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# TEMPE COMMUNITY WRITING CONTEST 2018

## Honorable Mentions

Co-Sponsored by Tempe Public Library and ASU



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# *Eastbound*

Amy Scoville-Weaver

· ADULT FICTION ·

She chose the yellow Studebaker. The choice thrilled the auto dealer, who had received a dozen or so from the manufacturer last February, but had only sold three. To her, the woman buying it, the model didn't matter. She chose the car because of the color. Also, she could pay for it in cash.

It was the color that suited her.

Yellow was cheery. Yellow was sunshine and flowers, the fabric of the apron she wore in the kitchen and the hue of the paper cupcake liners she bought the week before to make a dozen cupcakes for her husband's office. So, yes. It was a deliberate choosing of yellow. The yellow car, it had to be. The one with air-conditioning.

The man at the dealership didn't ask much, although he must have wondered about the woman car shopping alone early on a Tuesday, wearing a sweater so inappropriate for July, carrying only a shoulder purse and what appeared to be a sort of box, wrapped in a white cloth and tucked under her arm. But, he was behind on his sales quota. So, he didn't question.

That was a good thing. She wasn't sure of her ability to lie. She worried that he might stop her and kept an eye on him in the rearview mirror as she eased away, watching until he turned and walked back into the office. That relief, that she had gotten away with it, that it had been simple really, increased as she drove north past the drugstores and florists and newly erected tract homes, finally merging onto the gray interstate taking her from Phoenix. A shoebox that once held a pair of patent leather pumps balanced on the blue leather of the passenger seat.

The windows were up. The air conditioning unit was weaker than she wanted, but blew cold. She'd removed her sweater the moment she left the dealership and it lay in a wad in the backseat. Even so, warm sweat pooled in the cups of her brassiere and in the soft flesh behind her knees. She turned all the vents to the passenger seat and accelerated to fifty, passing a logging truck ahead of her. She was eager to be free of the desert. She'd hated it when she first saw it and she'd kept hating it, although her husband insisted that would change.

The sun grew stronger as the morning aged, shards of it slicing through the windshield and across the highway. Countless saguaros dotted the landscape. She imagined any other driver would have found the scene beautiful. Early on, when she'd first come, she'd looked up the name of the cactus at the library. She needed to learn how to pronounce it and didn't want to ask for

help. She read that the name – pronounced *suh-gwahr-oh* – derived from an extinct language. She'd learned that an entire people had lived in the area, but that they were long gone, leaving only broken pottery and dry canals. The saguaros seemed to watch her now, turning as she drove past them, tall figures with their arms positioned rigid and perpendicular to their bodies, as if motioning her to stop.

A faint notion, crumpled in the back of her mind, whispered that maybe she was a little crazy. The doctor had warned her of it, said that women in her position often become hysterical. It was normal, he insisted — hysteria. He'd even prescribed pills, which she kept wrapped in a small tissue in her purse.

“It's perfectly normal, Wilma dear. The hormones and the shock. Get back to your routine, and you'll forget all about it.”

Those had been his words, spoken with confidence even as he turned away from her.

Wilma didn't turn on the radio. She didn't hum. Her husband had always told her she could stand the quiet better than anyone he knew. He loved music — had an eight-track player installed in his car and the radio on whenever he was home. Jerry Lee Louis. Perry Como. Gene Autry. He loved them all. The moment he left for work, she turned it off, craving silence, sick to death of notes and words and the slow hum of traffic outside her window. It wasn't that she loved the quiet, especially. It was that she missed the noise she knew.

“Everything will settle just fine.”

That was her mother, reminiscent of the doctor's words now that she thought of it, yet spoken four days before going to the hospital.

“Mama, I want to come home,” she'd said, speaking loud against the crackle of the line competing with the whine of her new Maytag. “I don't want to have it here.”

But, she did. Wilma had the baby on a day so bright that even after the nurse closed the blinds, the light shone through them all the same — scalding and white. Her husband hadn't been there, stuck at a business meeting in Tempe, so by the time he did receive the call that she had been admitted and to come right away, it was too late and the baby was born.

The desert changed as she climbed north, the tall cactus replaced by low-lying shrubs and clusters of rock. Shifting her hands over the wheel, Wilma jerked when the gasoline light on the dashboard illuminated. She felt a momentary panic, banked when she saw a sign for a service station only a mile ahead, just shy of Holbrook.

She crept into the service station, nodding at the red-faced attendant who leaned against the tired wood of the station, one leg propped up behind him so, at first glance, it looked like he only had one to begin with. Hers was the only car, but more were parked at the adjoining café. Wilma parked in front of the gas pump, reached back and grabbed her sweater, tugging it over her head where it bunched in fists around her waist. Cupping the shoebox in her hands, she tucked it under her right arm and slipped out, asking the gas attendant where a payphone was. He pointed without words and, after paying him for the fill-up, followed his direction to a metal phone booth

tucked on the side of the garage. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a nickel and inserted it into the slot. She hesitated a moment before dialing. The line rang twice.

“Hello?”

Her husband’s voice came clear through the receiver. She swallowed before saying his name.

“Wilma? Are you there? Where are you?”

“I’m here. I’m...I’m safe.”

She heard his breath expel into the phone receiver, could imagine him sighing and rubbing the bridge of his nose with his index finger and thumb.

“What the hell? Where...Where...I’ve been worried sick. They called me, said you’d left. I was only gone an hour, I was coming back. Where...”

“I’ll be home in a couple of days. I’m fine. I’m sorry.”

She slowly, but deliberately hung up the phone. Pulling her glove back on her right hand, she smoothed the fingers then lifted the box once again and cradled it. Stepping out of the phone booth, she wondered if her husband had alerted the authorities. She’d seen that in films and imagined red and blue lights flashing behind the car as she drove. She took a fast, shallow breath. It wasn’t illegal, what she’d done. She didn’t think so.

The booth door slapping behind her, she saw her car re-parked in front of the café. The sun was high in the sky now, but not as hot as it was in the city and she was grateful for it. Her shoes flattened the dry grass with a soft crunch and a cattail embedded itself in her stockings as she walked across the lot.

Hesitating in the doorway of the busy café, she surveyed the people occupying the counter-high stools and red booths.

“Coming in?”

Wilma nodded at the waitress calling from behind the soda fountain. Stepping forward, she could feel the other patrons’ eyes as she walked to the counter. Gripping the box tighter, she concentrated on the flickering *Coca Cola* sign behind the cash register until she reached the first bar stool.

“What would you like?”

The server squinted small eyes tucked behind turquoise-rimmed glasses.

“Coffee, please. And a bag of ice.”

“We charge for ice, here.”

“That’s fine.”

“We’ll have to give it to you in a paper cup. We don’t carry ice bags.”

“That’s fine.”

“Will take a few minutes, I got to go back and chisel it off.”

Alone again, Wilma looked right. A toddler stared at her from his own stool, his mouth open and red. His mother waved a forkful of cherry pie in front of him and he took it, the sauce

seeping from the corners of his lips even as he kept his eyes on Wilma.

Swallowing hard, she pivoted and walked to the end of the counter toward the sign marked *Restrooms*. The bathroom was small and painted an obnoxious pink. She peed, then removed her sweater, looking down to see that she had leaked through her bra. Taking a roll of paper towels, she folded some into a small pad and slipped them over her nipples. When she was done, the server stood at the counter with her coffee and cup of ice. Gulping the hot liquid as fast as she could, Wilma paid and left.

Returning to her car, she unwrapped the nightgown from the shoebox, opened it without looking and poured the ice inside. Settling into the driver's seat, she winced. Her breasts were painful now and she wanted to press her hands to them hard, but didn't. Instead, she distracted herself by reaching into her purse and removing a road atlas bought at the dealership, opening it over the steering wheel. She traced the solid line of the interstate with her finger as it veered up and right across the page.

And so, with nothing left to do, she drove.

The landscape changed in New Mexico, no longer red and rocky, but flat and beige as cream. She drove through the night, stopping for gasoline in Albuquerque and again at an all-night diner outside Amarillo, where a vacant-eyed server handed her a block of blue ice while his skinny hound snored under the counter. The sun rose again in Tulsa, where she was forced to squeeze milk from her breasts into a chipped restroom sink. It felt to Wilma on that last day of driving, that last day before home, that the world was gone and it was just her and the black face of the interstate peering up beneath the Studebaker's hood — as silent a companion as the shoebox, separated from her by two inches of air and soaked in the same amount of water.

She crossed into Missouri just before nightfall. Even with the windows up, she could feel a change in the air, a heavy gentleness lapping against the car that wasn't there before. She knew she should stop and sleep, but she kept pushing forward into the thick evening haze. She skirted the outskirts of Springfield and took a local highway south, until the pavement ended and turned to dirt. She drove until the gasoline tank was near empty and she was sure she wouldn't make it home until she finally did. Her mother, hearing the car creep into the drive, came out on the porch and Wilma let the engine die.

Together, they buried the box in the black earth behind the oak tree. They dug the hole and when they finished, Wilma rested her palm on the lid and kept it there until her mother grabbed her wrist and brought it up, just one small inch. And so she sat back and they smoothed the dirt over the top with their fingers, traces of soil embedding under their nails. The spot was marked only with a small, wooden cross, etched with a four-letter name and a date written in pencil ten minutes before.

Wilma stayed in Missouri for two days. She sat on her mother's couch and made soup in the pressure cooker bought last Christmas and shipped special. On the second day, she kissed her mother and gave her a crisp \$20 bill before rolling down the driver window and turning the car

west. The saguaros would be there, she knew, their still arms spread wide in greeting as she went back the way she came.

# *R.I.P. Simon M. Frias*

Claudia Estrada-Lara

· COLLEGE FICTION ·

I shouldn't have come. I shouldn't get my hopes up like this. I know my brother is dead. Nothing can bring him back. Sometimes I think I could have done something to prevent it, but everyone keeps telling me I couldn't have known.

The face my best friend Chelsea made when I told her is still fresh in my mind like glistening paint. *How did it happen?* She asked, and I told her. She exhaled in relief. *I thought you were being serious.*

I was being serious, but at the time I couldn't explain it to her. I couldn't explain to her that there were worse ways to kill a person besides ending their life. My brother's lungs still inhale and exhale. His heart still beats. His brain sends signals. But he is dead nonetheless. *NOT* dead to me, to be clear. *NOT* in a coma. Just dead. Gone.

Fuck. I'm crying in public. Whatever. Nobody will notice. They're all eager to get their morning coffee and get out. That's usually me Monday through Friday trying to make it to my first period before the students do. But it's the weekend. I'm not in a hurry. A part of me wishes I were. I'm early. Now I must wait. It's worse than that ride that takes you to the top very slowly, stops, then drops you down hard. The anticipation is the worst. The drop is over before it begins. Then you're safe, ready to get off. It's not going to be anything like that. I know what's going to happen here. I'm going to crash. This meeting with him is going to break me.

"Isabella!" The guy at the counter calls my name. He's probably been calling it for a while because he's tapping his fingers frantically and his eyes are zig-zagging the café. I grab the two cups of coffee, and my eyes meet his weary ones. My guess is he opened and he's not a morning person. His frustration melts into concern. I must look like a fucking mess.

Nobody understands. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only one who truly knew him.

...

*Seriously Bella?* He paced in front of me. *I thought you were better than this.*

*So. It's not a bad thing.* I say. *Everyone does it. You're going to tell me you don't drink?*

He exhaled through his nostrils loud enough to bore his disappointment into my eardrums; my skin crawled. He did this every time he talked down to me. His goofy grin disappeared

into an equally goofy frown. *There's a difference between drinking and getting blackout drunk. There's a difference between getting blackout drunk at a party full of strangers and drinking with people you know and trust.* His arms flayed around as he delivered his lecture.

I stayed quiet. I knew deep down he had a point. I knew I went overboard trying to forget about my breakup with Tristin. I knew I was probably lucky that my friend Emily was a prude and got me home safely. *Are you going to tell?*

He looked into my pleading eyes with hands on his hips. *No, just be more careful.*

I was too sick to go to the next party. My allergies had me bed-bound. When I was well enough to go back to school, Kyla told me in confidence that her cousin passed out and was raped at that party. Not just that, though; she was pregnant and had herpes. Not just that, but her parents kicked her out and she was staying with her aunt, Kyla's mom. I got home that day and hugged my brother. I hadn't hugged him since we were little kids. *Don't ask.* I told him, and he didn't.

...

I sip my coffee attempting to relax. But it's coffee. Now my heart's a speeding train. My hand shakes so much I thank God for lids. There would be a puddle of coffee if it weren't for this lid. I'm not here for myself. I'm here for Thomas, my husband-to-be. He won't get off my back about this. He wants to meet my brother. I haven't been this nervous since I had that pregnancy scare in high-school. I was such a stupid teenager, but I'm different now. I must validate this. I search for a reflective surface. Straight ahead, the picture frame will do. I can just barely make out my reflection, but even so it's so different from the self-portraits I used to pride myself in as a high-school girl. My long dark tresses no longer fall down my back. Instead, they hug my shoulders imbued with a mixture of lighter shades of brown. My face, once round and full, is still round but more angular. My cheekbones and jaw jut out. My face is no longer the pale monstrosity of the picky anemic eater I once was. What's the same? My big round brown eyes and small broad nose. I've always assured myself that its smallness makes up for its width.

...

My brother placed his palm on his forehead. *I'll mess him up. Did he tell you to do it without protection?*

Noooo, I said, rolling my eyes. *The condom ripped. Can you take me to buy a pregnancy test?*

*Here's a twenty. I'll wait for you,* he said as we parked.

*Can you come with me?* I asked, not wanting to go alone. My stomach hurt badly just thinking about the potential results.

He slouched forward onto the steering wheel letting out a deep sigh. *Fine.*

We grabbed a few different ones and went to check out. The guy at the counter grinned. *Don't worry it'll happen for you. My wife and I were young like you two. We tried for years and it paid off.* We turned to each other and laughed. For the moment, I forgot about my anxieties. The guy turned red. He must have realized he misspoke. We laughed all the way home.

When I went into the bathroom, I started to cry. My brother was waiting outside. *I can't do it,* I sobbed.

*Need some water?* he asked, and I couldn't help but laugh. *Whatever happens, you'll have me. And you'll have Tristin because I'm going to make that fucker own up to it.*

The tests all came out negative. I got a box of condoms for my birthday. *Just in case he's using the ones he snagged in middle school,* my brother said. This was before Tristan and I broke up. This was before the drinking and the parties.

...

He scoots into the booth and sits before me obscuring my reflection. It's him. Right. Not him. He has an aura about him, a spotlight accentuating his dumb enlightened grin. It's stark compared to my brother's crooked goofy grin. How could I have ever hated his disappointed face? Nothing can possibly be worse than this.

"I got you a cup. It should still be warm. Mine is." My eyes fixate on him just in case he morphs into my brother. I don't want to blink. I don't want to miss seeing him.

"Thanks Bella, but I'm fasting."

I want to grab the cup and fling its contents at him. I want to see him wince in pain. I want to know if he's still human. I don't know how I manage not to.

"That dress suits you well."

Now I want to plunge both coffees at him. I know where he's going with this.

"It also pleases the Lord," he clasps his hands. "How have you been, Bella?"

"Good," I say. I brace myself as I tell him about Thomas, and my new job as an art teacher. I brace myself for his judgement.

He used to guard me from the bullies.

...

It was after school. We were both in the living room doing homework. I hated that room. It was always so blindingly bright. When we were little, we used to pretend we were in heaven.

*Can I borrow a pen?* he asked. I was concentrating on perfecting my collage assignment for eighth-grade English.

He proceeded to unzip my backpack, which was lying on the coffee table. Before I could

stop him, his fingers closed around the pack of cigarettes.

*Bella!* His eyes were wide open behind those dorky glasses he used to wear in high-school. Mom heard and came into the living room.

*Mom! These were in her bag,* he blurted out before I had a chance to explain.

I got up and pushed him repeatedly until my mom told me to stop and go to my room.

*I hate you,* I shouted as I stormed upstairs. The weeks that followed were the longest I'd gone without talking to him, not including now.

When we finally made up, I told him the truth. I told him how the cool girls said I wasn't cool enough if I didn't smoke. I told him how my friend Stella stole a pack from her uncle and gave it to me so I could practice, and show those girls how cool I was. I was never going to open it, I told him. I wasn't. My grandpa's ceaseless raspy coughs still battered my ears as I ran my fingers along the pointy edges of the red and white box. I remembered how I used to cringe and look at his heaving chest. I could almost see his blackened lungs through the plaid, like the lungs in the textbooks. I knew the cigarettes were to blame, so I could never bring myself to light one.

When I told him, he stayed quiet. His face was contemplative. He apologized, and his face remained contemplative. To this day, I don't know what he did, but those girls started being nice to me shortly after I told him. That was in middle school, eighth grade, before Tristan and the pregnancy scare.

...

"Congratulations!"

Could he really be happy for me?

"Are you two doing a church wedding? I know a minister who'd be happy to perform the wedding."

I bow my head and close my eyes. His words are painful, each one a papercut. He's done it. He's latched on.

"This guy's incredible..."

He continues, but I'm no longer listening. Instead I'm remembering what I've been avoiding, memories as painful as his words.

...

The air felt different that day when I got to school. There was silence littered with whispers. Soon the whispers reached me. A football player had died in a car crash. Kevin Hershel was my brother's friend. My brother shut down after losing Kevin. The death triggered a depressive episode. I had no idea what to say to him. He was quiet. He didn't look sad or angry, and I didn't see him cry. He just looked numb and motionless. I had no idea what to say to him. I wish I could

go back and kick myself, pinch myself until I find something to say, something meaningful, something to prevent him from seeking solace elsewhere. I failed him.

At the funeral, there was a man I still see in my nightmares. He was one of Kevin's relatives, maybe an uncle. His green-blue cat eyes gave me goosebumps. The room felt heavy. Everyone seemed to avoid this man at all costs. I thought it was in my head at first until I saw him stretch out his hand to greet a woman and the woman just looked at it and walked straight ahead as if she hadn't seen it.

He approached my brother and me talking about salvation and heaven. I listened passively and politely. I assumed my brother was doing the same. But I was wrong. He shamwowed every word.

He began visiting the man. When he'd get home, he'd be different. He'd be rambling about the verses with enthusiasm, but he'd be arrogant and judgmental. He'd talk about God every chance he had. He'd blast Christian music 24/7. He went out and bought a small whiteboard for the fridge where he would write a new verse every morning in the hopes that I would see it. I couldn't talk to him about anything that didn't have to do with Jesus or God. He'd scold me for wearing makeup. He'd scold me for wearing jeans. He'd scold me for listening to rap and pop and rock.

There were incidents that scared me so badly. We shared the hallway bathroom, and I was getting ready for a school dance. I asked him if he needed to use the bathroom, but he just stood by the doorway glaring at the lipstick in my hand. Then he spoke. *Snake. You're a snake. Devil's red.* I slammed the door in his face. Then I cried my eyes out. I had to redo my entire makeup. I wore that shade of red until it ran out. Full disclosure, I contemplated wearing it today. I still buy it.

There were other instances. It was Thanksgiving. The four of us had joined hands. He took it upon himself to lead the prayer. I didn't close my eyes. I didn't bow my head. I didn't pray or join in the amens. I just watched and waited for it to be over. In the middle of the prayer, my brother opened his eyes and peered right at me. It made me shiver. I saw the same thing in his eyes as when he called me a snake. I actually considered the possibility of him being possessed.

He'd try to get me to go every day, but I refused. It scared me unlike anything else.

I begged my mom and dad to prevent him from going. They didn't see anything wrong with it. How could they? They were never home. Once we entered kindergarten, our parents became strangers.

I lost all respect for my mother when she said, *I rather he'd be going to church than him smoking weed and drinking every Friday night with those troublemakers. I know what he does. I'm not stupid. Do you know they go out and break into houses for the thrill of it? I found a stash of junk in his room. I know what you do too. Have you thought about joining him? Maybe I won't have to be ashamed of you anymore either.*

Couldn't she see that it was a million times worse? How could she ask me to go? How

could she ask me to be stripped of myself? Could she not see the layers of her son being pulled away? Could she not see that soon there would be nothing left?

Yes, my brother would break into houses. Yes, I did know this. I couldn't believe it at first. I found his stash of mementos when I was looking for cash to steal from him. I needed to go shopping for a new pair of shoes for my dress. I wanted to look good for my friend Samantha's sweet sixteen. He caught me in the act. I was expecting him to be angry or deny it. But he was calm and composed as if he'd rehearsed for this moment. He said he liked the thrill of it, that it helped him feel alive. He knew it was wrong, but he never took anything too important, just junk. I rummaged through the pile: refrigerator magnets, picture frames, jewelry, pens, cups, pillowcases, and more junk.

Anyways, I wonder if I pushed him away with my responses. He'd sit down to talk to me about the Bible. I'd shoot down every point. He'd get angry and provide an immediate counterargument that I'd just shoot down again. He'd get frustrated and resort to saying the devil had me in his grasp. Pretty soon he left the house and went to stay with the man. He'd come home every once in a while for some of his things; he looked at me as if I had horns, a tail, a pitchfork. He had been baptized, born again. That was the day my brother died.

...

I look at his lifeless body as he continues to talk, his voice passionate and at war with the other conversations of the café.

"It's a beautiful thing. He healed the woman's broken arm right before my eyes. I was skeptical, too, until I began seeing it for myself. It's a marvelous thing, Bella. Come to one of our meetings. Do you still get those terrible allergies?"

I nod.

"Just come to one of our meetings. We'll read a few passages. Then we'll pray. Dad will pray for you. You won't have to suffer through those allergies anymore."

"Who healed her?" my voice shakes as I break my self-made promise not to argue with him. "Who healed the woman? Was it the man or was it God?"

He grins as if he knew I would ask this.

"It was God of course,"

"Then why do you worship this man? He's just an instrument."

"I don't worship him. I respect him. He abides by the law, so God has given him a gift. It's a blessing."

"You call this man Dad. In doing so, aren't you worshipping him, a false idol? Aren't you disrespecting God? You give him your money and labor. Is he not abusing his gift? Does that not make him 'of the devil' as you would say?"

He breathes out slow and calm, "Sister, the devil is blinding you. I call him Dad because

he converted me and helped me through my baptism. He helped me be reborn. He is my spiritual father. I give him things willingly because it's what a good Christian does. He never demands anything." He's satisfied with his answer and truly believes it. "Bella, come to one of our meetings. All you have to do is listen. Sooner or later you're going to be touched by the Word. Dad has foreseen it, and he's never wrong."

Why am I shaking? Am I truly considering it? I've never considered suicide before. I can see the appeal, the liberation. Pain grabs me by one arm and anger by the other. Together they drag me out of the thought. My brother's death caused me so much sorrow. I can't do that to my fiancé and my friends. I can't leave them with the same heavy emptiness I was left with. Thomas cries when we watch sad movies for fuck's sake. I can't abandon him.

I know why I came. It's not to offset Thomas' nagging. It's not to see my brother again, not to reconnect, not to try and bring him back to life. I'm here to say goodbye, move on, let go. I stand up and his eyes follow me. I feel strong, confident. He's stopped talking. I bend down, kiss him on the forehead, and whisper in his ear, "Rest in peace, Simon M. Frias, beloved brother, and the best friend I ever had."

As I walk to my car, I've never wished so hard for my brother to be dead. I don't want him to be trapped in there ceaselessly trying to claw his way out of the new skin and bone encasing him.

# *Kiwanis-out of home, in the park*

Mike Edwards

· ADULT POETRY ·

A crane's winter home; a homeless vet's winter home. The train rattles them both awake. The crane flies easily, elegantly to the other side of the lake. The vet, covered in blankets, sits up afraid, agitated, having returned from the other side.

The lovebirds come from a farm in Mesa. Not originally. They're from Tanzania originally. Farmed in Mesa for a time, only to be released by a bankrupt handler. They've made a home here.

Colin practices the bagpipes 3 times a week, saluting those who've passed, marrying others, going off to war. He gets better every time. He wants to play in the homeland of Ireland someday—like his great-grandfather did, before the U.S. became home.

Little Johnny loves the zip line, loves how his foster dad smiles brightly as he waits for him to arrive at the end. He can't help staring at the birthday party under the ramada. He doesn't want to say why's he's angry . . . or sad . . . or that he wants to go home. He wants only to ride the zip line again and again and again to that waiting smile. But he can't say that either.

A final whiff of Christmas—trees go here, recycle there. and it's their next-to-last stop. The smell grows stronger; piling up as the weather warms, waiting to be recycled or plunged to the bottom of some lake; a new home.

A man raises a didgeridoo, vibrating peace through the park, slow and steady—peace through the park? He draws a crowd, people feel the vibration, gravitate toward it—while others gravitate to the sound of an ice cream truck.

The vet walks toward the crane, the crane does nothing.

# *Bubbling Adulthood*

Karla Caldera

· COLLEGE POETRY ·

If there was ever a time to fall in love,  
It would be now.

Our glasses are overflowing with youthfulness,  
And the deadlines are all so far away.

We sometimes feel alone and alive all at once.

Our skin bounces with elasticity,  
And everything is tinted with gold.

You are primed,  
I am full,  
We are well and round.

Echoes of songs dance through the empty hallways.  
There's an excess amount of light peeking in through the windows,

"Hello," it says, "I'm here for you."

# *Dear Amy Schumer*

Celina Chiarello

· ADULT NONFICTION ·

I don't usually write letters to people I don't know. I just felt like I should say that up front. I have a hard time even using Twitter to tweet at people I don't know. I did once tweet at Lin-Manuel Miranda. It was two years ago and I was visiting my sister in New York. We were waiting in line to see *Hamilton* on Broadway (I got tickets early before it became THE THING). We found out he was sick and wouldn't be performing that night. I suddenly felt compelled to tweet that we were disappointed and hoped he would get well soon. So I pulled out my phone and agonized over the exact wording of my 140 characters. I think I included an emoji of sorts. I let my thumb hover over the "tweet" button for far too long, out of fear that any sort of fan-like well wishes would come across as being creepy. It wasn't creepy of course, but that should give you an indication of how self-conscious I am.

So, Person I Don't Know, perhaps you're wondering why someone who was so afraid of a tweet would commit to a full-blown letter. I'm drawing from the same place that compelled me to reach out to the creator of *Hamilton* — the creator of a brilliant story. It's the place within me that looks for meaning through stories. I've been desperately looking for some meaning and I think you might understand. You see, I just watched your story — your film *Trainwreck* — last month. I watched *Trainwreck* and then cried for about an hour afterward. Like your character Gordon Townsend and like your own father, my father has multiple sclerosis. He has primary-progressive multiple sclerosis, and I cried for about an hour after I watched *Trainwreck* because your story got his story exactly right.

Before my father's diagnosis, the only MS story I knew of took place on *The West Wing*. Have you seen that show? It's one of my all-time favorites and has been since well before MS was a part of my family's vocabulary. I majored in history and went to graduate school at Georgetown — *The West Wing* is my TV comfort food. I don't know about your father, but my dad has never once looked like President Bartlet with MS. That guy was supposed to have been struggling with symptoms of the disease for more than eight years. My dad has been struggling for about six years and Bartlet looks like the American Ninja Warrior by comparison. He's charging around the White House, flipping jackets over his shoulders, making rousing speeches as orchestras swell, and seems to have more endurance than the U.S. men's soccer team in perpetual overtime. My dad hasn't charged anywhere in about six years. After he couldn't hold himself up on crutches

anymore, we tried canes and wheelchairs but he never learned how to use them properly. I don't know if it that was him resisting change or if his brain just couldn't retain any new motor skills.

To be fair, my dad isn't much like Jed Bartlet in any capacity. He is a hell of a lot more your character's dad in your film. He has always been a man of few words, but he knows how to make them count (read: burn). He's a snap judge of character and stingy with second chances. When he was healthy, he had an intimidating sort of swagger to him. He was the kind of man who wore jeans, t-shirts, and baseball caps but was somehow always addressed as "sir." I remember one summer when I was about twelve, he took our family to see *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. He always liked to get to the theater early so we could snag the best seats and settle in with snacks well before the previews started rolling. Since it was opening weekend, we got there nearly two hours early. My dad, being the furthest thing imaginable from a *Star Wars* fan boy, was sure that was plenty of time. Imagine his shock when there was already a massive line of moviegoers curling around the building, waiting to rush the doors as soon as they opened. My dad took one look at the throng of bodies sweltering in the glaring Sonoran Desert sun and announced he was going to the bathroom. So my mom, my sister, and I took our place in line at the tail end of the unwashed and increasingly smelly horde. Ten minutes later, he hadn't come back yet. We just assumed there must have been a long line for the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, we wondered if he couldn't find us in the line. The staff at the theater had tried wrangling us into some kind of unruly queue with stanchions, so we weren't in the same place as when he had left. Thirty minutes later, he still wasn't back and the theater doors had opened. This was before any of us had cell phones so we had no way to tell him what was happening. We shuffled along with the rest of the impatient group, looking everywhere for my dad. I kept expecting to see his baseball cap hovering somewhere in the crowd. With no sign of him, we made it into the theater, wondering how we would ever get seats together for the four of us. My eyes adjusted to the dim light and then I saw him. He was sitting dead center guarding three other seats, holding popcorn and sodas. Without any hint of a smirk or smugness, he handed us our food. He said mildly that they just let him in to sit down. He made it sound like he got lucky but I knew better. It was the swagger. He always got his way. He always was the one who got the final word. Amy — may I call you Amy? — I have a feeling you might know what it's like to have a father like that.

In *Trainwreck*, when your character's father falls at the assisted nursing facility, a nurse gently reminds him that he is supposed to pull his cord when he wants to get in his wheelchair. That's the end of the exchange on-screen, but it told me that the character, and perhaps your real father, is stubborn and untrusting like my dad. He probably knew damn well what he was supposed to do, but that wasn't what he wanted to do, so he wasn't going to do it. In the next scene, the character then refuses to have his face stitched up, even shouting that he doesn't give consent. It was played as a gag but I'm sure you know as well as I do that a doctor would have had to step away at that point. When a patient doesn't want care, there's nothing you can do. I have heard a lot of simpering truisms about how strong people become when they fall ill and how brave they

are for facing the disease head-on. No one talks about the ones who refuse to admit they are sick. My dad and our family only received the primary-progressive diagnosis last year but it was a long time coming. My mom, my sister, and I fought, cried, and argued with my dad for years as his health deteriorated. We had no idea what was happening because he adamantly and immovably refused to see any doctors. He said his health wasn't any of our business. So we tried to make it our business. We tried as he fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. We tried as he limped through the house and had to stop driving. We tried as we helped him back up after he started to fall, time and time again, and while he cursed us for not moving fast enough. We tried as he started to choke on his meals, his body not recognizing the difference between food and oxygen. We finally made it our business when he could no longer physically resist going to the doctor. Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see, but I swear I saw that same attitude in the character you had on-screen. That's not a sort of person someone can just make up. You must know what it's like, Amy. You *must* know.

That final tribute your character gives for her father (my fingers are desperately resisting the word "eulogy"), where did that come from? Your character says that even in spite of being an asshole, her father is her favorite person. My dad hasn't been one of my favorite people since I was thirteen. I cling to the movie theater story because it was one of the last times I felt like I connected with my dad. Like a lot of kids, I was deeply unhappy as a teenager. Like a lot of kids, I pushed my parents away. And like a lot of kids, I snapped out of it on the other side of college. As an adult, I got my mom back. She has turned into one of my best friends. I never got the chance to get my dad back. We fought a lot right before his health turned because he still thought he knew best and there I was, making my own decisions. He constantly tried to talk me out of my college major. He isn't a gentle guy so instead of calling my choice "impractical," words like "dumb" and "waste of time" were thrown around quite a bit. He hated that I lived in the dorms and would often reel off the latest crime statistics on college campuses. He insisted that I come home every weekend. He offered to buy me things if I moved back home. He tried to forbid me from studying abroad in Spain. He was furious when I said I wanted to go to graduate school on the other side of the country. As it turns out, a lot of my early adult life was spent trying to prove my dad wrong.

That was the relationship we had when MS took over. It's only gotten worse since then. Even with the diagnosis, my dad still has trouble accepting his situation and can't tolerate my family's emotional responses to it. I told him I hoped he would stay strong because I want to make sure he meets his grandkids someday. He laughed and told me to change the channel on his TV. When my husband went to my parents to ask for their blessing before he proposed, my dad told him to think it over first because I'm really bossy. People have told me it's the disease talking, but they don't know how rocky we were before all this happened. I've gotten all kinds of advice on how to talk to him, but there is just no talking to him. I don't want to stay angry with him. I don't think he can be my favorite person again, but I'll settle for some kind of middle ground.

I'm sure the last thing you wanted was to be covered in the emotional vomit of a total

stranger, but I'm running out of options. My dad was admitted to hospice this week. I need to find a way to get to a better ending of this story. I need to find a way to connect with him. That's what you're supposed to do when someone is dying, right? I want him to know that I still love him and I need to know that he still loves me. But it's hard when he says he doesn't want to see me anymore and calls me a bitch. It's hard when I hear him threaten my mom with divorce. He can barely speak and when he does manage a sentence or two, they're just pure anger. I get that he's angry; this is the worst thing that can happen to a person and it's not fair. But why is he so angry at me? How can I not internalize his words? How can I move past that? Part of me is wildly hoping for some guidance, but I know I can't burden you with that. I know what I really need is strength. I need to hang on for however much time he has left. And I need to try to talk to him. Amy, if I can write to you, then maybe I can. If I can write to a stranger, maybe I can talk to him about our story. Maybe I can say all the things I need to say to the man who gave me his last name and my life.

Congratulations on your movie, by the way. I'm sure the next one will be just as successful. I wish you and your family nothing but the best. Maybe I'll tweet at you sometime.