



The Prompt

Princeton Writes Literary Journal

Cover Art by Sharon Adarlo, *Untitled*.

Introduction

Princeton Writes is pleased to present *The Prompt*, an anthology of writing from members of Writing Space, a group of writers who also happen to be Princeton University employees. Since the fall of 2015, the group has met monthly, both in person and virtually, to write with the option of following a prompt and to share their creative efforts with each other. We hail from diverse corners of the University, from the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, to the Center for Statistics and Machine Learning, to the offices of Butler College.

Our primary purpose is to keep our creative sparks ignited and to remember to let our writer-selves out to play, no matter what else is going on in our lives and our world. We hope this anthology will prompt others to start writing or return to it, to make space for imagination, invention, creative expression, and, of course, editing.

We are open to any University employee who wants to join us, and we are especially pleased to feature the work of 10 talented members of our group, including Robyn Howard, Andrea La Bella, Jeanne Jackson DeVoe, Rupa Ragbirsingh, Kristin Cass, Bhuvan Shori, Courtney Coffman, Stephanie Whetstone, John Weeren, and Dianne Spatafore.

Special thanks to Sharon Adarlo for our cover art.

Just

Robyn Howard

He whispered into the back of my hair, and before I could respond, I felt his two hands and chin stack upon my head, which, as it turned out, fit comfortably under his. We were standing in a crowded gallery, bundled up in winter coats, or I would have felt the front of his body on the back of mine. I froze in place, staring straight ahead—willing there to be a mirror in which to inspect the scene I could feel but not see.

It was only a few years prior, in the reflection of a large window etched with gold lettering, that I'd met this younger man in an ice cream shop in the East Village. All dark wood and black countertops, three stools bolted to the floor, though there were four of us. Yelling across other people's shoulders and over the rockabilly music whose volume was grossly disproportionate to the square footage, we found ourselves excitedly chatting about an array of topics—only rarely including the others as our ice cream pooled in the ornate glass dishes we balanced on palms and knees.

Have you ever made eye contact with someone in public and immediately detected the twinkle of recognition in their face while none registered for you? They begin hurrying towards you—a veritable tumbleweed of exuberance, while you're desperately trying to place them. If they reach you before you're successful, you have no choice but to engage in a perfunctory brushing of cheeks, lips pursed to convey the requisite affection.

That's the standard greeting in my family—towards people we like anyway. In general, we're warm, but not fuzzy. Generous of spirit, but not physical affection; it's not our forte. On sentimental occasions, the only adjustment to the fish-faced cheek swipe is the generous addition of a quick "smooch" sound, and even then, it's with our hips maintaining a distance from one another and our torsos angled toward, poised to snap us back to posture once the uneasy ceremony has concluded.

To feel the weight of this other body—even though it belonged to someone who had long since become my friend, was overwhelming to my standoffish sensibilities. I desperately searched for any reflective surface, so that I could see what it looked like to be so at ease with both yourself and someone you cared for that you could exhibit such effortless public intimacy. Even more so, I wanted to see what I looked like as the recipient of such tenderness. But there were no mirrors, nothing

reflective around us at all, not even a windowpane in which I could have possibly glimpsed a translucent outline of our morphed silhouette.

Instead, I had to try and absorb it through the expressions and reactions of those around us. I imagined that people thought we were dating; exhibitionists newly in love, or a less assured duo clinging to each other as we navigated the rocky road of a mature relationship. My eyes clawed the crowd as I searched each of the other souls, also bundled against the bluster, lurking on the other side of the door, for looks of disgust. I maintained statue stillness and used it to my advantage to listen, with considerable effort, for the tsk-click of tongues communicating that we were behaving inappropriately. I even adjusted my gaze lower to try to catch people shielding their children from the gratuitous display. But there was absolutely no attention detected; it was as though this type of frivolous intimacy was commonplace.

When he unceremoniously disentangled himself to advance to the next exhibit, I was unprepared for the loss that left me with so much more to contemplate.

Prey for You

A Drama in One Act

Andrea La Bella

Cast of Characters

FLORA: 25-30 years old, inmate

GUARD: 35 years old, guard

INTERVIEWER: Any age/gender/ethnicity

Place: Lowell Correctional Center, Ocala, Florida

Time: Spring

Setting: *Interior, Lowell Correctional Center. Two rooms, side-by-side; one is an office, the other a hospital room. The action of the play takes place for the GUARD in the office, for FLORA anywhere on the stage. The hospital bed appears to have someone in it, lying very still, connected to life support machines. The GUARD speaks directly to the interviewer. FLORA speaks directly to the audience. FLORA moves freely, unbound by time or space.*

At Rise: FLORA, in her room, is speaking to the AUDIENCE. The GUARD, in his office, is speaking to the INTERVIEWER.

FLORA. *(to audience)* We have a joke, we say to each other, “I love the smell of horse manure in the morning,” kind of like the old army guy in that army movie. Guards have a joke too, only they say it to everyone... “Inmate 36562, wait a minute, 562, is that Irish? Or Italian? Or whatever racist bullshit they think of. We have to laugh or *(she runs her index finger across her throat to mimic slitting her throat)* “lose your privileges.”

INTERVIEWER. *(to the guard)* What is it like for you?

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* We tease the girls, just a bit; makes the day go down a lot easier. It’s a long stretch here, even for us. I mean, we’re just as isolated as they are. Difference is, of course, we’re here cause it’s a good job. But them, well, mmm, mmm, mmm.

INTERVIEWER. *(to guard)* Can you tell us about the inmates?

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* I don't know what I can tell you about them. I mind my own business. Well, let's see ... ya got Marine: she is in for carrying drugs across the border ... *(stresses)* in her kid's backpack. She claims she didn't know they was in there. I think that's a bunch of BS. Then there is Becky. She's in for embezzling from her employer. A doctor. A good man. A God-fearing man, and she comes along and just takes from him. I don't understand people that just take things. The good lord provides for all his creatures, so they say.

FLORA. *(to audience)* I have been at Lowell for six years now. I'm serving fifteen, but there is always hope I could get out sooner. The first three years, I was just learning the rules. They got lots of rules ... but once you get it down, honestly, being on the inside is a big relief from the struggling on the outside. Hell, it's the first time I have been in one place for any stretch of time for as long as I can remember. We get to see a doctor sometimes. There is a library. I got my GED, and I am taking college courses ... I mean, you can't do any of that on the streets.

INTERVIEWER. *(to guard)* I understand there was an incident here. Can you tell us about that?

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* Yes. I can never remember that girl's name. She wasn't like the others. She was a little odd, but she stayed to herself. I like that in a woman: stay to herself. Not many women do that. My mama did. Pop'd get drunk and well ... *(fades off)* There ain't women like my mama anymore.

FLORA. *(to audience)* I miss my sister. I wish I could see her. There is so much to tell. But she's gone now, too. That's everyone gone—except Mama. I don't want to see her.

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* What was that girl's name? *(trying to remember)*

FLORA. *(to audience)* My name is Flora, my sister is Willow, and mama, she is called Violet. After Daddy left, she sold flowers out of the house, among other things. When she had "visitors," Willow and me would hide outside in the tall wheat grass reciting nursery rhymes like they was prayers. Sometimes we would jump on grandpa's horse, Pumpkin Pie, and ride double to the other end of the field at a full gallop. Pie carried us on his back like we was nothing. I felt like I was flying. Of course, after grandpa died, mama sold him. She said Pie wasn't good for nothing but dog food, and she didn't need another mouth to feed. I ran away a few weeks later. I was just a kid.

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* These girls come in here broken. I mean, we all got problems, but it's like they never had right love, or worse. It's social media if you ask me, but no one did, so I keep quiet. My Momma left when I was just a boy. She couldn't take daddy's drinking, I guess ... He was a mean drunk, but I made a good life for myself, didn't I? I am gonna remember that girl's name any minute now. Aw hell, it don't matter. It's funny, though. You find good ones in the strangest of places.

FLORA. *(to audience)* After I ran away, I was on my own for a year before I met Trax. He was so handsome with his bright blue eyes and dark brown hair. He looked like a movie star. He explained to me that some people were born whores, and that I was one of them. And I was a slut, and nobody'd ever want me but him, and the best thing I could do was just learn to be a good whore.

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* She was in here for killing her boyfriend. She got pregnant; he wanted her to have an abortion. But she didn't want to. She wanted to keep that baby. Anyway, they start fighting, and by sheer luck, or whatever, maybe it was providence, because this fella was not nice and you bet he would've killed her and her unborn given the chance. But they say she managed to get a nail file out of her purse, and with the full force of all the bad in her life, she plunged that file right into his eye. That boy was dead before he hit the ground.

FLORA. *(to audience)* There was a story grandpa used to tell us about this big old oak tree. The tree looked like it had a man's face on it; you could see it so clear, eyes ... nose ... mouth. Grandpa said that tree used to be a real person. But couldn't decide which way to go, so just stood there, waiting for something to motivate him; only nothing ever did. Well, pretty soon his feet grew roots and his arms turned into gnarled useless branches with shriveled good-for-nothing hands. And there he stood unable to move, looking slightly startled by his slow-growing fate. That story scared me so much I never wanted to be in any one place for too long, so I kept moving—I was always trying to fly like me and Willow did on Pumpkin Pie.

INTERVIEWER. *(to guard)* What happened to her?

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* Well, by the time they got her to the hospital, she lost the baby she fought so hard to keep. So, they locked her up. Had to.

FLORA. *(to audience)* After "it" happened, I was sent to jail, but by some miracle I ended up here at Second Chance Farm. I could not believe my good luck. Second Chance is a rehabilitation center for abused and retired thoroughbred racehorses, and it's part of the prison. It's amazing! Being in one place isn't nearly as scary as I thought it would be. I feel safe for the first time in my life. We work six days a week, and we get paid \$1.15 a day for tending to horses. They are so smart. The program is sponsored by Lowell and the community college. So, I get college

credits towards going to vet tech school. It is so easy to be with the horses. I have a knack for it. It's like my second chance to stop running and love something. It almost makes me want to stay inside forever.

GUARD. *(to interviewer)* It was a shame really. She got into some trouble, because women can't mind their own business, and she got her horse privileges revoked. After that, she was lost. She tried to kill herself, and they sent her to the hospital. Between you and me, she ain't never getting out of there. All the girls know they gotta behave or *(he runs his index finger across his throat to mimic slitting his throat)* lose your privileges! It didn't seem right to take her away. She was happy caring for them horses.

Eclipse of the Moon

Jeanne Jackson DeVoe

They say it was the longest eclipse of the moon in years
We woke after midnight to watch the final gleam
And I thought of you and the flashes of light that are left of you
How in the past you were never the moon, always the sun
Our planets spinning around you

And now we are helpless as your words and memories fade
You asked me a while ago who I was
How long have I known you, you wanted to know
I brushed away tears and replied, "My whole life."
And you saw my face and remembered

I recite your children's and grandchildren's names like nursery rhymes
And you are amazed at the lives you have put forth into the world

I didn't see how you stitched us all together
Like the tiny scraps of fabric you transformed into quilts
Until your hands could no longer remember how to sew
At first, I thought I could teach you again, but the skill had vanished
And so I show you the quilts and the photographs
And try to remind you of who you are

Yet even with so much loss you retain your wisdom
When I asked what we should bring a dear friend newly widowed
You said, "Bring her some sunshine and something for her health."
You asked a neighbor if she had found what she was looking for
"I'm still searching," you told her. "I'll let you know if I find it."

I am thankful for the glimmers of you
Your face lights up as you gather colored leaves from the ground
Piling them up like a hoard of treasure
You still sing along to the music even if you can't find the words

Each moment is new for you
You're still questing for joy
Even as your light disappears
You are no longer the sun
You are the sliver of the moon before the eclipse

Freedom

Rupa Ragbirsingh

A new family had moved in and renovated that corner house. Now, whenever you walked past that corner, it felt as if the house was alive once again, taking breaths of fresh air when the doors opened and expressing that it was filled with happiness. It was perked up with all bright lights. The joyous household members complemented the harmonious ambience. Throughout the house, everything was clean, and the aroma of exotic foods and the fresh sheets from the laundry dryer filled the air.

For many years, the corner house was occupied by Karen, our neighbor. Karen was blind and used to have angry conversations with herself while walking, so no one dared to interact with her. She went out daily—all dressed up—to different sections of the city in order to find food for herself and her stray animals; she had a lot of them. Karen was unable to maintain her home or pay for the utilities. I never knew what that house looked like inside, as it was never lit. On the exterior, there were leaking pipes that showed years of neglect; the entrance and sidewalk were covered with dirty debris; a foul stench oozed from it; the windows were mostly broken, with chipped frames; and the entry door swung open in the wind, as it could not close properly. Many times, the police came and removed the stray animals and took Karen to a homeless shelter, but she always managed to return to her home within a few days. Shelters were offering Karen much needed essentials—food, accommodation with heat and safety, but Karen wanted her freedom: her own home and independent life, regardless of her living conditions. This eventually ended with the city seizing her home, and Karen was forced to permanently lose her freedom.

This was my first home, located in an urban neighborhood that was very vibrant and diverse. It was like a garden filled with different colored flowers, plants, and shrubs. Everyone helped one another with snow shoveling and pruning the shrubs and hedges. The array of colorful flowers blossoming in the spring in everyone's yards brightened up the neighborhood. In the summer, as you passed by, you could see different exotic vegetables growing in everyone's yards, which often aroused my curiosity in trying to figure out what that vegetable is called or how does it taste. We had decorated our home inside with wood, glass, and brass furniture, and outside, we planted assorted annual and perennial flowers, plants, and vegetables. There was adequate space in my home, and I had lovely neighbors, but I wanted something more and different. Like Karen, I was striving for something I did not have, in spite of having everything I needed. I wanted to buy a larger home in the suburbs, with a lot of land and a serene environment.

An ongoing battle of needs and wants that can never truly make me contented. I wanted freedom from the urban hustle and bustle, traffic jams, and sirens of the ambulances.

My second chapter began with the arrival of my son. I wanted the best things that life has to offer for him. My journey of wants resumed. I wanted to raise him in a safer area with enough land, so he could play in the yard without getting injured by the passing vehicles. I wanted him to start his education in a Blue-Ribbon school district at age five. The search for a suitable house started, and with God's grace, all dreams materialized. Our new home was in a quiet neighborhood with an acre of land on a dead-end street, so street activity was never an issue. The yard had some trees, and we added a few more. In the summer we planted flowers and vegetables, watched and listened to different species of birds, and enjoyed our dinners with the lovely company of deer in the yard. Our new home was everything we wanted and more. Over ten years had passed. Here was another one of my desires. I wanted to relocate closer to my job and decided to do it before my son started high school. I thought it would be nice if he lived in a community with kids his age, probably attending the same school. He would make friends, and they could do things together.

A new search began again. We moved from a serene suburban area to a different urban area, closer to my job, so I could be home quicker and not have a long daily commute with most of the time being stuck in the morning and evening rush hour traffic congestion. This desire was also fulfilled by the grace of the Almighty. My son did make some friends and loved the new school district. Although this current home is smaller in comparison to our other home, it is cozy. With a less than ten-minute commute to my office, I no longer had to dread the daily commute. Moreover, our religious temples, restaurants, groceries, stores, and library are all within close proximity. There was nothing to desire any more. Time saved from commuting was priceless. But now, here comes the college admission process for my son, and the new ideas are already emerging. I'm not sure when and where the new ideas will cease.

Karen lost her home and perhaps kept longing to return to it. The shelter was a good gesture by the city, but that was not her choice. Her struggles were in an effort to live independently, as she did when she was younger and in better health. Maybe she lost her vision at some point in her life. She had adapted to her disability and managed to get around for many years and loved her home and her possessions. Losing all of that and adjusting to a new life in a shelter was perhaps a difficult journey for her. Maybe she just wanted to live on her own terms and be free and happy.

Our struggles were of different ongoing desires, but we were both captives of time: we wanted our heart's desires fulfilled while we had time. We were both prisoners of the illusion called life. It appears that the battle of desires will always continue for both of us. It feels as though this is not about the desires only but was more about the time. Time will always keep us on our toes and move us forward in life with no opportunity to turn back. We don't have time, but time has us. We will never attain freedom!

When You Left the Light

Kristin Cass

Holding the phone, with my brother silent on the other end, my first thought was, “how could you?” How could you be so careless and forget to secure your helmet to your head? Why didn’t you just take that extra second to make sure it was fastened properly? And how could you take your motorcycle out when you knew it was wet, and the ground was leaf-covered? You were the one that warned me only a few years before of the dangers of driving on fall roads, as I shot down the road at an unreasonable speed. This had to be a dream. After all, my head had felt thick with mist prior to the phone ringing. I had only seen you a week ago after weeks if not months of not seeing you, so my brain must be creating this horrible scene. But the phone felt real in my hand, hot and plasticky, and my brother’s ragged breath piercing through my ears sent chills across my skin. Before the phone rang, I had been spending the day with my oldest friend, someone who knew you as well as I did at one time in our lives. I stared at her, not sure how to tell her that you were gone.

I have never been good at showing my emotions. Giving them a voice seems simultaneously dangerous and impossible. There are no words that adequately describe the sensations inside my body. Anger is the only one that seeps out before I have a chance to quell it. So, when I told her, I imagine it sounded cold, possibly even annoyed. I shared what I knew, that you had had an accident and were found by the neighbor who was an EMT. When you were discovered, there was nothing that could be done. My friend cried in a way that I was envious of, freeing and cathartic. I had tears, but they were quiet and few.

The following weeks, there was a hurricane inside of me. I went between sadness and anger, swirling until they felt like the same thing. Deep in my soul, I wondered if you had done it on purpose. Your adult life was not what you had planned. A mechanic by trade. I could see in your eyes there was more to you than just manual labor. You were curious and interested in the world and the people in it. Until, you weren’t. You started drinking too much and purposely getting into trouble with the wrong people. You would make excuses afterward, trying to sound like your actions were heroic, but I knew after the first time that you were embarrassed and struggling and misdirecting those who didn’t know you as well by telling a joke or pulling a magic trick. You were hurting and lost, and few understood who you really were. Even now, I still question if you really showed me your true self.

What's worse is I knew, and I left you. I was mad at you for treating me poorly after being one of your closest friends. And, at the same time, I had met someone who was controlling and possessive and denied me my friendships with men. I let so much time pass, and I never forgave you truly. When you died, I was mad at you for a different reason though. Not because you had left this world before you should, but because I was never going to have the opportunity for you to forgive me. I left my friend who was in need, and I never explained why. I was cold to you even on the last time we met, and I will never forget our awkward goodbye the morning after my brother's wedding – the last time I saw your face.

Stand By Me

Bhuvan Shori

A million thoughts cross my mind as I experience 50 years in the making, and most of them are of love and deep gratitude for all the beautiful blessings that have been sprinkled throughout. Not all seeds of dreams and desires sprout, but today I can appreciate the seeds that formed saplings and fresh blooms throughout.

There are moments of oneness and feeling so connected to the world around me, and then those when I walk alone on my uncertain path. And throughout it all, there is only one constant companion that stands by me, in darkness and delight. There is an unseen hand that orchestrates the goodness, grace, and guidance that reaches me with blessings of love and light.

It is the breath of fresh air that flows through the hollow reed and makes music so effortlessly.

It is the love that flows through family, friends, and those known and unknown, in community.

It is the joy that has no words but flows as tears uncontrollably.

It is the word—written, spoken, or sung—that resonates so deeply, bringing forth goosebumps, tingling, or a river flowing within me.

It is the sweet fragrance that passes by in solitude.

It is the sunshine that warms the inner soul when the world can be a harsh winter, so cold and cruel.

It is the moonlight on a dark night that reminds me that I am whole and complete in myself, in all the stages and phases of life.

It is that conversation that takes place in the stillness of silence and leaves me with more comfort and clarity.

It is You my Darling, my Dear Beloved, always standing by me ... in the form of peace, love, joy, illumination, inspiration, and comfort in Thee.

Life is a celebration, as wonderful as can be, just as long as—You stand by me.

Granola Fashion

Courtney Coffman

It began around the summer of 2016. I was walking along Fairfax Avenue, just north of Beverly—the pocket of Los Angeles where the hypebeasts flock—when I spotted one in the wild. I audibly gasped, taken aback by the audacity of such a display, feeling a guttural reaction to such an offense. Among the cool skateboarding shops and clean branding was a hip, young skater-type wearing the unmentionable: a fanny pack.

You know you're in the “hype” part of the city when you see the long lines of teenagers and youngish adults with fresh sneakers and extra confidence spilling out of the experiential stores onto the sidewalks—lifestyle brands that constantly rotate the “next drop,” endorsing a micro-economy of subcultural goods. The surprise of a fanny-pack sighting felt more like a stylistic anomaly, but if there's one place to find the pulse of youth culture, it's in this small stretch, just one modest block between two of the tree-streets, Oakwood and Rosewood.

Unlike the buff, muscle beach types over in Venice Beach, whose leathery skin and narrow waists held onto these ugly, yet sad pouches—their zippers jangling like the new-agey ankle bracelets sold on the boardwalk—this new generation embraces such an accoutrement with unironic boldness. A tired neon yellow that looked more banana than cautionary, the fanny pack incident of 2016 was certainly of a vintage variety and no doubt picked up from a second-hand store that “curated” its wares. Yet it wasn't long before isolated incidents of fanny pack wearers became more and more frequent until, finally, my ensemble-y challenged friend purchased said article from the hypest store on the block, and I knew that this was a “thing”—a gateway from wallet to full-on murse.

After a few years of churring on internet scrolls and posts, the fanny pack is now colloquially pared down to simply “waist bag” or “belt bag.” The polyester straps are slung across their bodies: Dudes usually wear theirs higher on their chest, like a tactical bandolier, and Betties tend to wear them lower, accentuating their waists. And despite the previous cycle of Normcore trends in 2013 and 2014, where plainness and the generic are intentionally celebrated—think “dad hats” and “mom jeans”—this new wave of accessories is purposefully ugly, beyond utility. It's *Gorpcore* (noun), a subcultural spinoff of Normcore, which has saturated our visual paradigm so much that the term made Oxford Languages' 2017 “Word of the Year: Shortlist.” Gorpcore was not included in the dictionary at the time of its 2017 induction, but it did secure a place on the list because of its “rapid rise to fashion fame.”

Gorpcore describes “A style of dress incorporating utilitarian clothing of a type worn for outdoor activities,” with *Gorp* suggestive of sustenance for extreme outdoor adventurers, a la “trail mix.” Pre-pandemic, Gorpcore had already taken hold of many, including those more passive adventurers, starting from the ground up with Texas and chunky socks or the toasty, teddy-bear Patagonia fleeces, and the ubiquitous bucket hats often affiliated with pastimes like fly fishing. Original shoe brands like Merrell, Keen, and Salomon, along with the ubiquitous Crocs, have taken hold. After years of knock-offs and fakes, and fast-fashion cycles against eco-driven campaigns, high-end luxury brands and emerging independent designers fashioned their collections not on flashy materials and slick structures but rather on approachable designs and hiding-in-plain sight everydayness: quotidian aesthetics found in places like the Home Depot or Wal-Mart. The uglier, the better (for example, Google “Balenciaga Crocs” or “SUNNEI dad slipper”). The confusing part is how to know when someone is from Denver and just finished a mountain hike or is intentionally adopting Gorpcore as their fashion identity, buying into the trend of comfort and utility. Love it or hate it, we can all take comfort in knowing that at the very least, Gorpcore achieves what so few styles can: democratization.

Middle Earth

Stephanie Whetstone

I am in England, for the first time ever (unless you count a harried one-hour layover at Gatwick, which I don't). I'm visiting my son, and I picked a modest guesthouse, so I could be close to his place. It turns out the guesthouse is across the street from the cemetery where J.R.R. Tolkien is buried. *I know!*

I can see the entrance to the cemetery from my guest room window. This might be why they had a vacancy on a weekend early in the semester, but this town is full of ghosts, no matter where you stay.

I bring the rain in, it turns out, the cold-in-your-bones drizzle that depresses all but the sunniest of souls. You should know by now that I am not sunny.

Finally, a few days in, the forecast is wrong—probably because I wear my rain boots. It is gloriously clear, and I think maybe the England I've written off as miserable isn't so bad after all. I cross the street and wind my way through the cemetery to see Professor Tolkien. How could I not?

I am one of two people in the cemetery. No crowds or tour buses. I'm not sure if I expected those or not. The British, of course, do not have a crass sign advertising the grave, or even a large marker. I follow small stone signs with arrows at foot level, and there he is, the creator of Gandalf the Grey, in a grave simply marked with a stone he shares with his wife. There are small offerings, but not as many as on the more recent graves, covered with balloons and flowers. Tolkien's wife, Edith, even gets top billing on the stone, and there is no J.R.R., but his full name: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. I ask him for guidance through my own private Mordor, then I leave and catch the bus at the stop right in front of the cemetery.

Later, because I am a nerd and a writer, which are about the same thing, I google Tolkien quotes, looking for answers. The best one I find is this one: "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater."

An Ode to Nature

John Weeren

Nature, how I wonder at your contradictions.

Nature, you have impelled us to take refuge within our artificial walls but hold the key to freedom, inviting us to wander maskless in your crucibles of life.

Nature, you have denied us the solace of each other's touch but hold us tightly in a girdle of land and sea.

Nature, you have fractured our patterns of existence but never cease to keep us grounded.

Nature, you have withstood our prayers but minister to our spirits in pristine forests and artful gardens.

Nature, you have affirmed your fickleness but honor your primeval contract, for what withers will emerge anew and what crumbles will rise again.

Nature, you have robbed us of so much but embarrass us with gifts: the caress of gently falling snowflakes, the sound of birds at dawn, the scent of honeysuckle on a summer night.

Nature, you are our greatest foe and our staunchest friend. And for this I fear and love you.

The Orange Bracelet

Dianne Spatafore

“You can ask about an orange bracelet,” said the security person at the entrance to Sesame Place. “Do you know about those?” I shook my head no, but somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered reading about the accessibility program. “Thanks,” I said. “I think we’ll be ok.” And I smiled and moved on, trying to catch up with my friend and her son.

I was a bit surprised. Perhaps the security woman saw my son’s feeding pump bag in the cooler bag or maybe she noticed his g-tube button peeking out from under his shirt. I had given him a break from his back brace, so it wasn’t that. We’ll be ok, I thought to myself. It was not the things that you could see on the outside that presented the biggest challenge in this environment, it was what was, at a glance, unseen. On the autism spectrum, my son is mobile but still very unsteady navigating the world. He has little perception of danger, running quickly in whatever direction suits him. He cannot be reasoned with in the ways one might negotiate with a typical toddler. There are no snacks or rewards to bribe him with. His world exists moment to moment, and while he has learned to walk and run, he does not know when to stop.

I gave myself my usual pep talk before heading out of the house that morning—you are strong, independent, resourceful—you can handle this. The “this” was, at the time, a typical Saturday. My husband was working, and I was responsible for taking care of our three-and-a-half-year-old and determined to get out for an activity. We had been to Sesame Place once before, only trying a few things as the waiting in line was very difficult, and it all felt a little overwhelming. I left wondering if I would (or could) do that again, but with time and some naive optimism, here I was.

The park itself is, in theory, manageable. Half comprised of rides, games, shops, and theaters, and the other half a water park. The water park was out of the question for us, with the exception of sticking our toes in the wading pool. We didn’t dare to attempt that side. For the rides, we needed things we could ride together, so that left a handful of possible rides, a show in one of the little theaters, or trying to get a photo with one of the characters.

One look at the crowd of people at the carousel, and I realized I was in over my head. My son had taken to running as soon as I took him out of his stroller or falling to the ground, and I knew that there was no way we would last in that line. He was getting bigger, faster, and stronger, and I was struggling to stay one step ahead of him.

The kind security woman's face came back to me, and I admitted that maybe it was time to ask for help. I had seen the accessibility program on the website. I wasn't sure what it entailed, but I knew that my son was a candidate. We had spent many of our Saturdays trying to do "typical" kid things. I would venture out, going to the playground or the store and sometimes, with my friend and her son, somewhere like the zoo or the aquarium. Having a friend to meet was a great motivator—getting us out of the house for adventures that I would not have attempted on my own. It helped to have another adult, particularly a trusted friend, but she, too, had a little person to manage.

On the surface, we looked like a typical mom and her son. In general, people were kind and helpful, holding doors for us as I struggled with his stroller or offering a smile when I raced past chasing him through a store. People were often less friendly when he reached out to touch them, his way of saying hello, or screamed through the check-out line. Overall though, he was still little and cute. From my side, things were getting more difficult. Now that he was mobile, his lack of safety awareness meant activities needed to be carefully considered. While other kids could be left to run a bit at the playground, I could never be more than a step behind. I wished for a way to signal to other parents that though I wanted to stand to the side and chat, I couldn't. I wanted my son to be seen for the playful little boy he was, not his differences, but sometimes I wished for a way to communicate that all wasn't what it seemed.

I took a deep breath and went back to the customer service office. Luckily, the woman working the desk was understanding, and I only had to fumble through a few nervous statements explaining that my son was on the spectrum before she gave me a comforting smile. The orange bracelet, she explained, could be used to ride up to six rides, without waiting in line. I could wear the bracelet (which was good because there was no way he would) and just needed to show the bracelet and paper to the attendant, who would check off each of our rides. With tears in my eyes but a smile on my face, I thanked her, inside feeling a bit defeated. We were officially declaring ourselves as having special needs. Not typical, but different. I felt like maybe I was giving in, surrendering on this hill, admitting defeat.

Humbled but determined, off we went to the carousel, heading to the exit as instructed. It felt awkward, as the line on the other side was full of parents and their squirming children. The ride stopped, and as the attendant opened the door

for folks to exit, I showed her our bracelet. She smiled and told us we could enter as soon as everyone exited. The tension in my shoulders eased a bit. Instead of a white flag of surrender, I realized I had been given an olive branch. A bridge over the chasm that separated our challenging world to join everyone else. Not having to wait in line meant I could leave my son in his stroller until the last minute, mitigating the risk that he would wiggle from my grasp, drop to the ground, or hurt himself. Once on the ride, he was all smiles, and I said a silent thank you to that kind security guard.

She had, with a simple comment, given me a helping hand to guide us as we navigated the park. Our orange bracelet gave us access to the few rides we were able to enjoy, and each person we encountered was quick to help. When we arrived at the outdoor theater for a show, I was allowed to keep my son in his stroller and sit on the bench beside him. When the characters left the stage to interact with the crowd, Cookie Monster headed our way. Even with a rowdy show bustling around us, there was this big, furry, friendly monster kneeling down next to us and gently offering my son a high five. The orange bracelet, it seemed, had sprinkled a little magic on our day and allowed him to be, for the moment, just a little boy squealing with delight.

Contributors

Sharon Adarlo (cover art) is a writer, artist, illustrator, and maker. She works at the Center for Statistics and Machine Learning and lives in Newark, New Jersey.

Kristin Cass has been telling stories as long as she could hold a pencil properly. From a young age, she liked to write and illustrate books for her family to read. As teenage years hit, she embraced poetry as well as prose as outlets for her creativity. These days, she attempts to keep an online journal and writes stories, albeit sporadically. She also enjoys attending Princeton's Writing Space gatherings.

Courtney Coffman is manager of lectures and publications at the School of Architecture. She has served as a content and copy editor for various architectural publications and monographs. Her own writings explore the visual culture and relational aesthetics of contemporary architecture and design alongside alternative histories and popular taste.

Robyn Howard is the program administrator at Butler College. She loves old houses, gemstones, and ethical vegans. Robyn has a Visual Arts BFA from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and funnels most of her creative energy into esoteric Halloween costumes for her rescue Cavachon, 89.

Jeanne Jackson DeVoe is a senior communications associate at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. She is involved with several community groups and loves reading, storytelling, quilting, singing in the choir, and taking walks with her husband, Syth, occasionally joined by their two adult sons, Ray and Will.

Andrea La Bella is the assistant to the director at the Center for Statistics and Machine Learning. She studied acting in Los Angeles and has recently discovered storytelling, performing at various local venues. Andrea is also an avid horsewoman, dedicated to non-violent, partner-based horsemanship. She lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania, with her husband, Rich.

Rupa Ragbirsingh is the business manager of the Department of Molecular Biology. She left The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia about six years ago to join Princeton University. She enjoys nature, music, reading, writing, and, most of all, spending time with her son.

Bhuvan Shori is the Title IX office manager and provides executive level support to the director of gender equity and Title IX administration. She is involved with several community groups and dedicated to spending time with young children and youth in passing along character-building values through storytelling and related themed activities, including the practices of meditation, chanting, and mindful living while planting more seeds of love and joy along the way. She lives in central New Jersey with her husband Vijay and their daughters, Vahini and Toshani, and looks forward to writing her own short stories for children that inspire goodness and grace in thoughts and actions.

Dianne Spatafore is the college program administrator in First College. She has spent her professional career in higher education, with a focus on event management, and loves bringing people together. She started writing after her son was born with complex medical needs and she began navigating motherhood. She lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania, with her husband and son.

John Weeren is founding director of *Princeton Writes*, a program established to strengthen the practical communication skills of our University community. Between 2004 and 2013, he served as assistant to and speechwriter for Princeton's 19th president, Shirley M. Tilghman. When time permits, he finds a creative outlet in poetry, short fiction, and plays.

Stephanie Whetstone has always loved words. Her fiction has appeared in *Waccaman*, *Waypoints*, *Drafthorse*, the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and *Narrative*. She loves to edit stories, too. Luckily, she is the assistant director of Princeton Writes, where she gets to help Princeton staff and students hone their writing and speaking skills.



Thank you for reading the work of our Writing Space group. If you would like more information about *Princeton Writes*, please visit pwrites.princeton.edu. To join our creative writing and public speaking groups, please contact pwrites@princeton.edu.



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