resists and is yanked upwards from her hand.

Steph's glossy dark hair and black clothes shine like crow feathers. She is a vibrant supernova, fully self-contained and encompassing understanding.

"You're not so different from Persephone except your love, it turns inward and sustains you. Persephone spills out joy," says Hades.

"And you, Mud Butt. I don't think we can do this without each other."

Stephanie suddenly feels the seismic tremors of her mother's footsteps. She touches the ceiling and Demeter tumbles through the hole traced by Steph's fingertip. She and Persephone land on a soft pile of dirt.

They are quick to their feet. They hold each other, not daring to breathe.

"Hi, Mom. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?" Steph asks.

The dark, damp earth clings to Demeter and Persephone. Demeter cleans them both with one sweep of her arm. The other arm holds Persephone tightly.

"Hello, Stephanie. No, thank you."

"Ok. Not even a fresh fig or a glass of apricot nectar?" Stephanie smiles sweetly.

Demeter casts a disdainful look at her daughter.

"Nothing, thanks. I'm here for you, sweetie. Let's go."

Silence.

"Me?" Stephanie is filled with an unexpected rush of warmth. Or is it a hot flash?

“Yes, let’s go.”

Stephanie sits down on her mud bench. Since she’s been Mud Butt’s roomie, she’s carved friezes in the mud walls that frame stained-glass windows, created beautiful scenes from spider web floss rolled with saliva and sticky silkworm mucus and colored with fruit juice, snake skin, butterfly wings, and crushed insect pigment. The scenes surround the two visitors and two residents. Scenes of Steph’s life before, during, and after landing in Hades.

“Momma,” starts Steph, “I was the practical one but it turns out I’m not. I’m wild. An artist. A free spirit. Hades is too. He is responsible, after all, for all four seasons of the year. Frozen mud. Mud. Thawing mud. Fertile mud. Without the thawing of the mud there are no seeds, no sprouts, no dandelion puffs. No bulbs, no stalks, no ladybugs, no aphids, no whizzing dragonfly. No moisture, no rain, no heavy seed pods, no pollinating bees. No longing, no plants fertilized, no heavy-lidded looks, no red-stained lips, no quickened breath, no shivers from a breeze on the small of your back. No roses. No baby’s breath. No love.”

Demeter regards her daughter with intense eyes but is still as she listens.

“Since I died, I understand that it is because of the absence, the vacuum in nature, that there can be love, there can be growth, Mother,” says Steph. “I used to think it was all you. Just you. But there is another, darker side to you.”

Demeter intones, “You are the seed pod containing the last of the fluff-tufted seeds. You’re not dead. Your mind is fertile, spilling seeds of the present, the past, and the future. All of history. Stephanie, you encompass the beginning and the end. You must pass on your knowledge and the million stories unwinding from the floss of your DNA.”

The sisters lock eyes. They finally understand who they are. Stephanie will keep the family stories alive; Persephone will perpetuate the family’s genes. Steph is drenched with grief, heaviness, and a loss for which she has no words. Steph feels empty in her heart. Steph is her empty heart. Persephone is filled with six babies. Steph unconsciously reaches for Hades’ hand.

Demeter takes Stephanie’s hand and, still clutching a silent Persephone, attempts to rise into the hole left by their tumble into the underground. The weight of Hades pulls the women down. Demeter lets Stephanie’s fingers slip away. She and Persephone shoot out into the night sky. Cool air rushes in. Cool air rushes out. The hole closes. It’s as if they were never there.

Stephanie and Hades emerge from the earth many moons later. Warm, moss scented air radiates from them, warming the sun, slowing its descent, filling the sky with honey-thick floods of color. Aerosol clouds of gnats dance in the fading light. Stephanie and Hades stroll along the riverbank. The leaves underfoot are soft and cool. Hades’ feet

heat the ground. Petunia, phlox, mums, sage and verbena bloom under Stephanie's steps. Hades picks these flowers.

Demeter ripples the earth and translucent green shoots tickle Steph's feet as she and Hades walk.

"Hi, momma," whispers Steph.

Autumn is a regal tangle of garnet, plum, and gold leaves and over-lush roses. Autumn is the dramatic jewel-toned sunset streaking crimson, turnip pink, beet purple and deep sea urchin blue. Autumn is the smell of earth under damp fallen leaves. Autumn is life and it is death.

The sun descends and the world tilts to swallow the glowing orange-red orb. Steph and Hades watch in wonder. Her chest is warm. His chest is warm. The aches and pains and fears stop. Here they are, they simply are.

"It's pretty perfect, isn't it?" Hades says. Steph presses her hand on his upper arm that she holds.

"It is," she breathes. "It is."

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The New



Mythweavers:

Layering Female Archetypes in Myth Retellings

By Ruut M. DeMeo

In our world's patriarchal mythologies, the roles and destinies of female characters are usually determined in relation to their male counterparts. The virgin is a virgin because she has not yet been touched by a man. The witch is a witch because she is deemed unfit to serve in traditional family roles. The crone is a crone because losing her youthful glow has rendered her unattractive in the eyes of men. Even the female warrior, or Amazon, mimics male warriors or is often disguised as one, and her success is quantified according to traditional gains of warfare, such as power, instead of peace, for example.

Measuring female desires according to male perspective thins and oversimplifies them; any agency and possible heroism a woman might gain comes within the limitations of biological determinism, as long as she sexually “actualizes” or fulfills her procreative role. Such narrow depictions render female characters one-dimensional and lacking in natural, ever-evolving complexity, like in real life, where no woman lives out the characteristics of only one archetype in her lifetime. In actuality, inside the old wise woman is still the young maiden, the mother, and the warrior, for she has lived many lifetimes in one, and all her many perspectives are present in each moment of choice and dialogue.

By comparing a singular martyr archetype (Briseis in Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*) with a re-imagined, multi-dimensional maiden/mother/monster archetype (Grendel’s Mother in *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley), we will discover the importance of layering multiple female archetypes in modern mythology retellings through speculation and language mastery, and see how such multi-layered mythology creates a collective consciousness that’s no longer bound by patriarchy and male-centered monotheism, but rather connects us with ancient goddess worship, which was the original rich soil of oral storytelling.

The Patriarchy and the Origins of Female Archetypes

According to psychoanalyst Carl Jung and mythologist Joseph Campbell, archetypes are the portals that harken the modern mind back to an ancient collective

consciousness. Identifying archetypes in mythology—even if just subconsciously—helps readers see themselves and learn the “lessons” in stories, which attributes to our personal growth as well as to the forming of a societal psyche. But even Campbell acknowledges two foundational and harmful truths: first, that our world’s mythology is patriarchal, and second, that mythology and religion are inseparable.

In his book, *The Power of Myth*, he says that male-oriented mythologies became dominant when “the Semitic people were invading the world of the Mother Goddess systems,” rendering the Mother Goddess a “sort of Grandmother Goddess” (Campbell 170). This analysis probes at how differently might mythology have turned out, had the Goddess religion remained the prominent worldview.

In evaluating female archetypes, the mythologist faces much stereotyping in past theories. The major theories of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, for instance, and even some prominent female theorists, rely on a common understanding of the “roles” that women fulfill in society, and should therefore serve in storytelling. The problem with approaching mythology analysis with these presupposed societal roles is that this type of analysis doesn’t question the foundations of mythology itself as a means for the spread of patriarchy. Even Joseph Campbell agrees that there is a clear moment in history when the archetypes are greatly influenced by socially predetermined roles; he says that when the “male-oriented myth takes over... [the male god] becomes—apparently—the creator”

(Campbell 170). It can be concluded, therefore, that mythology and social structures feed and influence each other.

In his bold writings, Leonard Shlain defends the argument that misogyny and patriarchy took root when culture, writing, and religious expression became tools of political control. In his book, *Sex, Time, and Power*, Shlain claims that the development of writing was the key historical event that “changed the sex of God” from female to male, as there is ample evidence of ancient Goddess worshipping peoples in many parts of the world prior to that point (367). Prior to the birth of writing, the prevalent transfer of stories from generation to generation was oral storytelling in the forms of poetry singing and recitation, which were also signature elements of Goddess religions. Robert Graves identified this kind of oral poetry as a “magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honor of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age” (Graves 6).

Due to how it developed, Western patriarchal mythology played a role in diminishing women’s roles in society into simple stereotypes that serve to support male heroism. Although female characters have been made more complex in some modern retellings, their societal roles still remain the same: the witch may be more complex, but she remains an outcast due to her failure to comply, while the queen—although she may express frustration, or even act heroically—remains in power because of how she adheres

to the patriarchal hierarchies. Both archetypes fulfill the roles that the patriarchal system has assigned to them.

In the quest for more complex female archetypes in storytelling, an examination of “virtuous women”—such as the virgin archetype—is valuable, as religious ideologies are closely tied to how all female archetypes have developed over time. Campbell says that “all the motifs and themes [in mythology] were controlled by males—priests, bishops—who excluded women” (Campbell 171). And according to Shlain, “Literate information, the written word, was elevated to an exalted position until it congealed into dogma” (368).

Female archetypes originated in religious contexts, where their roles were evaluated according to their usefulness within the patriarchy. When seen through a religious lens, the virgin’s function was (and continues to be) legitimized by her patriarchal role as the Mother of God himself. The Virgin Mary provided the foundation for the “virgin mother,” which is another archetype (and further, a stereotype) that has shaped culture. Within religious spheres, the de-sexualization of mothers is rampant, as if they are no longer sexually motivated individuals who harbor desire outside of procreation. But just because a woman has given birth doesn’t mean she doesn’t experience lust. Quite the opposite is true. However, a highly sexualized mother is unnecessary in the realm of the patriarchy. If she is beyond child-bearing years, any overt sexual expression devalues her. According to patriarchal hierarchy, if women who

adhere to their duties of procreating and nurturing male-led families are elevated in society, then the position of women who defy the same structures is automatically lowered.

The development of archetypes in Greek mythology occurred alongside oral storytelling traditions, and when writing became prominent through patriarchal religions and empires, few female writers rose to prominence. In one of her few remaining and elusive poems, Sappho, the archaic Greek female poet from the Isle of Lesbos, asked an essential question: *Do I still yearn for my virginity?* (Carson 107). Most of her writings were lost and we do not know the context of her poem, but the question in it harkens an ancient truth. Did Sappho escape to Lesbos—an island paradise meant only for women—to think clearly, to live out a purpose outside of her role in a male-led society? Indeed, the virgin's moral purity has no meaning in a world where her value is not measured according to her sexual validity.

Scribes who captured ancient oral stories on parchment were required to speculate, for the simple reason that they were writing things down for the first time. This begs the questions: To what extent was writing clouded by political and religious agendas? Had women been allowed to write their own versions, would they have also minimized their own participation in heroic tales? If women were the way they are now, they must have juggled multiple identities at once, worked for the good of their tribes' survival, experimented with gender and sexuality, and thought deeply about their own

happiness and desires. But these elements are overlooked in most written myths, and female archetypes developed without any such “human layers.”

Furthermore, whatever dark or undefinable experiences a woman had was deemed as witchcraft. Frelick’s essay on “Woman as Other” proposes that it is a function of the patriarchy to vilify that which it finds mysterious, and othering and defaming the thing it fears or does not understand. She says that the deliberate emphasis of “grotesque figures of fascination” in misogynous texts “suggests a fear of death and disease” (Frelick 289). The witch holocaust that killed over nine million women in Europe and America over 1500-1700 is proof that men fear what they do not understand (Frelick 290).

The fallacy is that by focusing on the “effect of women’s monstrosity,” the patriarchy has circularly been able to prove that monstrosity exists. The way Grendel’s mother is depicted in the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* reveals more about how the patriarchy projected a definition onto her, rather than how she might have revealed herself to the world. Scholars conclude that outcast women were “regarded as dangerous by the good men of Anglo-Saxon England, because they were suspected of possessing dark powers not so readily tapped by the masculine genius” (Morgan 56).

Another apt example of mythology through misogynistic perspectives is the written Biblical creation myth. Vanessa Rousseau explains that in the origin myth of humanity, Lilith was Adam’s wife before Eve entered the picture. It was useful for the Hebrew male leadership to depict Lilith as “a dark mother, a woman who rejects

motherhood as her biological destiny” because the patriarchy has no use for a woman who enjoys sex without allowing herself to be penetrated by men (Rousseau, 98). It is easier to condemn her as a witch than to allow her to enjoy and discover herself without male fulfillment, and this is why Rousseau suggests that as a result of this persistent ideology, we now accept Eve as the true mother, and the first woman, because she did accept her biological role. But the mere existence of a woman like Lilith—as demonized as she may be by male-centered monotheism—points to the reality that women’s identities have been projected onto them, rather than defined and experienced by women themselves.

Women, Oversimplified

Some decades ago, Maureen Murdock attempted to redefine the archetypal “female hero,” especially in light of what role she plays in society. But her book, *The Heroine’s Journey*, fell short of including multiple women’s perspectives by over-simplifying the definition of a woman. In her eyes a woman is born female, expressing feminine gender, with female genitalia, and the core of her struggles stems from some kind of relationship to mothers or motherhood, an assumption that—despite its seemingly feminist exploration—still supports the patriarchy. It is a narrow assumption that every woman’s heroic journey involves setting herself free of the mother archetype, for each human’s connection with mothers, and parents, varies greatly according to their personal identities and experiences.

Is it possible for myth re-tellers, or “mythweavers,” to know what women’s true desires are apart from how they fulfill their biological roles? Also, where is the exploration of asexuality and non-binary gender, both of which are expressions of women in the real world, but serve no benefit to the patriarchy?

In order for a woman to be seen as human first, she must be allowed to define herself completely, and that includes her gender and sexuality. The LGBTQIA+ movement creates the possibility for everyone’s sexual liberation, even that of cis-gendered women, because it allows people to question the rigid lines around binary gender expression. The way women are perceived and how women perceive themselves are intertwined, and for now, cannot be separated. But in order for attitudes and consciousness to change, the archetypes must first be redefined, for indeed, one feeds the other.

In *Heroine’s Journey*, Maureen Murdock proposed one kind of a journey: separating from the mother. But this is just one possible arc. What is needed is allowing female characters to function as full humans, which means they must first be allowed to operate outside of sexual fulfillment. This alone requires including the asexual parts of their personalities, and viewing all their attributes as intrinsically neither feminine or masculine, but simply human. Another unwitting benefit of redefining the archetypes is that male and non-gendered characters will inadvertently be made more complex as well.

Female Archetypes led to Female Stereotypes

If archetypes are indeed a portal to the collective consciousness, mythweavers should not only give archetypal myths a new “spin,” but also realize that the purpose in undertaking such a retelling is to stop relying on stereotypes. Merriam Webster defines a stereotype as *an oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing*. Each stereotyped character is almost like a statue made from a casting, instead of an individually formed unique sculpture with its own special curves, imprints, and imperfections, every groove and wrinkle and line telling its own story of where that person has been.

An extremely harmful aspect of female stereotyping is biological determinism, which is the idea that a person’s role is determined by their sexual or biological service to society. Biological determinism has been established by patriarchal and religious laws, such as the criminalizing of abortion. Without the choice of whether or not she will bear children, woman’s assumed destiny becomes childbearing, which leads to the idea of Virgin Mary being the “ultimate woman.” The strongest argument for challenging archetypes in myth may ultimately be this: mythology is not only the evidence of patriarchy, but the backbone of it. Mythology has shaped the collective consciousness and gives social definition to the “nature” aspect of the human psyche. For example, when a woman births a child, it’s assumed that she instinctively knows how to nurture that baby.

Holding onto simple archetypes can lead to stereotyping, and Pat Barker's *Silence of the Girls* is an example of this. The book's title offers tantalizing possibilities; a reader may pick up the Greek myth retelling in hopes of finally finding out what the elusive women of Troy experienced. But none of the tropes re-examined in some new way, and the narrative does not even challenge the essential need for war. Instead, Achilles, who is the traditional male hero of these myths, makes his appearance on page one and remains the focal character until the end. The author could have unearthed some secrets, lusts, and experiences that might have caused the enslaved woman of Troy to discuss something other than how their masters liked to be served in the bedroom. But that is all Barker offers.

What's even more disappointing is that among the group of chatting women, there were tropes. Barker leaned heavily on our common, unquestioned understanding of the seductress, the virgin/maiden, and the goddess/monster tropes. Instead of layering onto these women, she gave shallow overviews of their lives, and only explained their personalities enough to show how they served to enable and reward the competition of masculinity among the Greek men. It seems that for these silent girls, there wasn't even the yearning to speak.

When it comes to female archetypes, retelling a myth gives an author the chance to question and ultimately dismantle biological determinism. Without such questioning and dismantling, the female character remains the other (opposite of the male) onto

whom “reality is projected” (Frelick 297). Biological determinism makes it impossible for a woman to imagine, let alone actually be, simply human, the same way that men have been allowed to be. Instead of giving this self-generated reality to Briseis, Barker gives Achilles the agency he’s always had, and a deeper understanding of his sexuality, instead of her own. Barker’s Briseis doesn’t learn or experience anything profound, even when she is fondled by Achilles, who can only touch a woman when he imagines her to be his own mother. What a rich opportunity for exploring a multi-layered female experience, but Briseis’ confusion and suffering becomes another spotlight on Achilles’ homosexuality, (which has already been handled beautifully by Madeline Miller in *The Song of Achilles*). Barker’s Briseis does nothing but fear for her life and it is her fear that directs her mostly predictable choices; even when given the chance to escape, she remains at Achilles’ side and bears him a child. Just as in all traditional, male-oriented myths, Achilles continue making choices based on “abstract” concepts, like wills, desires, and achievements that are separate from biological determinism.

As writers embark on creating a new canon of mythological interpretations, they must challenge the archetypes of female characters through a nuanced art-form that goes much deeper than simply giving women agency in any particular story. While giving female characters the ability to make choices does demonstrate agency, giving them complex and often contradictory *reasons* for making those choices is much more of a manifestation of heroism and self-actualization. In other words, for retold mythology to be truly egalitarian, the archetypes within women must be layered; a female arc must

not only journey through the different phases of womanhood, but layer on every one of those experiences, like an unending amalgamation that never seems to run out of possible outcomes. A woman's journey could lead just about anywhere. Retellings that allow female characters to evolve outside of biological determinism are rare, but fortunately, this new tradition has begun to bloom.

A Successful Layering of Female Archetypes

There do exist myth retellings that bring the female archetypes into the modern sphere. One such retelling is *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley, who reimagined the old Anglo-Saxon epic myth, *Beowulf*, featuring the “monster/mother” archetype. Grendel's mother is a quintessential “other,” an outcast and the enemy of the dominant (white) race. As the main antagonist in the story, she pushes the white hero, Beowulf, to rise above his own limitations and fulfill his heroic destiny.

As all female archetypes traditionally do, the mother-monster completes the hero, and although she is harrowing, her fierceness serves one purpose only: to embody the hero's darkest fears which the male hero must overcome. The original is, therefore, a flat and weak archetype, leaving little to no possibility for new outcomes for the female character. The plot of the original myth leads to an expected end like a funnel, and the tropes have been used for centuries to coax human minds to automatically root for Beowulf.

But in Headley's re-imagining, Grendel's nameless mother receives a name, a complete backstory, and much, much more. Her character also requires two women to complete; the novel splits into two female narrators, both of whom represent the "monstrous" woman. One of the voices is that of Willa Herot, wife to the developer and owner of the affluent Herot Hall community. The other is Dana Mills, an ex-soldier with PTSD, who hides in the mountains beyond the gated community. The two women are connected as their sons—against all odds— become friends and lovers. Headley seemed to instinctively know that it would require both of these women's narratives to flip the archetype of monster on its head, by recreating Grendel in layers. As the monster-mother is made up of two women's voices, their two little boys cross the invisible boundary between worlds and become joined through a powerful attraction to one another. Traditional gender and class expectations in the gated community drive these two boys to suffer and ultimately die for their love, which is absolutely a demonstration of monstrosity in a new light. Headley's new monster is the culture of oppression, established by the patriarchy that requires absolute compliance.

The Beowulf character is represented by a cop named Ben Woolf, whose heroism is a mere side note in this re-imagining, least of all its focus. Beowulf simply serves his role, which is to push the female characters to actualize themselves, by causing them to layer on their many identities and experiences. Headley allows Dana Mills/Willa Herot to unfurl like an intricate composite of ideologies and emotions, giving them as much room as necessary on the page. The author lets readers stay awhile as her female characters'

inner lives are splayed out, page after page, and succeeds in complicating the female archetype of monster-mother, because she permits experimentation without limit.

Not only are the women's choices the central engine of the plot, but these choices are wrought with complex intentions and emotions, making readers constantly ask themselves, "What would I do, if I were in her situation?" It's the type of wild re-imagining that not only challenges our ingrained patriarchal views and attitudes, but it sets up those ideologies to fail.

Headley also complicates the virgin archetype, as she starts her novel in medias res, when Dana Mills finds herself at the brink of giving birth, somewhere in the Middle Eastern country where she's been in combat as a soldier in the US army. Our heroine is weak and prone to hallucinations, and soon realizes that she'd been buried alive in the desert. She's visited by a saint who speaks to her about death and sainthood, almost as if to prepare her for what's to come. This is how Headley layers the virgin archetype onto a mythical character who has only been seen as the monster-mother.

But Headley's virgin archetype does not play out like a stereotype. For the majority of the novel, Dana has no memory of how she got pregnant, so the reader concludes that Dana was raped, or at the very least impregnated, by the enemy, and therefore her child will carry the mark of the enemy. Dana returns to the fractured system that fails our veterans, and opts to live in the outskirts of society, in the woods

surrounding her ancestors' long-forgotten graves, and there she raises her monstrous son, although it's unclear what makes him monstrous.

In a way, the fact of their unplanned pregnancies is what deems both the Virgin Mary and Dana Mills vessels of the patriarchy. Their bodies become holy carriers of life, and this function predetermines and solidifies their entry into sainthood, which in turn justifies the fact that their bodies have been sacrificed to undesired and unplanned motherhood. Just as religious writers did with the Virgin Mary, Headley portrays her female character as saintly because she yields to unwanted motherhood. But Headley complicates the metaphor by using that same sainthood as grounds for the merciless destruction of privileged male destinies. The female saint, who visits Dana through visions and has an 'eternal flame' burning visibly inside her chest, tells Dana (who is hiding in the mountain and recovering from a gunshot wound):

"Sharpen your knives," the saint says. "Kill them all."

"I thought saints didn't kill people," I say, and she laughs, the candle in her chest flickering.

"Some of us killed hundreds, and others got killed."

"Why are you with me?"

"I'm not with you," she tells me. "I'm just your hurt walking." (237)

This admission shows Headley layering yet another archetype. Besides being a monster, mother, and virgin/saint, Dana is also the martyr; the saint who visits her in visions is actually *her*. A woman who carries so many identities can do nothing else but to destroy the system that shaped her and rendered her powerless, or in other words, to go down in flames, thus the flaming center of her "hurt." The martyr archetype, traditionally, is seen

as powerless, as someone who willingly gives up her agency, for the benefit of the patriarchy.

In Headley's retelling, the martyr's flame has dual meaning. Not only does it represent self-destruction, but it stands for empathy as well, almost as if to say that a woman with so many layers is capable of the ultimate empathy in life. In the following page, Headley finally shows through a flashback how Dana got pregnant after the war. The child was born out of love after all. And when an American general accused her of "empathizing with the enemy," she replied, "Who are you if you don't?" which is the ultimate anti-war sentiment, and the complete opposite of the patriarchal agenda (Headley 238). Moments later, on the same page, the author shows us how Dana—like Mary, Mother of Jesus—justifies her son's existence and suffering to expose the world's injustices,

"You should've killed me when I was born!" says Gren. "You made me think I was a monster... But I'm not a monster."

My son stands before me looking like a boy. Out there, I know it, I know it, my son running down a street would be my son confessing to a crime. My son shouting would be my son attacking. My son sleeping would be my son addicted. My son in love with the boy from down there would be my son hanging from a tree. (238)

And indeed, like Jesus, Dana's son fulfills the mother's prophesy. She has birthed a son to shed light on the real monster: the system that has made her and her son into outcasts.

Literary scholars have proposed that the purpose of feminist mythology retellings may primarily be to reveal the harmful effects of the patriarchy. That seems to certainly be the case with Headley's courageous attempt. Bonvillain suggests that "Ultimately, *The Mere Wife* reveals the patriarchy as a monstrous system, which forces female bodies to obey certain standards and restrictions for the benefit of men, the community, and the reproduction of the patriarchal system" (Bonvillain 8). In other words, the two-headed female archetype is no longer the monster. Rather, the monster of this story is the unforgiving world in which they are forced to survive and make enemies of other women.

Layering Female Archetypes through Imagination and Goddess Religion

Once the desire exists to rid our minds of old mythologies and outdated definitions of female archetypes, the psyche can be remade through thoughtfully constructed, defiant storytelling that begins with female desire and complexity. Headley does this successfully in *The Mere Wife* by creating a dual protagonist with two opposing sides. Dana's blonde counterpart is a suburban housewife, who—after a night of drinking and drugs—returns home and mistakes her own son for the wild boy in the mountain, and consequently kills him with a knife. Headley's imaginative take on a mother's murder is presented in Willa's drugged voice:

Monster slayer; people will whisper.

She feels her body turning to metal, away from the marble and the onyx she was. Maybe she's lost wax, a soft sculpture melted away in the forge, replaced by bronze.

Once upon a time, Willa thinks. She was rescued from this. On her finger is a diamond ring. On her skin is a name written in shining scar. It's not even her own name... She stretches and examines her nails. Her manicure is messy. It'll have to be redone. She squints at it, holding her hand closer to her face, but she can't focus. (Headley 263)

A layered female character will certainly shock readers, and be allowed to do what male characters have done for eons. As female characters become more complex through imagination, ascribing things like the desire for power and acts of violence to them will eventually lose their unsettling effect. Just like our existing mythologies have shaped our minds, so our minds can be reshaped by new mythologies, and in order for this transfer to occur, authors must exhibit a certain fearlessness and reject the programmed reflex to characterize women as tame. In fact, re-imagining women demands wildness.

Carine Plancke's recent exploration of re-creating female power can prove useful for authors who commence layering onto female archetypes. She calls this practice "a return to wildness," which ultimately leads the woman to creating a new reality for herself through "the imagined becoming real" and through "being overtaken by what we imagine" (Plancke 10). Plancke's paper focuses on tantric and shamanistic rituals that are

controversial in that they practice exoticism, or cultural appropriation. Indeed, cultures that have not been touched by the patriarchy as strongly, can give us insight to the true female experience, as they have deep roots in goddess worship and matriarchal tribal structure. But this practice of “returning to the wild” establishes the importance of re-imagining mythologies for the sake of giving women an ability to imagine themselves as what they might once have been. According to Plancke, dozens of modern women who have undergone this practice have experienced profound changes in their lives; it’s as if the true definitions of female archetypes exist deep within our psyches, but we must revisit ancient shamanistic rituals and cultures in order to access them. Plancke defends these methods as not being “cognitive imperialism,” but rather as appropriate, useful, and beneficial, because of how the practices quickly become part of a woman’s own psyche (24).

It is every woman’s ability to “absorb” the archetypes into the psyche that makes them universal and ancient, rather than borrowed from some unknown culture. In fact, through these tantric exercises of letting the imagination grow, Plancke proposes that “When fully embodying images of primitive alterity, the neat division between self and other becomes blurred” (25). Perhaps the key to layering the archetypes, therefore, is the opposite of how the patriarchy has deemed the feminine as “other.” A blurring of genders and an erasing of biological destinies may be exactly what’s needed. There is rich soil for further investigation of these methods in reimagining archetypes, and

“mythweavers” are in the perfect position to make use of them. For who else has better use for the imagination than the writer?

The mythologist, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, has written extensively about the wild woman archetype, making the claim that she is a portal to all the other archetypes. The researcher concludes that the reason archetypes profoundly affect the human brain depends on the Jungian idea of “participation mystique,” a term used to describe a human mind’s innate ability to “step away from its ego for a time and merge with another reality, that is, another way of comprehending, a different way of understanding” (Pinkola Estés 418). This phenomenon is truly the reason why patriarchal ideology has been able to take root through storytelling, and now it is in the hands of the feminist and progressive mythweaver to make societal attitudes more egalitarian.

Layering Female Archetypes through Language Mastery

As a result of “archetype layering,” women’s stories need not to be defended or changed, but only revealed in greater detail; the answer to this layering is found within the minds of women and female characters who already possess desires and traits that exist outside the biological fulfillment established by the patriarchy. As long as a female character is layered and given room on the page to reveal her deepest longings and ideas, she will inadvertently challenge social norms simply by her mere existence. Headley’s mastery of language allowed her to bring *Beowulf* into a new focus within the modern

world, for the modern reader. By strategically using current language, she produced a new theme that surpasses the original: *a mother's suffering and martyrdom has purpose when it exposes the system that created a monster out of her son*. In order for Headley to expose the social structures that “create monsters” out of innocent people, she had to appeal to the readers’ common understanding of such structures. In other words, mythweavers must unquestionably use their myths to challenge incongruous aspects of culture, like gender expectations, anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, and the hatred of women.

A re-imagined female character’s gender must also be opened to more than binary possibilities, and for such exploration, a writer might ask, *What would my character’s gender look like, if they had no biological fulfillments?* A de-gendering of the archetypes benefits all people who have previously not been understood, including men, who are also certainly more varied in gender than the patriarchy allows them to express.

But ultimately, what must be done away with is the “duality” of the genders. Egalitarian language must override the rigid boundaries created by our dualistic culture through allowing opposing forces to coexist in one character. The mother must be allowed to remain a virgin. The crone must be seen as the maiden. The martyr can also be a warrior. And so on. A fully realized female character will contain the tension of opposing forces. She must challenge the roles of women as defined in connection to men.

Opening the gender expression of archetypes will connect people to images that resonate with our prehistoric, non-biologically determined selves. Before the existence of societal hierarchies, storytelling provided a deeper purpose than the bolstering of roles; it was a way to explain mystical occurrences in ways that all humans understood. Animal symbols, natural cycles, and celestial features all carried meaning of the human experience. A new mythology should reach back for that simplicity, but also gender-bend and take advantage of new ideas, information, and experiences that have been brought out into the open in the past few decades through the women's liberation movement and the LGBTQIA+ community's fight for rights. Identities, such as asexual and homosexual, should be examined as aspects of all people, because only then can the biological determinism of the genders be removed, and human desire be isolated as purely human, rather than belonging to specific genders. Even if this kind of shift occurs in the speculative realm for now, it still moves culture toward egalitarian progress.

Layering Female Archetypes through Speculation

Speculative fiction is the modern craft equivalent of mythology, which grounds the reader in familiar, easily absorbable surroundings, through which the unknowable is made known. The uniquely layered approach Headley takes in revealing the mother-monster character in *The Mere Wife*—by bringing forth her voice by way of two female characters, and layering her as a saint, virgin, and martyr—allows the language to carry the heavy lifting of the shift in the reader's consciousness. For example, Headley

uses the burning flame, which is a mundane image, as a portal for the reader's imagination by placing it in the saint's chest. Anchoring new ideas and identities in existing sensory details and cultural references is truly the method by which the speculative writer brings the imagined into the realm of the real.

Margaret Atwood's feminist poetry provides us with masterful examples of this kind of speculative expansion through the use of mundane language, through which she examines the mythological archetypes of women as posed by the patriarchy. Christine Keating proposes that with her words, Atwood is able to create "a fantastical space that lives in the imagination" and a "borderline setting [where] the landscape shifts as layers of the past and present human history form a moving, multi-layered palimpsest" (Keating 490). The most important part of this analysis is the use of the palimpsest, which Merriam Webster defines as *something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form*. Indeed, familiar words can be used to create new images in the readers' mind, as long as readers are able to cling to an existing image first.

Speculative fiction is a new way of informing the world with mythology, because it serves to make sense of things that make no sense. Speculative fiction also relies on intuition, making an impossibility "feel right" by way of appealing to culturally accepted emotional connections; for example, an animal with fangs causes us to panic and want to flee, and a writer can use this entry-point to evoke the feeling, then lead the reader to an unknown or repressed idea.

Mythweavers can rely on innovative uses of language—memory, imagined scenarios, recounting past experiences, running dialogue, or dreams—to persuade readers through emotional connection and multiple sensory connections, which can be achieved through more ways than traditional narrative. For mythweavers, the novel use of human identity, language, and symbolism are not just encouraged; they are essential.

Conclusion

The patriarchal influence on consciousness and myth has polarized and simplified female archetypes, making monsters and witches out of the women who defy traditional gender roles and biological fulfillments. In essence, women's reality has been projected onto them, instead of risen out of them authentically. Modern mythweavers, therefore, hold the power in their hands to re-imagine genderless experiences for human archetypes—which are neither male nor female—by opening multiple possibilities and outcomes for heroes, characters, and their roles.

Studying old myths offers us a starting point, or the palimpsest, on which we must write our new myths. They reflect back and harken to the missing pages of Sappho's poetry, and the lost millennia of the goddess's presence on earth; the reflective act of examining the past makes speculation of the future ring truer. Female archetypes were defined and deemed monsters and virgins and seductresses through a singular patriarchal lens, and now, we must look at them again.

As more and more research and archeological finds emerge to support the once-prevalent ancient goddess religions, mythweavers can look to them for clues as to how ancient woman originally saw herself, and how she was seen by her tribe. If it's true that the lunar calendar was developed as a result of an ancient artifact counting a woman's monthly cycle, for example, what else might writers glean from speculating on the psyche of the pre-patriarchal woman (Shlain 182)? Mythweaving is indeed an opportunity for the re-emergence of planet earth's first religion, the worship of Mother Earth, and the unique ideologies that have been tragically lost since its dismantling.

Writers must imagine lives from new perspectives. A retold myth either bolsters existing stereotypes or re-imagines character experiences outside of them. Writers like Headley use their imaginations to apply speculative imagery to culturally understood identities. By using familiar language as a portal, and layering onto existing archetypes, mythweavers can create new versions of old stories that will shift our collective consciousness for the better.



Lilith by John Collier, 1887



Eve by Lucas Cranach, 1553

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As a renaissance woman herself, all of Ruut's creative work speaks to the layers of women, especially her latest fiction: a retelling of the epic Finnish myth, *The Kalevala*. Ruut currently teaches English in a public middle school in Baltimore and is earning her MFA from Antioch University.

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