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In honor of

Bonnie Jo Campbell

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PREFACE

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* is dedicated to Bonnie Jo Campbell, recipient of the 2019 Mark Twain Award from the Society for The Study of Midwestern LIterature. As explored by the essays in this issue, Campbell is known for her writing on women, rural life, and the natural world of central Michigan.

To those, let's add an appreciation for her sense of a moment, of the experience of a scene, or a look. Campbell is a master of those things that pass unnoticed or are hard to quantify. This is particularly notable in her short story collection *American Savage*, a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award in fiction, with respect to the way she represents silence. In"Family Reunion," Marylou Strong hasn't spoken for a year, since her uncle raped her, "because she discovered that she could focus more clearly without words" (75). Throughout the story she does not speak, but then in the very last paragraph, "the shout of her rifle" breaks her silence and precedes a moment, after her revenge, "when the air will fill with voices" (83). The collection's opening story, "The Trespasser," begins with a family pausing on the threshold of their vacation home, finding it has become a meth kitchen. The story is written without dialogue, save the teenage daughter saying, "Holy crap" (1) and "Mommy!" (4), and her mother admonishing, "Don't look" (4) as a semen-and blood-stained mattress. the rest of the story is a mixture of the trespasser's experience in the home and the family's discovering her effects on it. This woldlessness allows Campbell to emphasize other senses—sight, touch, smell—and to consider how the sensory experience of this intrusion leads to other ways of understanding the home, the family, and the world around them. For instance, when "the daughter inhales the scent of the crime," she realizes, despite her parents' attempts to shelter her, that, many times in her life, "she has walked through the ghost of this crime and felt its chill" (4).

Silences also proliferated in Campbell's 1999 collection, *Women and Other Animals,* which is marked not only by the sheer number of wordless mements but also by the way these moments read differently depending on how they're used within the story and how they reach out to other experiences and ontologies. In this sense, we might read Campbell's silences in the spirit of Susan Sontag's 1969 essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in which she writes, "The notions

of silence, emptiness, reduction, sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.—specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art of for confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way" (300). Following Sontag, it seems that Campbell uses silence to bring central concepts into focus. Through silences—whether momentary or sustained— Campbell invites her readers to be conscioius both of their perspective and of other ways of seeing the scene in front of them.

Such invitation to consciousness, and the detailed observations that provoke them, are not only a feature of Campbell's prose. In this issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, we are proud to publish seven of her poems. In these poesm, Campbell's eye moves from miniscule (millipedes, mushrooms, metastasis) to monumental (roller coasters, storm clouds, death), and the four essays in this issue also grapple with that range. Garth Sabo examines Campbell's "millennium" stories, a cluster of work that speaks to the uncertainty surrounding the year 2000 (or Y2K). Sabo argues that writing about this period places Campbell in a unique position, as much of her fiction speaks to those adversely affected by, and influenced by, impending disaster. Sarah Harshbarger narrows her focus to one story, "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," investigating Campbell's narrative perspective as one of emotional resonance, not unlike that of Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*. Becky Cooper's innovative essay showcases just what teachers can do with a text like *Once Upon a River.* Her students create poems and art to complement the text, and Cooper situates the pedagogy needed to encourage personal growth in her classroom. Finally, Lisa DuRose takes the farm woman as her subject, reading the motif in a number of Campbell's short stories. Her placement of Campbell's characters within a lineage of farm women in American literature helps us see Campbell's work through a larger and more dynamic prism: as a member of a long line of writers concerned with farm women, farm wives, and farm daughters. Together these essays represent the possibilities of reading, studying, and teaching Bonnie Jo Campbell's fiction. Please enjoy.

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POEMS BY
BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

Beer Garden by the River Dreisam

A few Pfifferling on the side, that's what I wanted.
They were rare and in season in the Black Forest
so I packed my bag and left our house.

Bring me liver with a few Pfifferling, Sir!
My waiter returned from the kitchen shaking
his head. He had other customers,

didn't have to bother with me, but explained
how one cannot have a few Pfifflering
how with these mushrooms it is all or nothing

so I ordered an abundance of Pfifferling
and liver with onions (the liver being as
inseparable from the onions as a lover

from complications).
My companions—did I forget to mention
my fine companions? one can find them

in the Black Forest, one can find them
everywhere—they ordered this and that,
but none of them were who I'd left behind.

He is probably snacking on peanuts or picking
twigs off the lawn—things one does at home.
My companions sided with the waiter.

What I am trying to say is that I ate Pfifferling
until I swelled with longing—funny how
an ache, though it is a loss, can double your size

and effectiveness and efficiency. This I owe
to the German waiter! How rare? I asked,
how long is the season? but he had other

fish to fry, other liver. And now I will be separated
as well from that beer garden on that night
beside the river, which longs for its stony bed.

Thank you, Mrs. Thiessen

Cancer is easy
if it doesn't kill you
with twenty-four hour
help lines gifts arrive
in the mail friends inquire
invasive is clearly defined
aggressive and radiation
metastasis even a second
opinion is a thing invited
by the first tumors can almost
charm you with their properties
their lengths and weights
their inked footprints

But when my ninth grade
typing teacher dies
and I wake up bawling
hot and tangled in sheets
who can I call or complain to
she scolded me for looking
at the keys thumped me
even one day at last my fingers
flew oh forty years flew too
my scar my heart does any
woman over fifty sleep
through the night my second
opinion snores on

The Odyssey

For Danna Ephland

Cancer is easy if it doesn't kill you. What's hard
is when friends die, what's hard is to grieve.
So get up, unravel the fabric, and stand guard

against that rude suitor, death. What's hard
is this mess, clutter and noise enough to deafen.
Cancer is easy if it doesn't kill you. It was hard

as a girl, piercing my heart with every shard,
stitching together every hurt I'd perceive.
Get up, unravel the fabric, and stand guard,

find the loose ends in death's canard—
yank! Spill wine! Ruin the funereal weave!
Cancer is easy if it doesn't kill you. What's hard

is to be inhospitable to houseguests. What's hard
is scheming some new way to deceive.
Get up, unravel the fabric, and stand guard.

Even the husband's way must be barred—
Ask the goddess for another year's reprieve.
Cancer is easy, don't let it kill you. Life is hard.
Get up! Unravel death's fabric! Stand guard!

Legs

Under my kitchen
in cool chambers
millipedes hatch
and sprout
a multitude
of feathery pins
enough to float
the body,
that dark little wave,
over quarry tile,
seeking a drop
of water, pointing
comma antennae.
Each millipede

a marching army,
a village on the move.
Against my broom,
brittle cheerios
tuck their limbs.
When I get a cramp
in bed I disentangle
my shanks
from the blankets
and stumble out
barefoot, thirsty,
crunch exo-
skeletons, crush
so many legs.

Study in Black & White

My father doesn't show up in family photos. Stay still,
he said, until the only moving thing was the eye

of the camera. My father was of three minds. One mind
was in the dark room enlarging. There are no

mountains here, but my father had a door opening
into a mountain,

where he developed his film with a smattering of snow,
etching his children's faces with silver bromide.

The icicle stretching from roof to ground,
reflects the barbaric heart of the photographer.
A contact sheet

flutters in the blood-light of the darkroom, twenty-four
storm clouds above twenty-four shadows of storm clouds.

Sometimes I still confuse the photograph and its negative.
To hell with green parakeets, red cardinals, goldfinches.

See the peacock moving to and fro, magnificent in gray.
I know shutter clicks and the body's inescapable rhythms—

before I was born, my mother's heartbeat was my own.
She betrayed me by hanging laundry,

by riding horses, by standing in the whipping wind
with arms raised. I thought we were flying.

When my father left us, my aperture narrowed
for greater depth of field. And after Timothy Leary

dropped by, the pages of the Kalamazoo Gazette
exploded into color, and my father's gray eyes

turned peacock blue. He looked up and saw
contrails. Poisonous and purple.

He got into his Chevy van and drove across
the great divide, loaded with Kodachrome.

The old man was sepia-tone in his coffin.
The church was lousy with peacocks, but our camera

phones captured only their shadows
and reflections in window glass, the ice
cubes in our drinks, and grief, its blackbird shape.

Met a Blind Man on the Train out of Elkhart, Indiana

When they told him his foot was infected, too far gone,
the blind man said cut the fucking thing off,
cut off my leg, cut me all up to my dick
and take my heart too and my money, you bastards.
They took the leg,

halfway up the shin, the best cut for prosthesis,
and we pass Toledo in the dark, and he's been to Toledo,
his ma took him to Toledo, and he got diabetes
the year his ma died—his ma loved him, and it is something
to have been loved. Years later he spread her ashes

over the lake and told his stepmother to go to hell
clasping then letting go every handful of ash and tooth
and bone. I sip whiskey from a half-pint and he knows
as we pass Sandusky, Ohio, but I hesitate
to offer a blind man with one leg whiskey on a train,

though he says he loves the roller coasters at Sandusky.
The blind man's dog betrays him, hardly glances
in his direction. The dog's seeing eyes glitter in the dark,
following candy wrappers and fashion magazines,
the apple the Amish boys toss across the aisle,

the bouncing curls on a bright-cheeked girl
who pinches her baby sister until she cries.

Trouble in the Meth Cave in Winter

Kalamazoo drug-enforcement officers today raided what they'd dubbed a "meth cave." The 10-foot-by-10 foot was dug 5 feet deep into the side of a hill on Kalamazoo's east side. It was accessible through a narrow tunnel, authorities say. —Kalamazoo Gazette

There's a hole in the earth full of bad news, deep in a hill
on the east side of Kalamazoo, hollowed out by love

of meth and meth buddies, kerosene reeking, anhydrous ammonia
and Sudafed and flashlights, paper towels and white powdery residue

of meth. Hard working meth-heads dug ten feet down, ten feet wide
inside, thinking of their baby mamas getting high and giggling

and being skinny again and not bitching about money. When two kids
walk across the top with parkas unzipped on their way to the river,

dirt falls from the ceiling. The claustrophobe didn't mind the digging
and now keeps his panic hidden, smoking cigarette after cigarette

as they cook up and shoot up—he's not afraid of needles (or snakes),
but sweats more that the others as he ties off his arm. He wants

to build a meth lab in a tree house so he can have a view, breathe
cool air and not fumes, see Christmas lights at dusk, little kids
pulling sleds along the path, teenagers wobbling on ice skates.

RETROSPECTIVE FUTURITY: BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S MILLENNIAL FICTION

Garth Sabo

For all the fears of catastrophic failure and eschatological reckoning that surrounded the millennium, its arrival twenty years ago was a disappointment. The lights stayed on. The gas continued to flow. Banks did not dissolve, and Jesus did not stir from his seat in heaven. These are glib recollections, but the year 2000 seems to invite glibness. Months of anticipation and uncertainty gave way suddenly to an embarrassed disbelief that continues to treat millennial anxiety as a moment of hysteria best forgotten. James Berger's "Twentieth-Century Apocalypse: Forecasts and Aftermaths" shows how quickly the politics of Y2K disavowal took hold. By the time the special issue on apocalyptic fiction Berger's essay introduces was published in the Winter 2000 edition of *Twentieth-Century Literature*—less than a year after the world was supposed to end—he was able to wax nostalgic on "how little was expected" of the transition between millennia (387). Berger acknowledges that Y2K anxiety was "endemic" to the liminal period between centuries, but he insists on seeing infrastructural anxiety as a subcategory of apocalyptic dread, making use of the imbalance between the two to look down on fears of a dark, cold New Year with a "pleasant nostalgia knowing that there were still a few people looking forward to the end of the world" (387). "Most of us," he concludes without any apparent concern for the easy we/they distinction he falls back upon, "ultimately were convinced by government and business assurances that the problem had been addressed," and those who were not are summarily dismissed as quaint anachronisms dwelling on the physical and temporal fringes of society (387). Y2K was the failure that failed,

and spectacularly so. In the twenty-first century, to fear this type of collapse is to worry from and for another time and place.

What happens to a doomsday deferred? It is surprising that so little has been said about Y2K after the millennium, given that a world *did* end at the stroke of midnight. Bonnie Jo Campbell has employed this language of an unseen disaster to describe the work she does in her short story collection *American Salvage* (2009). As Campbell reveals in an interview for the *Kenyon Review*, "the stories in *American Salvage* are making the case that not all Americans are on the same page heading into the twenty-first century. It's as though there was some kind of apocalypse and nobody noticed, and now a large number of folks are living off the debris that's left behind" (Kothari).

This insistence that "not all Americans are on the same page" rings especially true alongside Berger's claim that "most of us" saw through the problem of Y2K and his dismissal of those who didn't as "anachronistic." Campbell's willingness to contest the portrayal of millennial anxiety as correlated with a lack of intelligence or cultural savvy is consistent with her broader interest in the overlooked humanity of Michigan's rural and semi-rural areas. She evinces a type of nostalgia for Y2K anxiety that is very different from Berger's, if only for the experience of subtle hope that came with it and was subsequently crashed by the continuation of the status quo. Thus, by looking back on the millennium instead of forward to it, Campbell activates a desire for renewal that is located in retrospect rather than anticipation.

In a trio of short stories from *American Salvage* and *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters* (2015)—"World of Gas" and "Fuel for the Millennium" in the former and "Blood Work, 1999" in the latter—Campbell further articulates her idea of a disaster nobody noticed at the cusp of the year 2000. Campbell constructs a relationship with the past that in many ways mirrors Berger's "pleasant nostalgia" for the end of the world, though hers is grounded in community rather than alienation. As we enter the second decade of a world that continues to be comfortably warmed, well-lit, and conveniently connected in spite of dire prognostications to the contrary, it seems especially appropriate to reflect with Campbell on the cold, dark, lonely future we are not living in.[1] This perspective of retrospective futurity, looking back to the futures we had in the past in order to view the present as the accumulation of memories that might not have

been, resonates throughout Bonnie Jo Campbell's writing, though nowhere as clearly as in the three stories this essay addresses. Campbell looks back to the millennium as a way of thinking about the Midwestern present in terms of what was imagined but never realized. The timing of these stories invites comparisons between the twenty-first century struggles we imagined and the very different, though very real, struggles we endure instead. By reading Campbell with the millennium in mind, and approaching Y2K through these stories, millennial anxiety emerges as a critical and cultural apparatus for evaluating the temporal components of place—in this case, the Michigan cities and towns that capture Campbell's interest.

The millennial stories in *American Salvage* and *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters* share several distinctive traits. Each is set in the grips of Y2K panic but written after the reality of its failure has set in. Each begins with a beleaguered protagonist's personal and professional reactions to others' fears for the millennium. Each ends in hopeful speculation for the new millennium to correct the shortcomings of the old. Thus, as "Fuel for the Millennium" draws to a close, refrigerator repairman and doomsday prepper Hal Little imagines stepping out of his pole barn bunker after the Rapture and knows "he'd hear the sweet voices of birds and angels. He hope[s] he would smell flowers. He hope[s] there would be babies" (150). Marika of "Blood Work, 1999" enters the new year from the burn ward of the hospital where she works, convinced that "[a]s the sun rose on the new millennium, there would no longer be rich or poor, weak or strong" (195). And though Susan, the put-upon office manager for the Pur-Gas propane company, is less sure of the transformative potential of the new year, "World of Gas" ends in contemplation of "some advantages to a real millennium breakdown" as well (38). "Life would be quieter without power," and "[o]verhead, the stars would shine as brightly as they did in the desert sky. Men revving motorcycles, chain saws, and lawn tractors in garages would wind down, too, their machines becoming dead, oiled metal in their hands. The voices of vice principals, men who ordered Pur-Gas, and guys jabbering on TV and radio would slow and then stop, if only for a moment. Men of all ages everywhere—men talking about football, auto engines, politics, hydraulic pumps, and the mechanics of love—would finally just shut up"(38). Campbell deploys the same shift to the hopeful subjunctive in all three cases, with Hal, Marika, and Susan all imagining what

"would" happen to theorize a promise of societal improvements both great and small.

Campbell's preference for the certainty of "would" over the possibility of "could" or "might" reflects the uniquely infectious quality of disaster acquired in the months (for some, years) leading up to the year 2000. Even reassurances that everything would be okay were tinged with the possibility that many things might not be. As chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Arthur Levitt's remarks to the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion on September 17, 1999, preached confidence that "the first day of trading after the New Year will be business as usual." Yet those same remarks end with the promise that "the Commission is also developing a coordinated plan to respond to any problems that arise." Levitt's use of the indicative mood stands out with particular clarity alongside Campbell's subjunctive; his invocation of "problems that arise" comes close to promising their occurrence, even while insisting that "the disasters that some originally predicted will not get even an honorable mention in the history books." The official stance articulated here is that nothing could go wrong at the stroke of midnight, and that the government would be prepared when something did anyway.[2]

This inability to abandon thoughts of ruin pervades Campbell's millennial stories and underscores the material precarity that her fiction takes as its foundation. Even Susan, who for most of "World of Gas" is "so busy scoffing at the alarmists that she [doesn't] let herself really think about the year 2000," concedes that the "principle involved with the zero-zero date . . . could cause problems with computer systems controlling traffic lights and ATM machines" (37). What follows is a litany of conditional language that embodies the mixture of anxiety and assurance that attracts Campbell to the turning point between centuries: "Maybe she'd allow extra time to get to work on Monday, January 3. Maybe she ought to have a couple hundred dollars on hand in case her first paycheck was screwed up. She could easily fill her bathtub with water, but probably she wouldn't bother" (37). Susan's decision to "probably" ignore the survival instructions she read in her brother-in-law's militia-style pamphlet makes her certainty in the status quo remarkably tenuous. The rumors of Y2K and a dark, cold future in Michigan are persuasive enough that even those who are sure disaster will be averted plan for its effects nonetheless.

As a result, the promise of disruption and the possibility of ruin runs throughout these three stories. Hal Little is aptly named, given his Chicken Little insistence that the sky will fall at the stroke of midnight. His story begins with his knowledge "beyond the shadow of a doubt" that "everything would fail – the stock markets, of course, but also the government and then the power company, the water and sewer, law and order, and most importantly, the gas stations" (144). Marika is closer to Susan than Hal in terms of her belief that disaster is imminent, and yet she also "knew that at the stroke of midnight, as the fireworks display lit up the sky over Kalamazoo, a hurricane or tornado could hit this hospital just as easily as any other place" (194). Framing Hal's and Marika's conviction as forms of knowledge pushes us to see their actions as the rational recognition of patterns of interconnection rather than (solely) a flight of fancy or religious zealotry. Y2K always fails extradiegetically for Campbell, which means that even if history would prove them wrong, the narrative leaves their hope intact.

In all three cases, the promise of January 1 relies upon the chaos of December 31. Susan is most explicit about connecting her imagined delivery to the destruction of the technological apparatuses that would be rendered inoperable by the Y2K shutdown, but Marika's dreams likewise begin by imagining the electrical system at the First National Bank short-circuiting and "the bars guarding the vault at the heart of the bank [sliding] open" (194). Hal Little, meanwhile, is sure that he will be saved along with "the other Men of God who had prepared for the end," which means that he can only imagine entering Heaven after "open[ing the] reinforced steel-and-aluminum, solid-core front door" he installed to thwart rioters after the anticipated collapse. The hope for change, in other words, is inseparable from the destruction that must clear a place for the new.

Campbell's characters embrace a form of devastating optimism that Frank Kermode presents as characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode contends that, "even in its less lurid modern forms," the apocalypse "still carries with it the notions of a decadence and possible renovation, still represents a mood finally inseparable from the condition of life, the contemplation of its necessary ending, the ineradicable desire to make some sense of it" (187). It is worth noting that this detail comes from Kermode's 1999 epilogue, where he waxes philosophical on the then-current millennium fever. The apocalyptic, for Kermode, must

be future-oriented. It promises to make sense of life by rendering the future knowable, even if that knowledge is of destruction assured. From his vantage point at the end of the twentieth century, Kermode looks ahead to the twenty-first and insists that the apocalyptic fears associated with the coming epoch are merely the latest rendition of a long cultural narrative of pending collapse.

Kermode labors to discredit the significance of numerological signs of doom, by which the round numbers of the year 2000 could be taken to signify the coming of the biblical apocalypse. With the calm of a man whose career was made decades earlier, he insists that "there is no intrinsic connection between apocalypse and millennium" (183); elsewhere he calls the millennium "a calendrical fiction that makes available new attitudes to time and its passage" (189). James Berger, clearly influenced by Kermode's seminal text on this topic, strikes a similar note in his introductory essay on the apocalyptic in the twenty-first century with his opening description of the "arbitrary chronometric click of the millennium" (387). Kermode and Berger are both surely right to point out that the zero-zero date carries no ontological capacity for destruction, but they underestimate the ubiquity of systems that, at the turn of the century, were both essential to life and vulnerable, in perception if not truth, to the computer glitch. In other words, Kermode is spirited in his critique of Y2K as a hardware problem.

Campbell's fiction adds the catastrophic impact that software problems could (and can) have as well to apocalyptic renditions of the millennium. Her depiction of Hal Little, in particular, stands out for its nuance in this regard. The conservative orthodoxy he spouts throughout "Fuel for the Millennium" would seem to pigeonhole him as the type of apocalyptic Christian that feared the millennium for numerological reasons, whom Kermode would insist was mistaken and Berger would condescend to as quaint. Yet Campbell weaves together biblical and infrastructural fears in her bespectacled repairman, who urges his customers to "accept . . . both Jesus and the millennium problem" as a way to avoid "the impending Y2K disaster" (145). The simile he uses to understand the millennium problem, "like religion," further indicates that the two are entangled but distinguishable (145), and also suggests an ability to limn the borders of faith-based thinking in anticipation of doomsday in a way that other equations of Y2K and the apocalypse struggle to replicate. Campbell's millennial fiction, in other words, does not shy away

from portraying the religious anxieties dredged up by the replacement of nines with zeroes, but she also pairs these depictions with real, materialist concerns that can be traced back to the data infrastructure of modern life. She remains ever attentive to the material precarity that her characters experience and scholars of the apocalypse presumably did not as the twenty-first century was born. Hal Little's fears for the darkness of January are complex and rooted as much in a pragmatic assessment of his risk exposure as they are in his Faith Channel convictions of a vengeful God.

Fitting Y2K under the umbrella of the apocalyptic, as Kermode does, would thus seem to sap it of any unique temporal quality or critical interest, but Campbell's triple investigation of the transition between millennia insists on some specificity in this liminal moment. To write about the millennium as she does is to eulogize a disaster that didn't happen. Y2K was a future that unfolded or unraveled in the past; for her characters, it became disastrous precisely in its failure to be a disaster. This is surely why her millennial fiction dwells in the moments preceding the New Year. "World of Gas" and "Fuel for the Millennium" are both set an indeterminate amount of time before December 31, though close enough for the date to loom over both stories. Hal remembers starting to hoard gasoline "a few months ago, in the heat of summer" (144), whereas Susan reflects on her problems in "a stream of cold night air" and "imagine[s] the hands of her kitchen clock spinning faster and faster, racing toward New Year's Eve, and then stopping" (37-8). This image of the clock stopping at midnight is fairly representative of Campbell's approach to the millennium in all three stories, as it serves equally well as a material reminder of the real fears of infrastructure failure as well as a symbol of her temporal fascination with the liminal moment between centuries.

The clock stops for Campbell at midnight because it is precisely at that moment where the mixture of anxiety and optimism for the future reaches its critical mass. "Blood Work, 1999" gets us closest to that pinpoint in time, ending just as one year gives way to the next. Marika, who has snuck back into the hospital where she works in order to fulfill the burn victim Tiny's request for her intimate touch, "hear[s] the popping of the fireworks," signaling the arrival of January 1, and along with it "the beep of [the] heart rate monitor" as well as a sudden surprise "when the overhead light came on" (195), presumably as the night nurse enters the room to check on the patient

and discovers Marika masturbating him. The rapid pace of Campbell's prose here encourages a reading of these various events all unfolding simultaneously at precisely the moment of transformation from 1999 to 2000. In particular, the sensory shock of the overhead lights flipping on, which causes Marika to "blink and [feel] herself bursting open like flowers in sunlight, overflowing into the new millennium" (195), obscures the physical setting of this moment and highlights instead the temporality. This is a moment frozen in time, where the physical setting fades into the background in order to highlight the temporal experience of limitless promise in the face of an uncertain future, which is precisely how Campbell invites us to reflect on the millennium.

It is crucial to recognize the collectivity that drives these dreams of the year 2000. In all three instances, the promise of the future is inseparable from the hope for greater contact with a sense of community. Loneliness emerges as the core condition of the world that, with any luck, would dissolve at midnight. In pointed opposition to the cliché of Y2K preparation as an act of withdrawal and isolation, then, Campbell sees the millennium as a potential source of togetherness. Though most of Hal Little's actions ostensibly create distance between his farm and other survivors of the anticipated apocalypse, Campbell weaves his deep-seated need for closeness throughout "Fuel for the Millennium." Hal's repeated references to the bloody car accident that killed his parents frame his actions as a response to the trauma of loss. His preparations offer a palliative against the need to "fend for himself" (145), and thus his final reflection centers on his closeness to others in the Kingdom of Heaven after Jesus nestles his pole barn into the Heavenly Woods (149-50). Hal hopes to be "not right next to the other houses, but not far away, either," and follows this with a short list of possible neighbors he would be "pleasantly surprised" to gain: a Faith Channel minister; his parents; his skeptical customers from the beginning of the story (150). The implication here is strongly of Hal's desire for community and his faith that the millennial apocalypse will restore the closeness that had been torn asunder by loss.

Likewise, Marika's decision to spend the last moments of 1999 pleasuring Tiny comes shortly after admitting that "lately [she] had been feeling sorry for herself for not having had a boyfriend in six years" (184). As with Hal, Campbell couches Marika's endless desire to serve as a means to distract from her relational deficits: "Being

alone wasn't nearly as bad as being a refugee or a victim of a famine or of debilitating burns" (184). These opportunities for contact multiply in the vision she receives after being touched by the regular patient she knows as the Lightning Man, such that Marika's millennium may be defined as the tearing down of boundaries between stranger and friend. After the sun rises on the new millennium, she foresees that "[s]trangers would embrace and heal one another with touch" and feels "more than ready to ladle out [this] nourishment herself" (195). The Y2K glitch is thus valorized as a social leveler, and it is in "Blood Work, 1999" that Campbell pursues the implications of the openness that would result.

Even Susan, whose exasperation with the millennial hullabaloo and the "pain-in-the-ass alarmists in town these days" manifests as a desire for solitude by the end of "World of Gas" (34), shares Marika's optimism that a slower, quieter world will restore balance to her interactions with the men in her life. This belief is made particularly clear while recalling the tryst she interrupts between her teenage son and his girlfriend. The room where the two lie is "lit only by the bluish glow of the television" (36), and her parting shot, thought but not said in response to her son's insistence that she "wouldn't understand," focuses on this disruptive technological mediation: "if this girl means so much to you, then why don't you turn off the damned TV when you're in bed with her?" (37). The bright shine of starlight she invokes in the story's closing moment of millennial fantasy must then be seen as a corrective to the uncanny glow of the television.

Of course, any reading of these stories will inevitably be textured by the historical fact that civilization did not crumble at 12:01 on January 1. The poignant tragedy with which Campbell imbues these stories is the knowledge that these hopes for new communities lit only by starlight will be roundly dashed in the moments immediately following the last words on the page. Marika's case is the clearest example of this, due to the shorter interval between the end of her story and the beginning of the new millennium as well as the extreme final action she took in 1999 and the equally extreme reaction it is likely to receive when the overhead lights dim in the first seconds of 2000. And, indeed, Marika's brief return later in the closing story of *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters* reiterates that the new world she imagined the sun rising over on January 1 failed to materialize. "The Fruit of the Pawpaw Tree" finds Marika some years later, still entangled

in her family's hardscrabble life in the semirural areas outlying Kalamazoo.

Campbell makes it clear that the trajectory of Marika's life was not unduly altered by her impropriety in the burn ward. She is still easily swayed by emotional appeals for aid and now serves on the board of directors for the local Humane Society, a position for which she is eminently well suited. But this continuation in spite of the promise of change is precisely what Campbell's millennial fiction asks us to consider. She plays the future orientation of her stories against the retrospective actions needed to read them from the twenty-first century in order to juxtapose the radical challenges that had been imagined against the mundane struggles that unfolded instead.

Susan and Hal fare no better. The imagined reprieve the millennium would grant Susan from the relentless jabbering of the men in her life, including her newly and naïvely sexually active son Josh, never comes, and Hal Little's doomsday prepping leaves him without "anything left in the bank" (147) and ill-prepared for the self-sufficient farm life on which he has mortgaged his future. The likelihood of financial ruin rears its head at several points throughout these stories, in fact, underscoring the inescapable capitalist gravity that holds the various systems that ought to have failed in orbit around each other. The Pur-Gas fuel company arranges to profit coming and going from Y2K preparations; Susan informs her brother-in-law that he will "have to pay double rent on the [propane] tank" if he doesn't "use a hundred dollars a month worth of this gas" (36), all but ensuring that the money spent to procure the propane tank will be followed with punitive charges. Campbell leaves these hardships implied but inevitable so that they enter the memory ephemerally, equal in substance to the imagined lives each character would have led had the millennium gone wrong in the right way.

Campbell's decision to reflect on this regional temporality through the millennium is astute, as she recognizes that Y2K was more of a threat to a way of life than to life itself. Though the possibility of violence and even death is invoked in all three stories, the emphasis remains on the benefits to be gained by dissolving the infrastructures that perpetuate economic and material precarity. As Campbell shows, retrospective futurity is well-suited to representations of the Midwest because it is grounded in the material and economic vulnerabilities that make the continuation of the status quo

perilous. Looking to the past to find hope for the future speaks to a condition of uncertainty and betweenness that is at home in the cities and towns along the Rust Belt.

Following the examples set in these three stories to delve deeper into the implications of a regional temporality provides a new way to think critically about the role of place in Midwestern writing in general and Campbell's Midwestern writing in particular. It is important to recognize that place is not merely a spatial term; it includes the temporal as well. We can see examples of this in the complex way David Pichaske entwines the two in the first chapter of *Rooted: Seven Midwest Writers of Place*. "Place," he writes, "is important to literature for several reasons" (5), one of which is the way place "provides a characteristic manner of acting and reacting—a behavioral language, if you will—which locates a character in time and space" (6). Thus, though space is, according to Pichaske, where "Midwest writers begin," it need not be where these writers end. Campbell's nostalgia is for the opportunity, now lost but still remembered, to grow something new from the ruins of a futureless present. Although the new millennium is portrayed as a pending catastrophe in all three stories, Campbell opens up the possibility that the real disaster is that Y2K failed to ruin us in the way we hoped it might.

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NOTES

[1]This is, of course, not to say that the millennium has been completely ignored in the twenty years since 19s gave way to 20s on the calendar. Kevin Shay's 2008 novel, *The End as I Know It,* stands out for its nostalgic take on the end of the 1990s, and 2018's *Surviving Y2K*, the second season of Dan Taberski's *Headlong* podcast, revels in a contemporary interest to return to the millennium as a source for human stories. However, Shay's reliance on a comedic tone presumes that, as readers, we are in on the joke of the millennium. Taberski's preference for "happy—and sane—endings" to the millennial stories he tells precludes a sense of loss associated with the failure of millennial failure that this essay is interested in exploring (Larson).

[2]As Kavita Philip and Terry Harpold note, "Y2K panic was most forceful and general in the United States" due to this country's "deeply embedded . . . fantasy-structures of crisis and redemption" related to computer networks (para. 2). Ross Anderson's essay "Reasons Not to Panic" is a cogent reminder of the global interconnectivity that exacerbated, however subtly, millennial anxieties. Anderson describes Y2K preparations from the UK perspective, insisting that Y2K disruptions were both impossible and someone else's responsibility: "Nothing can possibly go wrong, and if it does it's the previous government's fault" (11). Even Anderson's title, with its enumeration of reasons not to panic, invokes reasons *to* panic by negation, suggesting a common mixture of confidence and contingency planning on both sides of the Atlantic.

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BONE TIRED: CYCLES OF GUILT AND EXHAUSTION IN BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S "MOTHERS, TELL YOUR DAUGHTERS"

Sarah Harshbarger

In the title story of her 2015 collection, *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters*, Bonnie Jo Campbell tells the story of a woman on her deathbed who has much left to say, much of it in defense of herself and her own parenting. The story is the narrator's unspoken "letter" to her daughter, whom she calls Sis, and who is revealed to have been sexually assaulted by the mother's on-again-off-again lover, Bill Theroux. The narrator makes many excuses for herself—some about her own upbringing, some about the circumstances in her adult life, some about the time period in which she raised the children. The excuses seem to boil down to one thing: tiredness. At the end of her life, as tired and as powerless as she will ever be, the narrator addresses her daughter's complaints. In this story, Bonnie Jo Campbell portrays a single, working-class mother who is guilty because of her exhaustion and who is exhausted by her guilt. The narrator's unspoken confessions reflect the cyclical struggle of attempting to get out from under the weight of responsibility and feeling more guilt because of it. Campbell's epistolary story gives insight into the mind of a working-class mother who is figuratively and literally voiceless, stubbornly trying to reclaim the narrative of her own life until it exhausts her.

In this story, Campbell crafts a narrative of bone tiredness through rationalizations and defensiveness. The narrator retells stories from the past, but the memories she selects to tell and the language that she uses to tell them reflect her lifelong pattern of rejecting agency that has never really been offered to her. She presents herself as strong and independent, but also as a victim who was inca-

pable of changing her circumstances. She distances herself from her choices at the same time that she tries to defend them. Her story has holes in it, and as she tells it, her exhaustion allows the reality of her life to seep through the cracks. Like other short stories by Campbell, "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" depicts a working-class woman afflicted by trauma and abuse that have been perpetuated over generations. It also depicts a woman challenged by stubbornness and refusal to admit fault, a stubbornness that exhausts her until the end of her life.

Stubbornness has allowed this character to survive the hostile world she had to live in, but it also contributes to her inability to escape a pattern of excuse making and shame. One thing the narrator is especially stubborn about is maintaining that she did her best as a mother or at least that she gave her children a better life than she was given herself. Rather than seeing herself as failing at parenting, she sees herself as successfully avoiding certain weaknesses, the weaknesses of her own mother. Ann V. Bell argues that "[u]nlike women of low socioeconomic status (SES) who repeatedly described circumstances in their lives they did not want to mirror, women of high SES wanted to emulate their own childhood environment" (32). While women of high socioeconomic status tended to feel nostalgic about their own childhoods and see their own parents as successful parents, women of low SES reacted against their parents' methods and looked to their families as examples of what not to do. The narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" was motivated during her children's upbringing to be different from her own mother—at least to be present since her mother was not. She says that "'[m]y mama couldn't stand the work of the farm, especially not the slaughter. After a while she couldn't stand anything, and then your grandpa sent her away. I used to be afraid I'd end up in the nuthouse too, was afraid your grandpa would send me there if I didn't work hard'" (Campbell 89). At times, the narrator is shocked that she could be considered a bad mother, especially after she dedicated her labor and her body to the well-being of her children. In her mind, she succeeded as a parent because she did what her own mother did not do—she worked hard, and she stayed around.

In a way, however, her effort and success open her up to more criticism, because, as Bell notes, "Women adapt their definitions of good mothering to what they are able to provide" (26). The narrator's daughter does not have children of her own, but because she has gone

on to have a better life and career than the narrator had, she has adapted her definition of good mothering to exclude her own mother. Bell also finds that "[w]omen of low SES first compare themselves to their own mothers in an effort to move away from the bad mother stereotype" (33). Both the narrator and her daughter, aware of judgments that may face them because of their socioeconomic status, compare themselves to their mothers in attempts to distance themselves from their class (Campbell 101). For the narrator, however, this effort only tangles the web of her excuses because if she uses her background to excuse her mothering, surely she must excuse her mother's mothering too.

There are times when the narrator appears to comprehend her failures to protect her daughter from harm, but even in her moments of understanding, she remains stubborn in keeping up her façade. She hears Sis making comments about her to the hospice nurse and imagines how her children will talk about her when she's gone, and she tries to shield herself from criticism with excuses. As Bell explains, systems of surveillance are designed to keep a close eye on women of lower status, which can worsen "bad mother" stereotypes among the poor and create tension between class groups. Bell writes that "[s]ocial agencies such as welfare departments and child protective services publicly survey the parental behavior of poor and working-class women. This surveillance amplifies the deviance of poor women by making their mothering practices far more visible than the mothering of higher-class groups" (24). Campbell's narrator's daughter moves out of the class she was born into, and at her mother's deathbed, she reflects on the way she was raised as a woman of higher status critiquing a woman of lower status. The trauma Sis endured cannot be blamed entirely on social structures, inherited trauma, or status, but the idea of being judged that consumes the narrator in her final address to her daughter has something to do with what she has seen happen to other women of her class and what she has experienced herself. The thought of being remembered only for her failures keeps the narrator from laying down her façades and allowing herself forgiveness, even at the end.

The narrator's words exhibit the honesty of a final goodbye, but because she is unable to speak in her condition, they also exhibit the bias of a speech that does not have to face criticism. In this story, she thinks through some of the things she would like to say to her daughter, sometimes reacting in her mind to conversations she hears hap-

pening around her. Sometimes she is critical or scolding, but other times she seems sincere and vulnerable. She wishes she could say some of these things to Sis out loud, but the letter she composes in her head allows her to tell her side of the story uninterrupted. Ann Bower argues that "[i]n epistolary novels published from the seventeenth century to the present, we often find women characters who increase their power or sense of self through the opportunity to write their own truths. Their material conditions may not change greatly (although sometimes what they write does affect their circumstances, directly or indirectly), but their words shape their own lives and the lives of others" (30).

Campbell's narrator claims that she has not had much agency throughout her life, and notes that she has even less now. However, in writing this letter, she at least has the power to reframe the story of how she lost her daughter. The fact that Sis cannot argue with her letter means that she can force Sis to become a part of her narrative, one in which the narrator was judged too harshly and judged for things outside of her control. However, this also means that the narrator's material conditions will not be improved by her words to Sis, and since she cannot write her words down, her real narratee is herself.

The narrator uses the pronoun "you" to refer to Sis throughout the story, but she also sometimes uses a more general "you" that could also refer to groups such as the narrator's children or even people in general. "Don't you know we need our skin to cover what's underneath, to protect us from the burn of air and sunlight? Women get themselves hurt every day—men mess with girls in this life, they always have, always will—but there's no sense making hard luck and misery your life's work," she warns (89). The first "you" here is addressed directly to Sis as the narrator discourages her exploration of injustice against women. The second is part of a broader statement reflecting the narrator's life philosophy that dwelling on injustice is unproductive and a waste of time. In his discussion of the pronoun in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Bruce Morrissette argues that "[f]requently 'you' cannot be said to apply completely to either the protagonist or to the narratee, but represents Hemingway's didactic or moralizing merging of the two" (9). Hemingway's "you" in lines like "You could not go back. If you didn't go back, what happened? You never got back to Milan" (231) represents Henry talking to himself rather than to another character; Campbell's use of the narrative

"you" in this story has a similar effect in that it allows her narrator to rationalize a point of view to herself. In the didactic but also personal, line, "there's no sense making hard luck and misery your life's work" Campbell's narrator talks herself out of her guilt by implying that this is true of "you," which would be a more powerful argument, rather than just of herself. The pronoun "you" distances the narrator from her own responsibility—her second-person references to Sis draw attention to the reality of her solitude within her own mind, and the general statement attempts to move the problem outside of the family unit to society as a whole. The second person used throughout the unspoken letter makes the narrator's defensiveness clear. She can't tell a story about her daughter without comparing it to a story about herself, and she can't talk about her own experience without accusing her daughter, or a larger group, of something.

A large part of the narrator's defensiveness is using language that distances her from the role she has played in her daughter's unhappiness. She not only assigns blame; she removes herself from the narrative, and she uses "you" as much as "I" in her own self-reflection. The process of removing her own agency as she composes her last thoughts is part of her cycle of guilt and exhaustion. If the way she speaks in the present is meant to reflect her attitude over the course of her life, it appears that this character has spent a long time stubbornly refusing to either cope with harm done to her or apologize for harm done to others. The patterns in the narrator's defensiveness, including the way she uses language to distance herself from her children's trauma, reveal that she is practiced at keeping her guard up—an exhausting form of labor in itself.

The use of second person is not the only way the narrator distances herself from her guilt. She also chooses language that removes her from her own life story, particularly in describing herself as a mother and in describing her own body. She rejects the idea that she had agency in the processes of child-bearing and child-rearing, and this attitude is reflected in her storytelling. The way the narrator speaks indicates that she sees parenting not as a truly conscious decision she has made or as a way of life she has chosen, but as something that has happened to her and her body—a long medical event of her life that has physically drained her. One scene from her youth illustrates how she views becoming a mother as a transformation she underwent unwittingly, stumbling into the role of struggling mother before she had finished playing the role of flirtatious teenage daugh-

ter: "One man had a glass eye, said he'd been shot. When he popped it out, we were all possessed by a powerful desire to hold the blind thing in our hands. Julia touched it first and passed it around. She got pregnant right away, and the rest of us followed, and for a lot of years we raised our children, fed our husbands, worked hard at low-paying jobs or at jobs that didn't pay at all, and learned just how tired a body could be" (92).

The glass eye that determines the order of the girls' pregnancies is desirable to hold, tempting because of its strangeness and because it does not belong in the body. They take hold of it and pass it around, and as this narrator sees it, they step into the role that was already decided for them. Campbell describes the eye as being "popped out," the same way the narrator remembers the experience of childbirth; later, she compares the birth of Sis, her firstborn, to spitting out a watermelon seed (99). At the end of the glass eye passage, the narrator summarizes the trajectory of the girls' lives. They would become mothers, and they would become tired. The physical exhaustion the narrator feels in the present has been nearly lifelong, and her attitude seems to be that she has taken on this exhaustion without preparation and without much reward. Perhaps intentionally, perhaps subconsciously, she distances herself from the most important role she has played in her life. It is the beginning of a justification for her performance as a parent—one she clearly feels conflicted about despite her unapologetic tone.

Seeing and describing her body as an object is a comfort to this character as she avoids the implications of her involvement in bringing children into the world: "The men who came around never passed up an easy target, so they killed all the rabbits. I meant to sew a blanket from the soft skins to replace my own skin, which I imagined wadded up under the bed in my room, smeared with menstrual blood, stiff with sperm, stretched by pregnancy" (93). On her deathbed, the narrator sees her body as a used tool, worn out too early. Here, she doesn't reference her lifelong labor of farm work in her assessment of her body, but rather describes the skin in terms of the transformations of reproduction. She removes her own agency in the language she uses and, in so doing, is able to distance herself from the ways she knows, deep down, she has harmed her children. She seeks security in the same lack of agency she blames for these harms in the first place. She is tired because of men, and her children suffer because

she cannot fight through the exhaustion of those men or the time she spends convincing herself that she was better than she was.

One belief the narrator uses to defend herself is that she had no control over men's behavior when she was raising her children. When she overhears her daughter complaining about her to the nurses and others, she thinks to herself that her daughter should really blame the men, the narrator's husband and lovers, not her. The narrator doesn't allow herself to think that if she has had knowledge of the events all this time and didn't stop them, she should share the blame. She refutes her daughter's accusation that she fed her children liquor as babies but admits that her husband did so: "He poured it, burning, into your tender mouths when you cried and kept him awake—men did what they did back then, and there was no stopping him. You complain about the way I raised you children, but I only wanted to live another day. You see me as powerful in my crimes, but I was bone tired" (90). Not only does the narrator confess to knowledge of her husband's actions, but she also describes them in harsh, vivid detail. At times, she appears to be so confident in her lack of agency that she has nothing to hide. By claiming a place as an inferior, she shields herself from criticism and the guilt of wondering if she could have made some other choice. Men had exhausted her so much by the time her children came around that she had no energy left to protect them. Though she talks about events in the past, this attitude affects her in the present as well. At the same time that she is claiming exhaustion as a defense, she is exhausting what little time and energy she has left in life attempting to talk her way out of a burdensome guilt.

The narrator's excuse-making reaches its climax when she attempts to reckon with her failure to prevent her daughter's sexual assault, which she identifies as the reason her daughter ran away from home and the reason their relationship is irreparable (91). She can justify a disorderly house and dangerous practices that didn't cause any long-term harm, but it is difficult for her to find justification for a wrong against her daughter that she knows, from her own experience of assault, must be damaging: "'But you got it wrong, Sis, when you said I didn't care what a man did to you. I didn't like it, and I've been lying here racking my brain about it. Maybe it was the way he asked, so casual, like it was an ordinary thing, like, can I borrow your truck? Maybe that was why I couldn't say no. Maybe I thought it would've been selfish to say, *Hell, no, you can't kiss my eleven-year-old daughter'"* (100).

Even to the narrator, this rationalization isn't totally convincing. Bill Theroux doesn't physically intimidate the narrator into letting him assault her daughter, and it seems that if she'd said no, he might not have (100). It does appear as though doing so may have cost the narrator his love or affection, however. The narrator expresses emotional exhaustion after a lifetime of needing men, whether for practical reasons, such as to help her work and raise her kids, or to fill a void she's been socialized to see in her life (Campbell 102). In this situation, however, exhaustion falls flat as a reason. Even comparing the event to her own rape doesn't make the narrator feel justified, and she has no choice but to accept some degree of responsibility and go on carrying guilt for it (88). She admits, "'Twenty-some years later, after his wife died, he came to me with his raw loneliness, and I took him in. I thought I'd already paid the price for his company, so I was damn well going to have it'" (102). In the end, she knowingly makes a self-centered decision to give herself the only relief that is still available to her. To her daughter, she describes this betrayal as tired resignation, a choice made only after realizing her wrong step was taken too far in the past to go back. She is resigned in explaining her choice, too—in her letter, she voices her defense as though she is on the losing end of an argument, even when no one is speaking to her.

While the narrator is happy to discuss men's power over women and the effects it can have, she feels uncomfortable doing so in the language of feminism. She is proud of her daughter's achievements in becoming a professor, but she is skeptical of Sis's field, women's studies. She worries that the privileged, liberal culture of women's studies will turn her daughter against her. In *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English*, Helen Buss explains that in most cultures with a history of written language, "societal and biological pressures have worked to leave women almost completely in charge of the earliest mappings a human child makes of the self and the world, and almost completely excluded from direct participation in the more power-based mappings of a culture" (11). The narrator becomes anxious as she sees herself losing her daughter, whom she was once entirely responsible for rearing, to the perspectives laid out by the dominant culture. She perceives that her educated daughter has started to see her the way others of higher socioeconomic status see her, as someone who has put her children in danger and so should be judged. She and the other women who passed around the glass eye as teenagers did not have the opportunity to make a direct

impact on culture; however, they do make an impact by raising children in the world. Even at the end of her life, the narrator struggles to define herself in a way that makes her experiences meaningful without making her culpable for the abuses her children have faced under her care.

In many ways, this character understands injustice in the same way her daughter does: she knows how much easier her life would have been had she been born a man or wealthy. However, her personal cycles of tiredness and guilt reflect the societal forces that slow women's fight for equality, the fight in which her daughter, from a position of relative privilege, is able to participate. She recognizes inequality in the world and how she and her family have been affected by it, but she argues that she is too exhausted to fight it, too exhausted to confront it at all. She says to her daughter, "You can always find pain and suffering in this life, but why look for it? Before you went to college and got them degrees I had no idea there was something called women's studies that would teach you to poke around under the skin of women" (89). She's not opposed to the idea that women are in many ways unfairly burdened; she feels certain that if she began examining women's oppression, she would find plenty. However, she also feels that it wouldn't do any good, given the traumas she would need to unbury and the responsibility she still had to her work and her home. She talks about how she didn't want to testify about her own rape, calling it her "private business," and she says she never wanted to "get bent out of shape" about it. The narrator has experienced enough injustice to know it exists, but she lacks the energy to be an activist, even in her own family. As a working-class woman, she has never had the option to slow down to process pain, so she denies it in whatever way she can.

At the end of her life, guilt weighs heavily on the narrator—partially because she knows what she's done to harm her children and partially because of the scrutiny she knows her illness and death will bring to those faults. This is far from the first time she has claimed to lack agency, but as she nears death, she experiences true lack of agency, knowing that after she passes, her reputation and her memory will be entirely in the hands of the children she knows she has failed. She begins this letter to Sis in the hope that she can explain herself, that some combination of excuses and blame will ease the burden on her. But by the end, she isn't asking for forgiveness or even true understanding, merely protection from the harsh words and

thoughts of others. After years of navigating exhausting circumstances and years of avoiding the guilt that followed, Campbell's narrator only stops fighting when she is completely bone tired, worn out by the world and her stubbornness.

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AN INVITATION TO CONNECT HIGH SCHOOL READERS CRITICALLY AND CREATIVELY WITH BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S *ONCE UPON A RIVER*

BECKY COOPER

We all know the signs: from the overt heavy sighing, eye-rolling, and audible grumbling to the subtle missing of deadlines, waiting for someone else to speak, and dwindling smiles. The students let us know when we've lost them. "Will this be on the test?" When I see this happening, I know it may be time to reassess my approach and try something else. I teach in the Academically Talented Youth Program (ATYP) in the office of Pre-College Programming at Western Michigan University, which provides an advanced and accelerated experience for middle and high school students who exhibit as highly gifted in math and/or language arts. After taking the SAT or ACT exam offered through Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search, they are invited to join us through qualifying scores. The program draws from more than ten counties in southwest Michigan and allows students to remain enrolled and connected with their local district—an adaptation inspired by similar initiatives at Johns Hopkins. One year of ATYP English serves as the equivalent of two years of honors English at a regular high school, and the students in our program are highly motivated. The first two years require a portfolio of each student's writing to be submitted. Before revisions, they will write upwards of 200 pages for each class. In year three, they are invited to take our AP English course, where, after completing rigorous weekly writing responses, notebook writing, practice essays, and practice exams, they will sit for both AP literature and language exams in May.

This generation knows all about testing. It seems they are constantly prepping for tests, both at their regular schools and for us, all

the time. It's my job to guide them through two more "high-stakes" exams. Many of my colleagues share my concern about whether students are gaining a deep love for literature through our current educational models. They're motivated to pass the test; I'm motivated to teach them about what literature can do. It's easy to lose sight of the greater purpose of literature: to connect with other human beings and understand or empathize better with their struggles, to engage with the author's opinions so they may craft more well-informed opinions of their own, to understand the cyclical nature of history and their position within their own current historical context.

In our program, the student population does not yet reflect the full diversity of our community. We have students who tend to come from middle-to-higher socioeconomic backgrounds, who are generally white. We have students who come from Asian, Indian, and Middle Eastern families, but fewer from Indigenous, Latinx, or African-American households. Only a handful of our students experience financial hardship. Our reading selections should broaden the context for students as they encounter a character whose life may be very different from their own, and while some students will recognize aspects of their lives on the page, their classmates may be noticing the ways their particular privilege has protected them from expanding their worldview. For these students, limited experiences present a hurdle to connection. The stories we read together provide a bridge to begin relating to others, to build stronger bonds in the classroom, and to prepare them for greater involvement in the world today. Engaging with texts with wider sociocultural representation becomes a key priority.

Bonnie Jo Campbell's novel, *Once Upon a River* (2011), provides opportunities for us to discuss interstices of gender, violence, and class structure. Inviting each student to choose a non-traditional approach such as poetry, sculpture, drawing, or painting through which to analyze Campbell's project gives them multiple paths toward deeper reflection and allows them to connect more personally to the material. According to secondary education instructors Nancy Bailey and Kristen Carroll, "Multimodal communication and representation, including film, written scripts, comic strips, music, and photography, encourage students to carefully select information from the research they want to communicate and to analyze it in ways that they may not if they are merely reporting it in a traditional format" (82). Allowing students to direct their exploration in ways that

encourage more complex thinking guarantees not only sustained interest, but a richer understanding of the multiple meanings a text may reveal to them through a nonlinear approach.

"NOW WHAT?"

On a nuts-and-bolts level, we all use these strategies in our classrooms: pair/share writings, small-group projects, and large-group discussions. *Once Upon a River* lands at the end of the year for us, so students feel comfortable with all of these activities. And because we have discussed different literary lenses (historical, Marxist, feminist, postcolonialist, gender/queer, psychoanalytical, and critical race theory, to name a few), they find themselves better able to situate the concerns of main characters like Margo. They have the language to begin their critical analyses.

After we've had weighty, authentic discussions using several of the literary lenses mentioned above, I circumvent the eye-roll response by telling the students that we won't be writing another essay for this novel. Sometimes this announcement is met with cheers; sometimes they shoot dubious looks my way. This is the moment when I talk transparently about why. We've spent most of our year in the practice of writing essays to earn a certain score on an exam. This time I want to give them more freedom to connect with the text on a personally significant level. Celebrated educator Tom Romano remarks that "I revel in seeing human minds at work. There is not right or wrong about this. It is simply remarkable to see people making meaning, regardless of their age and the meaning they make. We teachers—if we are paying attention to those whom we teach and expecting more of them than rudimentary thinking and memorization—see this common miracle of sense making all the time . . . the most significant learning comes when students launch their own dive and teach the teacher" (172). We are moving from the abstract to the concrete, from the monotony of test taking to an expansion of empathy. The prompt reads as follows:

> **First:** After contemplation of Campbell's novel, think about what resonated with you the most. What elements or scenes continue to occupy your imagination? What do you want to comment upon, explore further, or investigate more deeply?
>
> **Next:** Choose an artistic medium that you enjoy. Craft an artistic response to Campbell's novel using the medium of your

choice: painting, photography, film, poetry, sculpture, collage, music, etc. If your project gets more complicated than usual for one person (such as a short film) and you wish to have *one* partner, consult with me and it's likely you will get the green light!

Last: Write a couple of paragraphs explaining your project to the reader—point out the specific ways you feel you have successfully captured the element of Campbell's work you sought to respond to. You will be graded upon completion and presentation during our last day of class.

We read over the parameters together, and then I provide time for questions and clarifications. Some students feel elated by the options before them, while others might prefer the safety net of a more structured and traditional assignment. It's important to let them know that we are not judging the art itself; we are evaluating their level of effort and engagement. For emphasis I might show them the limits of my own drawing skills on the board, encouraging their laughter: "Maybe this isn't the medium for me. I'll find something that would allow me to better express myself." I also write this FAQ on the board: "Do we have to present our work?" The answer: "Yes. Each of us will gain from what you share. *You* will grow from investing yourself in your project and allowing us to see how this novel has made an impact with you." I tell them that taking chances may feel scary at first, but ultimately they will feel excited. To illustrate and inspire, I might show them a few examples of previous students' work.

At this point, I emphasize how this project can provide a way for us to show our empathy, to be vulnerable, and to feel heard, but we will need to create an atmosphere in our room that makes people feel safe to explore difficult subjects. As we follow Margo's journey through multiple traumas and her quest to find her mother, students connect with her plight while contemplating the extremity of her situation. Because of the sensitivity of the material, some instructors may feel that providing a trigger warning is appropriate, especially for high school students. Prior to reading the novel, our class discusses the concept of trigger warnings and the debate over whether or not they prove useful. I find that students appreciate the invitation to address this issue in a scholarly way, which enables them to delve into a more in-depth debate as they feel less fear of judgment from their peers. Sometimes the structure of an academic dialogue, with its understood norms, provides a sense of security as we approach

topics that may cause discomfort in some students. To begin, I share some relatively recent findings. Dr. Guy Boysen, professor of psychology, explores the research on trauma as it applies to the topic of trigger warnings actually helping students in psychology courses. He invites teachers to consider the following observation: "The decision to give or not give trigger warnings in class represents a pedagogical choice that can be informed by research evidence. Clinical research supports the basic phenomenon of trauma-based triggers of distress, and students with documented PTSD diagnoses could request trigger warnings as an accommodation for a disability. With such an accommodation, students may be able to reduce distress and increase performance by controlling exposure and arousal. These points are well grounded in empirical research" (171). Boysen's article offers a thorough examination of the kinds of questions teachers in any field should investigate concerning trauma supported by research before making a decision. Benjamin Bellet, Payton Jones, and Richard McNally expand upon the conversation, adding this caution: "The question of whether trigger warnings are beneficial or harmful for trauma survivors is an important one. However, because trigger warnings are now applied to a broad range of content in many different settings, another important question is whether they foster attitudes that undermine resilience in people who have not—or not yet—experienced trauma" (135).

The arguments against trigger warnings include the concern that students may view themselves as more vulnerable than they are and that this perception will hinder their classroom engagement and lead toward censorship. The authors conclude that "[t]rigger warnings do not appear to be conducive to resilience as measured by any of our metrics . . . Trigger warnings do not appear to affect sensitivity to distressing material in general, but may increase immediate anxiety response for a subset of individuals whose beliefs predispose them to such a response" (140). Our class examines the dialogue that emerges between these articles' findings as applied to a broader range of the population, and notes how both studies agree that more research is needed. Taking the points of both articles into consideration, I ask students to share their thoughts. From this conversation, we strive to build a consensus about how we prefer to move forward and deal with some of the topics that Campbell's novel explores that students may not have discussed in a public space before: issues of socioeconomic class, molestation, rape, death of a parent, abandonment, sexual

autonomy, revenge, gun violence . . . to name a few. By approaching concerns via debate on trigger warnings and via our subsequent community building, I've noticed that students respond intellectually, personally, and emotionally. We relate to one another as *people*.

I recently asked former students to share with me their thoughts about our process in order to gauge how accurately I have been evaluating their sense of security and freedom while exploring *Once Upon A River*. One student reports that "there was never any perception of mine that any thought I had about the book, an interpretation of it or idea of what would, could, or should happen, would be infringed upon. Everyone in that class wanted to learn everyone else's opinions and thought processes, with the intent of informing their own." Another young man writes:

> I feel there were several things that went a long way to make the class feel like a safe environment. Reading the book at the end of the year allowed the class to develop a positive culture where students felt comfortable enough to discuss the sensitive content of the novel. Ms. Cooper's upfront addressing of the subject matter profoundly helped to facilitate discussion. By providing content warnings prior to assigning the reading, she demonstrated a considerate attitude and circumvented an issue of the class sitting silently, with no student wanting to be the first to broach a topic. Finally, the use of an artistic final project rather than a purely academic one set a focus on the human aspect of the novel and magnified my engagement with the reading. Writing a paper would have invited me to focus on a piece of symbolism while ignoring the broader issues Campbell highlights in the story.

And lastly, this young woman shares her thoughts on the experience, as a person who has been through trauma like Margo's: "I loved reading that book so much. I went through a sexual assault issue when I was younger and parts of that book made me emotional when we talked in class, but the support I felt from you and my classmates made it feel good to talk about. I felt like I was being actually listened to. As a class we created an area where everyone was able to be heard without judgment and I haven't experienced anything that felt the same since."

RESULTS

By encouraging their creativity alongside critical exploration, I noticed sustained interest and much greater engagement with the lit-

erature. The amount of personal growth the students and I witnessed argues for itself. Their written self-reflections articulate what they wished to explore and whether they feel they were successful. When students present their work to their classmates, they invite one another to see what matters to them. It's thrilling to notice how thoughtfully students throw themselves into this entire process—how receptive they are of one another's experiences. Here is a sample student response, followed by her poem: "I wrote a poem about Margo and my interpretation of her story. It discusses the contrasting ideas outlined above, for as I read the story, Margo became an enigma to me. Despite the trauma she has faced, she does what she must do to survive, even though this only damages her further at times. Margo inspires me and reminds me of myself and I hoped to communicate this feeling through my poem."

"Margo"
sweet, bruised fruit
forbidden
from leaving the river
she hangs delicately
over the water
or does she crouch?
balanced, ready to
pounce?
a young enigma
I see myself in her
as she sees her green eyes
in the face of a
familiar current
fearless fire doused
by cruel men
she bites back
harder
until she breaks
the bonds of reckless
control
she rests her soft chin
on the gate, a golden
barrier, gleaming, let her
into the clean air and

the dry earth
let her live like me

One young person revealed that he was not a good ally to a friend when she needed him. He states in his reflection that "I have written a poem to encapsulate the experiences I have had with my friend and the people I am constantly around. When they say things that perpetuate the culture of men that Margo speaks of, I rarely speak up out of fear of being ridiculed and being thought of as too weird. On an almost daily basis, I hear and see things from friends that disturb me, and produce an extremely uncomfortable feeling, yet I have remained silent, and [feel] just as guilty because of that." Another student interviewed several friends to discover that not only had they all experienced sexual harassment, but that many had experienced it *that day*. At school. He explained how this made him keenly aware of how differently he moves through the world than his friends do. One shared concerns of navigating sexual autonomy and another spoke about privilege and consent. The young woman who shared that she had been abused sang to us. Her voice brought the entire room to tears in gratitude and respect for her strength.

One student shared her thoughts on the connection Margo has with the deer in the novel. She writes that "[t]he reflection of Margo in the animal's eye portrays the connection the young girl feels to female deer. She shares an identity of vulnerability with the creature, which translates through the eye of the animal."

Figure 1: Student artwork, *Once Upon a River*

Some students spent their time imagining what it was like to be Margo. What would she choose to wear? What would a map of her surroundings look like? With this idea in mind, one student reflects that "I sought to understand the specific geographic location of Campbell's project, seeing as [it] played a significant role in shaping the story. Thus, I began by evaluating which parts of Campbell's Stark River were fictional and which portions are based off a real river."

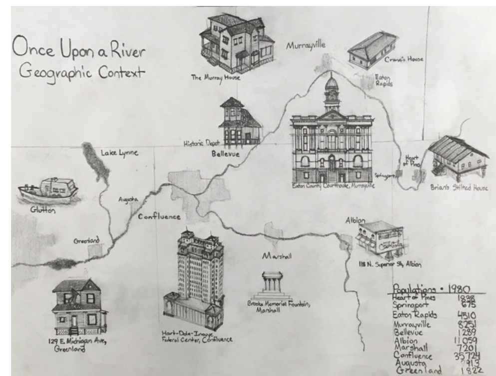

Figure 2: Map of the Stark River area

Margo danced, how would she move? Using her own body to express how she imagines Margo might feel, this student had a partner film her while dancing in the woods: "As the person in the pictures, I tried to embody Margo and present her innermost thoughts through poses that relay to the audience not only her struggles and emotional turmoil, but also her strength in being able to overcome tragedy. Although Margo does not recognize herself as valuable beyond her physical properties, her mindset and the way in which she perceives herself changes throughout her journey, and my partner and I used the photographs to illustrate this progression."

Figure 3: Photograph, *Once Upon a River*

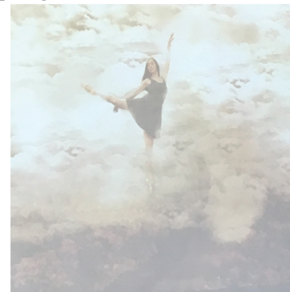

Figure 4: Photograph, *Once Upon a River*

Unusual choices such as painting the novel's cover art onto a jacket or applying tarot cards to Margo's journey surprised me. The films students made were lovely and thoughtful, as one student demonstrates through her writing: "Wading up and down the cool stream with pants pulled above our knees, Campbell's character came alive in a way text on a page cannot fully capture. Like Margo, we watched birds dive into the water, fish swim off the banks, and even a doe leap up the riverbank . . . Discussing *Once Upon a River* while out in the Michigan woods during our project resulted in both a film and a better understanding of the inspiration behind the novel and reasons Campbell writes passionately about the river." Several students tried their hand at watercolor, with impressive results. The following student, who made an entire journal, states that "[t]hese faces are all rough ideas of characters within the book. In close proximity, with a general layering of watercolors, I believe they display the layers of different sexual experiences and assaults Margo has been through and the journey she has made as a person."

Figure 5: Watercolor, *Once Upon a River*

It might be easy to forget that, along with our students, we educators also benefit from this period of growth. With every tough question asked, I consider my own answers, observations, and paradigm. Since starting this project in 2015, I have noticed that my students tend to reflect and respond along traditional gender lines—more than I thought they might. When many of the young women relate to the harassment and assault Margo goes through, most of the young men feel shocked by the ubiquity of their experiences. I anticipate a day when this will be different. Simply based on the power of their connections, their testimonies, and their growing empathy, I feel hopeful. Every spring I look forward to this time, just to see what each new group will reveal about themselves—about all of our lives together.

CONCLUSION

Creating a space in our classrooms that invites challenging discussions while encouraging compassion requires intentionality. We have the opportunity to show our students that becoming aware of our implicit biases and then examining them allows us to grow. For students who have experienced being "othered," finding representation in the text empowers them. Even for those already doing this work, seeking out training in this area helps our staff to avoid blunders and missteps. For example, our staff have taken advantage of anti-racism workshops through ERACCE: Eliminating Racism and Creating/Celebrating Equity. The Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership at Kalamazoo College hosts similar workshops and events. Many groups provide information, resources, and support to people in the community seeking to educate themselves. Organizations in your area may offer these opportunities and some are available online. Over the course of the school year, our reading list strives to provide the basis for a greater awareness and understanding of the authors' projects and our own, real-world connections. But first we have to show them how to dive in.

I remind myself to model, coach, listen, and then listen some more. When seeking the resources and guidance of our university's office of diversity and inclusion, we show them we care and use their help—through coalition. This is how educators can model engagement for students on a real-world level. By doing so, we will be able to better provide a space for students to work out what they see happening in the text and how it relates to concerns we see in the world

around us. Emphasizing connection and real-world relevance remains essential.

The multi-genre approach is not a new idea; many of us use it to some degree with various texts in our classes. But this approach proves especially rewarding to use with *Once Upon a River* because the novel covers such intense issues that students find themselves more likely to delve profoundly into their projects. They have more space to experiment and to discover, and then they are more apt to share authentically of themselves and what they have learned from Margo's journey. Allowing them autonomy through the selection of their medium and content with an emphasis upon personal connection, we allow their learning to become more meaningful to them. Every year I ask my students if I should keep Campbell's novel on the syllabus. Overwhelmingly, they answer, "Yes."

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WHO WILL DROWN THE KITTENS? BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S FARM WOMEN AND THE BURDENS OF NECESSITY

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In the title story of her 2015 collection, *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters,* Bonnie Jo Campbell invites us to inhabit the point of view of a dying mother who is trying to explain her actions and transgressions to an estranged daughter. The narrator has suffered a stroke and cannot talk. In a 2016 reading at the Library of Congress, Campbell describes this narrator as "furious about her condition, thinking hard at her sullen over-educated daughter, a women's studies professor, hoping the ungrateful girl can read her mind." The narrator mother defends her actions by drawing alliances with other mothers in the natural world she has encountered over a lifetime on the farm. She wonders, "No reason I should be thinking about that old Mama Cat now, but I remember how she suffered with a new litter every spring, and another in summer before the swelling was even off her teats, something like me having six kids in six years" (95).

The hardships of mothering on the farm become a recurrent theme as this narrator ponders her choices and circumstances of raising children as single mother. Mama Cat is a figure who appears throughout the story as a symbol of a mother saddled with a litter of kittens even as she yearns for more tomcats—a tension the narrator understands intimately: "And I understood why she wanted to go back outside when them tomcats yowled for her. You thinking I ought to regret drowning all them kittens, but I made no promises to the damned kittens" (95). The unsentimental mother, typically a farm mother, appears frequently in *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters,* but no mother illuminates this trope so transparently as the narrator mother here. She appears unapologetic about her relationships with occa-

sionally abusive men; she makes no excuses for her lapses in judgement, even those that put her daughter in danger.

Campbell's 2015 collection highlights the strength of tough mothers whose lack of sentimentality might be quickly dismissed as unsound, flawed, or even criminal mothering. But something else is also at play here: the unacknowledged truth that sometimes the instinct to survive is as powerful as the instinct to mother. "You complain about the way I raised you children," the narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" imagines saying, "but I only wanted to survive another day" (90). This same theme of survival plays out in nearly parallel fashion in Campbell's "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom"; however, in this story Campbell tilts the lens on rurality by incorporating a narrator who is not a farm mother, but the daughter of one.

As her aging mother's health declines, Jill is still deeply tethered to life on the farm but now makes her living as an adjunct professor teaching biology, hoping to finish her PhD in zoology. As the story opens, we learn that Jill has been walloped with two recent discoveries: her husband is having an affair with one of his students and Jill, who is a forty-seven-year-old mother of three, is now pregnant. Like the narrator of "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," Jill is frustrated by her situation; she is furious with her cheating husband, irritated by her stubborn farm mother, who refuses to admit she can no longer bale her own hay and attend to her animals, and exasperated by one of her daughters, who is also pregnant but insists on maintaining a vegan diet. And in similar fashion to the narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," Jill faces the difficult choice between mothering and self-sufficiency as she contemplates whether to end her pregnancy.

In spite of these circumstances, Jill's comic and satirical tone is vastly different from the bitter and tragic tenor of "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" because Jill's education and social class land her opportunities that stretch beyond the confines of the farm. However, the stories share striking commonalities in point of view, theme, and symbolism. Campbell's intimate framing in each story—her use of second- and first-person narration—opens up moments of remorse and meaning for each of these narrators, who face difficult choices as mothers. As women closely tied to rural life, each narrator returns repeatedly to the landscape for a source of context and explanation for her actions, finding symbolism in the animals and insects that occupy her world. In these stories, Campbell presents a wide spec-

trum of rural Midwestern women, characterizations rich in texture and complexity. Readers are invited to see these unsentimental women in all their fullness—in some moments, victims of harsh circumstances and choices, and on other occasions, survivors who find their agency and voice in the natural world.

Campbell's depictions of unsentimental mothers at conflict with their daughters certainly fit in the larger context of American literature, seen most prominently in the works of Katherine Anne Porter, Tillie Olsen, and Flannery O'Connor. Porter's 1930 story, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," like Campbell's "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," centers upon a dying protagonist, frustrated by her loss of voice and agency who must silently witness her offspring rummaging around her house and making decisions without her consent. Olsen's classic 1961 story, "I Stand Here Ironing," offers a prototype of single mother who doesn't have the luxury of money or time to dote over her first-born daughter and, as the years pass, finds herself trying to quiet the voices of guilt. Although Olsen's narrative is richly woven in an urban setting, Campbell's "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" evokes the same intimate frame, exposing the narrator mother's fury, guilt, and desperate need for understanding. Likewise, Campbell's "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom" underscores these same tensions by relying on comic dialogue and characterizations that recall Flannery O'Connor's 1955 story, "Good Country People."

Strong, rural women have captured the attention of other American writers long before the twentieth century. Since Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 1890 short story, "The Revolt of Mother," readers of American literature have encountered the hard-boiled American farm mother. Freeman's story introduces us to Sarah Penn, a protagonist whose will and ingenuity win over a husband who consistently dismisses his wife's need for a new house. When Penn notices that her husband has decided to construct a new barn instead, she swiftly moves her entire household into the newly built barn. Even though her action reduces her husband to tears and causes a stir in her small New England town (even the minister visits and implores her to reconsider), Penn's clear-minded reasoning wins over her husband who reluctantly gives up his dream barn so that his wife can have the new home she has earned. By the end of the story, he agrees to put in partitions and windows in the barn and buy his wife furniture. Freeman describes the ever practical Sarah Penn as "overcome by her own triumph" (468).

Like Sarah Penn, resourceful farm mothers appear in a variety of works from Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) to Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and Jane Hamilton's *A Map of the World* (1994). However, as Becky Faber argues in "Women Writing about Farm Women," by the 1990s, both Smiley and Hamilton are documenting the end of the family farm and the move toward commercial agriculture. Faber argues that "[w]hat was once rural and individual is now more global, more expensive, and possibly corporate" (124). It is clear that Bonnie Jo Campbell wants to address a gap in the contemporary representation of these mothers. In a 2015 interview about her collection, *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters*, she asserts that "I have a special interest in this book and everywhere of investigating the lives of farm women, rural women. And I'm especially interested in a kind of woman who is disappearing—the kind of woman we don't see much anymore and that's the kind of farm mother type." In the transition to the twenty-first century, the rural landscape continues to diminish, something Campbell has witnessed in her hometown of Comstock, Michigan. In this collection of stories, Campbell is exploring the disappearance of not only the rural landscape, but the type of farm mother whose life is not the subject of blockbuster films or *New York Times* bestsellers.

Campbell places the rural mother front and center in *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters* and the narrator mother in the title story is the most compelling and unforgettable representation of this type because the challenges she faces as a single parent are so overwhelming. Her recollection of life events is a litany of hardship and heartache: witnessing a man murder his wife, watching her mother die in the Kalamazoo Asylum for the Insane, being raped at knifepoint. She was a teen mother, abandoned by her husband, left to raise six children on her own. It is no wonder her attitude toward suffering is passive resistance: "Women get themselves hurt every day—men mess with girls in this life, they always have, always will—there's no sense making hard luck and misery your life's work" (89). The narrator's acceptance of suffering and hardship is something she wishes to bequeath to a daughter whose pain is also captured in Campbell's narrative frame. The story's point of view offers an intimacy with the mother even as we learn more details about the source of the narrator's tension with the daughter: a failure to protect the daughter from the sexual advances of one of the mother's boyfriends. The narrator imagines saying to her daughter, "I thought his wanting

to kiss you was one more test, one more hardship I had to endure. Maybe I lied to you all those years because the thing was a confusion to me. But you got it wrong, Sis, when you said I didn't care what that man did to you. I didn't like it, and I've been lying here racking my brain about it" (100). As the story's structure provides clear glimpses of the now middle-aged daughter's trauma and neglect, the first-person point of view reveals the mother's doubt and regret, offering the reader an insider's angle on the heart-breaking gap between them.

Campbell's choice of narration in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" echoes that in Tillie Olsen's 1961 story, "I Stand Here Ironing," another work that features a mother trying to explain herself to a critical listener. Like Campbell's narrator, Olsen's mother expresses an ironclad passivity. When the school counselor requests that the mother come in to talk about her daughter Emily, the narrator says, "Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me" (Olsen 3).

The point of view here is intimate and immediate, a mother sorting through memories, processing the circumstances both in and out of her control. Olsen's narrator is circumspect and inclined to analyze her relationship with her daughter Emily through a lens of distance: "She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother" (13). Campbell's narrator, however, does not have the luxury of detachment; as she lies dying, there is an urgency to explain and defend her mothering. This need is intensified, of course, by the fact that this mother can no longer speak; she can only listen as her daughter tells the nurse, "*This is the first time in her life she's had nothing to say*" (91). The irony here is this mother has plenty left to say and losing her ability to communicate, especially with her daughter, stings deeply. "When I had a voice," she says, "I didn't know how much I wanted to say to you, Sis, to explain that I lived my life the way I could, and that I couldn't say no to some things" (103). In both stories, readers inhabit the innermost thoughts of a mother grappling with her past actions, unable to communicate fully with a daughter who is distant and resentful.

Entangled by both circumstances and choices, each mother fluctuates between prosecutor and defender of her actions. In Campbell's story, the narrator could not resist the necessity of men who repaired her fence, fixed her tractor, and hauled her hay. However, this necessity came at her daughter's expense. The narrator says of these men, "We needed their help. There was so much work to do around here—and mostly they were nice" (92). The economic necessity of men affects both daughters in these stories. For Emily, her mother's decision to remarry results in ambivalent circumstances: Emily endures loneliness, waiting for the newly married couple to return home in the evenings after their dates; after her siblings are born, she understands the stark contrast between the harshness of her rearing and the luxury afforded her siblings.

For the daughter in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," however, the intrusion of men is much more severe, leaving her vulnerable to sexual assault. As the narrator mother works through her own complicity in the daughter's assault, she first attempts to minimize it: "But you say he didn't have sex with you, so what's the big deal?" (98). Then she moves to consider her own precarious circumstance as a single mother managing a farm alone. She thinks, "You can't possibly understand, Sis, can you, with your women's power and women's rights, how I couldn't say, *Hell, no, you can't kiss my daughter"* (101). The narrator consistently contextualizes pain as necessary hardship, a part of the natural process of living. In her last days of life, this mother wants her daughter to understand pain in relationship to the natural order: men must be tolerated, and kittens must be drowned. Women like her didn't have the luxury to offer their children protection from men or the elements. Men fulfilled necessary functions. Protecting her children from them was as useless as protecting them from the environment they inhabited, another source of toxicity.

While the narration of "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" shares commonalities with that in "I Stand Here Ironing," the characters who inhabit Campbell's fiction are distinctively rural and, consequently, face challenges outside of the scope of Olsen's urban frame. In fact, Campbell never lets us forget how the rural landscape in this story shapes her protagonist. As the narrator tallies her faults and articulates her defenses, we learn of another complaint leveled against her. She barks, "Of course I fed you kids PBB, but it wasn't on purpose. It wasn't me who mixed that fireproof powder into the

cattle feed at the Farm Bureau and poisoned half the county" (96). Polybrominated biphenyls (PBB) was used as a fire retardant and, according to George Fries and Renate D. Kimbrough, between 1973 and 1974, cattle on about twenty-five Michigan farms were exposed to the toxin when it was accidentally mixed in cattle feed: "Approximately 85% of the Michigan population received some exposure to PBB because dairy product marketing involves mixing milk from many farms" (105). It is quite likely the narrator and her children were exposed to high amounts of PBB as she reports that cows were dying, even their beloved cow Daisy, whose cancer spreads to one of her eyeballs, causing it to fall right out of its socket.

Despite the dangers, the narrator refuses to waste the milk, and she feeds it to her children. She returns to the same defense she employs earlier: she did not have the means to protect herself against the dangers of daily living. "Women like me couldn't afford to keep themselves pure like you girls do now. We inhaled gunpowder, spray paint, aerosol wasp killer, smoke from anything that burned" (96). In this description, Campbell demonstrates how these man-made inflictions contaminate the land and poison the narrator's resolve, leading to the resigned and bitter posturing we see throughout the story. In a 2017 interview with Catherine Eaton, Campbell notes that, "mostly the natural landscapes work as a sounding board for my characters, so they can understand themselves, and it acts as a mirror in which we readers see ourselves. The natural world is the place into which all my characters have to situate themselves in order to be who they really are, and that makes my rural fiction feel different from a lot of urban fiction." Campbell's farm women turn to the landscape consistently to contextualize their actions and motivations within a larger, natural order. For this narrator, in particular, the natural order is tied intimately into her position as a poor, single farm mother who can't escape her economic dependence on men; neither is she inclined to blame these men, as they are simply a part of a harsh and unforgiving climate. She expects nothing, and she promises nothing in return. As she states early on in the story about her decision to drown Mama Cat's litter: "I made no promises to the damned kittens" (95).

While the narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" uses the rural environment to explain her past choices and actions, Jill, the middle-aged narrator of "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom," considers the behaviors of animals and insects as she contemplates her

future and, with it, the possibility of ending her pregnancy. This narrator also identifies with a vast array of animal characters: a Silkie hen, "who decides to hunker down in a nest box and peck at anyone who touches her" (138), snail mothers, black widow spiders, and queen bees. In contemplating the mating and rearing practices of a variety of species, Jill takes a clinical and humorous approach to her unenviable situation. While babysitting for her grandchildren, she tells a story of snails to distract herself from her current frustration with her vegan, pregnant daughter and her cranky mother who is in the hospital recovering from a mastectomy. She tells the children (who would prefer a story about tigers from their book, *The Encyclopedia of Animals*): "Snail mothers lay eggs containing only daughters . . . And everything is fine until those daughters start thinking for themselves. They get it into their knuckle heads to grow penises. Can you believe that?" (141).

The snails also provide an ample vehicle to tackle her own frustration with being a daughter of the animal kingdom—at the whim of the natural world which inflicts unwanted pregnancies and unfaithful mates. To illustrate this concept, Jill explains the mating practices of the snail: "A love dart can take an eye out. In all fifty states, it is against the law for a person to shoot anything resembling a love dart at another person, but there is no such law protecting the daughters of the animal kingdom" (145). After an emotionally confusing conversation with her husband, who assures her that a new baby will mean a new start for them and a chance to stay at home with the child and finish her PhD, Jill moves from snails to spiders to praying mantises to queen bees as sources of clarity: "It is not just black widow spiders that kill their mates. The female praying mantis often bites off the head of the fellow who has just impregnated her, and some snails, too, get so furious they lash out, albeit slowly. In the honeybee population, the male can't even be trusted to be a member of the hive, and if one should survive the breeding season, he is kicked out in autumn to freeze to death" (150-151).

Unlike the narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," Jill's use of the animal kingdom provides both an intellectual and emotional framework for her dilemma. She is, after all, a product of the farm environment, not an exclusive habitant of it. Yet, while her education may provide her with a wider scope to consider the implications of the natural world, both narrators come to the same conclusion: pain, loss, and hardship are a part of the natural order, especially for the

daughters of the animal kingdom. Near the end of the story, Jill makes the difficult choice to end her pregnancy, and she will share this news with her husband in the henhouse on her mother's farm.

Campbell's farm women occupy a distinctively Midwestern terrain, replete with cold, snow, and a shortened growing season, but their characterizations stretch beyond the Midwestern landscape, as Campbell's stories evoke the works of rural Southern writers. In an event at the 2019 Annual Symposium for The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, Campbell remarked that what she learned from Southern writers was "to embrace your eccentrics," a philosophy that she was able to apply to her own tribe in rural Michigan. Campbell's kinship with Southern writers runs parallel with her desire to remain authentic in her descriptions of Midwestern lives. The author sees these literary tendencies as intricately woven by migration. In a 2015 interview with Christine Rice, Campbell describes her affinity with Southern writers: "Michigan has a deep connection with the South, since so many Southerners came up to work in the auto plants after the Second World War, and I hung out with transplanted Southerners in my youth. Nowadays when I get fan mail from somewhere other than Michigan, it's usually from the South."

In her effort to capture the particulars of her own Midwestern village, Campbell conjures the voices of her literary foremothers from the South like Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. For instance, one can certainly hear echoes of Katherine Anne Porter's 1930s story, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," in Campbell's "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" as each story is centered upon a dying protagonist, frustrated by her loss of voice and agency. Granny is irritated by the intrusions of young Doctor Henry and her daughter Cordelia, who whisper about her condition: "She was never like this, *never* like this! Well, what can we expect, yes eighty years old . . . Well, and what if she was? She still had ears" (81). As with Campbell's narrator in "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," the state of incapacity stirs reflection, regret, and anger for Granny.

In the same vein, "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" and "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom" recall the stories of Flannery O'Connor. In particular, Campbell, like O'Connor, is drawn to the lives of middle-aged mothers whose dominant (some might say "difficult") personalities often put them at odds with their daughters. In her 2016 address at the Library of Congress for O'Connor's birthday celebration, Campbell states, "Flannery shows us that the characters

we love in fiction may be precisely the ones we would not want to spend time with in real life." O'Connor's stories feature many challenging mothers, but her 1955 story, "Good Country People," shares the most commonalities with Campbell's "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom."[1] Stanley Edgar Hyman refers to O'Connor's unique portrayal of the mother/daughter relationship as "the duo of practical mother and dreamy daughter on a dairy farm" (30). This description certainly fits "Good Country People," as Mrs. Hopewell struggles to understand her daughter Hulga, whose aspirations extend well outside the farm. O'Connor writes, "The girl had taken the PhD in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a school teacher,' or even, 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans" (276). Despite her academic success, Hulga's health grounds her on the family farm with her mother, a situation that exposes deep family dysfunction and leads to a plethora of comic exchanges. O'Connor uses the frame to create a comedy of manners, exposing each woman's flaws: Hulga's disdain for the simple mindedness of her mother and Mrs. Hopewell's strong desire to keep up appearances.

Neither Jill, the narrator of "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom," nor her farm mother obsesses about appearances; however, Campbell relies on a staccato of dialogue and a similar character constellation (an overeducated daughter and a practical mother) to evoke the same comic tone as O'Connor employs. When Jill visits her mother in the hospital, readers are treated to a series of comic exchanges in which both women express their frustration with each other. As she does with her grandchildren, Jill tries to entertain her mother by infusing bits of scientific knowledge about snails into their conversation. Her mother, who is still recovering from surgery, is not having it. When Jill shares that French women take their daughters to snail farms on their fifteenth birthday so they can harvest the snail's slime for a beauty product, her mother launches into a recollection of Jill's fifteenth year: "'When you were fifteen, I dragged you out of that van parked in the driveway,' my mother says . . . 'Remember? I kicked your ass, but it didn't stop you from becoming a teenage mother'" (143). When Jill tries to move the conversation to the topic of eating snails, her mother takes the opportunity to complain about the food in the hospital:

> "Snails probably taste better than the crap they're feeding me here," my mother says. "They call this pizza?"
>
> "You seem to be eating it," I say.
>
> "This milk is skim, tastes like water. Go find me some salt, will you? And a couple shots of brandy."
>
> "You're not supposed have salt."
>
> "I'm not supposed to have cancer, either. If you don't bring me some brandy, I'm kicking you off my property." (144)

Although Jill's mother is much blunter and more direct with her daughter than Mrs. Hopewell is with Hulga, both authors use humorous exchanges to expose the tension between practical mothers and their highly educated daughters. In "Good Country People," O'Connor inserts clichéd dialogue between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman to poke dual fun at their superficial conversations and Hulga's contempt for having to listen to their exchanges every day:

> "Everybody is different," Mrs. Hopewell said.
>
> "Yes, most people is," Mrs. Freeman said.
>
> "It takes all kinds to make the world."
>
> "I always said it did myself."
>
> The girl was used to this kind of dialogue for breakfast, and more of it for dinner; sometimes they had it for supper too. (273)

Although the same tension between farm mother and daughter that exists in "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom" is at the heart of Campbell's "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters," the tone of these stories is vastly different from that of "Good Country People" because Campbell's farm families occupy a different economic sphere. The narrator of "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" is just the sort of person O'Connor's Mrs. Hopewell takes great pride in avoiding. In fact, Mrs. Hopewell explains that she hires Mr. Freeman and his wife to tend to her farm because they are "good country people": "The reason she had kept them so long was that they were not trash" (272). By contrast, poor folks occupy the bulk of Campbell's fiction and, as such, she illustrates the effects of extreme poverty on the mother and daughter relationship in her "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters." The scope of Campbell's story stretches beyond the kitchen table to the daily struggles of life on the farm, run solely by a single mother who

has neither the luxury nor the motivation to maintain appearances. Thus, Campbell updates the farm mother-daughter dyad by incorporating challenges rooted in realistic issues that women face: poverty, infidelity, gender inequality, and sexual assault. In addition, the point of view Campbell uses (first and second person) draws readers into her characters' everyday struggles. "Say, you're the middle-aged only child of an increasingly fragile mother. . . . " begins "Daughters of the Animal Kingdom," and readers are encouraged to identify with Jill's precarious situation. In doing so, Campbell invites modern-day readers to take a deep and serious interest in contemporary rural lives.

In turning the focus to the characters who live on the margins of O'Connor's fiction, Campbell's fiction invites the reader to share an intimacy with a demographic that is too often overlooked in contemporary American life In her essay, "Cow Milking Lessons from Mom: Life (and Writing) Skills from My Mother," Campbell writes that "I have found much of my inspiration comes from understanding how poor people and the working poor make it work in America, where the cards and laws stack up against them. And I consider it an important part of my job to show readers a picture of those who are struggling near the economic bottom, even if they are a little less attractive than those at the top." The narrator of "Mothers, Tell Your Daughters" has little in common with O'Connor's Mrs. Hopewell in part because Campbell's narrator is at the economic bottom and in part because she is not squeamish about harsh realities, especially those found in the natural world. In the final pages of the story, as she considers her death, this narrator imagines being consumed by the same forces of nature that swallowed up other animal mothers. She instructs her daughter, "Bury me beside the graves of my horses and old Daisy, the parts of her we couldn't eat because of the cancer. Bury me with one of Mama Cat's teeth. . . " (103). It is a fate that feels comfortable for this farm mother who aligns herself with the creatures she loved and protected most dearly. And it's a theme that Campbell returns to again and again in her depiction of farm women who often find stronger connections with animals than with their own kin.

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NOTE

[1]Campbell's admiration for Flannery O'Connor is documented in a number of interviews, including Christine Rice's "Survival Is Not Guaranteed" and Jeanne Kloker's "Bonnie Jo Campbell Is on a Mission to Write Books about Women That Men Will Read," in which Campbell

refers to O'Connor as "a kind of literary mother." Recently, in *Arkana,* Campbell noted, "I have mixed feelings these days about old Flannery, even though I traveled with her. I got a cardboard cutout of her, life-sized, and I carried her from town to town, and you can see some of her exploits on my Facebook page, 'Travels with Flannery.' It was so fun introducing her to everyone, and I got invited to talk about her at the Library of Congress, so I got to go to DC and talk about Flannery. But I read so much Flannery that I actually started seeing things… I mean, she was racist, of course. She was of her time. Do you know that she refused to see James Baldwin when he came to Georgia? She said it would upset the church people. It would upset her mother. She wouldn't see him."

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