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Dear Readers,

How would you describe that look staring back at you from the cover of *NELLE*, issue three?

Those eyes: are they daring or summoning you? Is the gaze one of protest or power?

Perhaps it's all of the above and more. Each inspection of this stunning block print by Debra Riffe reveals something new; the way floral shapes within that doily gag suggest howling, the dark flicks in the right eye. It's the same with the writing in this issue—each piece wants your clear attention. Look, they challenge. Look closer. I dare you.

We are privileged at *NELLE* to host The Three Sisters Prizes, which the editors annually award to one work each in the categories of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. It was especially difficult to make our selections this year. Our choice in nonfiction, Virginia Bell's lyric essay, "Chicken," reflects on the contradictory elements of a father's identity, especially regarding his sexuality. What does it mean to "come out," Bell asks, and what does a lifelong game of "chicken" look like? In "Jane Doe," our fiction recipient, Susan Taylor Chehak, explores—against a seemingly ordinary Midwestern landscape—the most brutal forms of female erasure for a girl who seems to have lost everything, including her name. Natasha Deonarain's poem, "Pretoria, South Africa, 1945," expresses moments of whimsy and beauty in a look at a mother's white privilege and a multiracial daughter's struggle under Apartheid. These works, along with many others in this issue, engage with the themes suggested by the cover. Who in our culture is permitted to speak and be visible? Whose voices and bodies are systematically silenced or shamed? These themes appear so persistently, it's almost as if we'd planned it

Kerry Madden

WILD THINGS

In 1987, my husband and I spent our first year of marriage teaching English in China. When our year of teaching was up, we took the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Beijing to Berlin and eventually settled in Los Angeles.

We lived on Valentino Place in an old Hollywood apartment building next to Paramount Pictures. It was rumored Valentino's ghost roamed the halls and played tricks with the ancient birdcage elevator. Aphrodite, a working actress, lived on the top floor. My husband's brother was a TV cameraman for shows like *All in the Family*, *Golden Girls*, and *Married With Children*. He gave us the lease on his studio apartment because he was burned out on Hollywood. He left us a couch from the set of *The Jeffersons*.

Our son was born on November 8th, the day George Bush Senior was elected. I thought I might vote on the way home from birth, the way one does, since our son was born at a birth center. He was two weeks overdue, and labor had stopped after a long night, so the midwife sent us to breakfast at a nearby diner, and I said to my husband, "It's Tuesday and I'm so tired. Maybe we could go home, and I could have the baby on Thursday?"

But after breakfast we went back to the birth center with labor at a standstill, and the midwife said to me, "How do you feel about having this baby?" I wanted to say, "Scared—so scared," but I mumbled something like, "Fine-good-okay," because that's what responsible people said or pretended. Then eventually labor started up again which I have described to friends as "cinderblock surrealism" because there were no drugs to dull the pain, but when he was born, she put him on my chest and he gazed into my eyes, already lifting his head

to look at me, and the midwife said, "Babies don't usually lift their heads this fast—look at him looking at you. Look at your baby." And my husband was crying, trying to hold us both in his arms.

No one told me this was how motherhood began.

When we arrived home late that afternoon, Aphrodite met us by chance at the car on her way to an audition. She said, "When was this child born?" Followed by, "Why aren't you in a hospital, girl?" My husband had to find a parking place, so Aphrodite carried our baby boy inside. The birdcage elevator was broken again, so I followed them up a flight of stairs to our studio apartment, one step at a time. Did I think about the Greek goddess of love and beauty carrying our son over the threshold? Or did I take it for granted?

Soon our former Chinese students began sending us letters: "Congratulations, teacher, auspicious birth, baby boy born in the Year of the Dragon."

The first book I read to our son when he was a baby was *Where the Wild Things Are*. We danced the wild rumpus on Valentino Place, but our son didn't look like Max. He looked like Calvin from Calvin & Hobbes, so that became his nickname—Calvin.

As new parents, we tried to do things right. My husband has high cholesterol. It's hereditary in his family even though he's wiry and runs marathons. We were both worried about Calvin getting high cholesterol, so even though I breastfed him I started giving him skim milk, too, when he was around a year old thinking I would nip this cholesterol thing in the bud. And one of my mommy friends back then said, "Skim milk?!!! Their brain cells are developing. It's critical that they get that fat for brain development."

Oh, the shame. Clearly, I'd been abusing the baby. I immediately started buying whole milk for the baby. I also didn't cut up Calvin's fruit because he had eight teeth at eight months, and he could gnaw on a pear or an apple in the park even though the other mommies thought he would choke.

He would drop his pear and coat it with sand. I'd rinse it out of defiance and declare it built up immunities. Around that time, we had a little girl, and we took them everywhere. They looked like twins, Calvin and his little sister.

By age four, Calvin breathed like an espresso machine, so he had to have his adenoids and tonsils out, as they were the size of basketballs. He also needed tubes in his ears. The day of the surgery, they gave him something to put him under, and he began laughing and pointing at us and said, "Mommy and Daddy, you're giants. You're giants!"

A nurse chuckled and said, "Don't ever let this kid take drugs."

Excuse me? What responsible parent would ever let their kid take drugs?

Eventually we left Valentino Place and moved into a little house where we were kind of stagehand parents. We set up the art table and filled it with crayons and paintbrushes and play-dough, in case they had to make things. We had a trunkful of costumes if they wanted to put on a play. My husband put in a garden and we had pumpkins and champagne poppies, and he built a King Kong topiary made of jasmine.

And we showed the kids old movies. It's true I also told Calvin that we didn't get *Power Rangers* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on our television. I showed him Charlie Chaplin movies, and he fell in love with Charlie, and he used my mascara to create a Charlie Chaplin moustache and eyebrows regularly. He'd go to the video store dressed as Charlie to rent Chaplin films, and he was adorable, swinging his cane through the aisles. But Chaplin films weren't the only black and white movies he loved. He soon discovered the 1941 *Wolf Man*. He felt sorry for the Wolf Man who was trying so hard to be good except when that pesky full moon rose. Calvin even told people his name was Larry Talbot, the wolf man's name.

One day in kindergarten, he cut off all his blond hair with tiny scissors and attempted to glue it to his arms to become a werewolf like Larry Talbot. It was like he had a reverse

Mohawk. His teacher was horrified, and I told her, "He's really quick. It could have happened to any of us."

Next, he kept a pair of vampire teeth handy and a black cape to be Dracula and a hook in case he had to turn into Captain Hook. He stuffed a throw pillow under the back of his t-shirt to transform into Quasimodo, the hunchback ringing the bells.

Once, our kids received two cats as presents. Our son named his Quasimodo. Our daughter named her cat Emily.

We had another little girl, and Calvin became the big brother of two sisters, and our family was complete. He'd put his sisters into his movies, but mostly Calvin was just a boy. He always climbed to the highest branch in the tree to shout—"Look at me, look at me!"

He smelled like salt and dirt and sun and adventure.

Then Calvin grew wilder in high school. He joined a rock band and we drove the boys to gigs. They were good and won battle of the bands at the Greek Theatre and got to go to the Warped Tour. But when he didn't call or check in—and he usually didn't—we'd find the party and drag him out. His friends told him, "Man, it's not a party until Calvin's dad shows up."

Calvin graduated from high school with low honors in high-tops and silver snakeskin pants. Then he grew even wilder at university but worked hard and graduated on time in film and comparative literature ready to make movies—he found a job, got cast in an indie film, went on a rock & roll tour, worked in television, and became an addict.

Intervention

You've heard of interventions. You know other families have them. But you are not other families, right? How do you even plan one? But it's gotten bad. You didn't even know speed was meth. That's how dumb you are. You google interventionists. It's overwhelming. You remember your neighbor, now a friend, who had a niece who was out of control. Ask him.

Do you even have the storyline right? Whatever.

Your boy's been out of college for three years. Isn't this when parents get to breathe a little? Never mind. You will become a family again. You will not cow or bow to this disease. You've got this.

Your father wants to help, too. He goes online and finds an interventionist who turns out to be also a scientologist. You don't know this when you meet at Foxy's diner in Glendale, California—you, your husband, your mom and dad—to discuss rehab with the interventionist/scientologist and drink iced tea or maybe coffee because it seems like you will never sleep again and why should you?

But then you find out later about the interventionist/scientologist thing so you fire him.

Or, rather, you make your dad fire him because he's the one who found him.

Then you plan for the day of the miracle, which has to happen fast because everyone is coming in from out of town and friends are gathering, too. You write a letter pouring out your love for your son—everyone does. Everyone writes letters that you will press into his hands after you read them aloud to him and the words will go into his head and heart and he will hear.

You know this. So, you hire a real interventionist from the mountains who is not a scientologist but a freelance rehab guy with ties to Betty Ford. You know Betty Ford is legit. Your sister pays him \$4000 because you don't have the money to pay him but your sister does and she loves her nephew.

You watch the interventionist take your sister's credit card and swipe it through his phone on a nighttime street in LA under a palm tree. You wonder how this is your life? You see that the interventionist is six and a half feet tall. How does a person get so tall? His hair shines under a streetlight. He drives a white truck. He loves sports and watching the news. He doesn't read books. He saves people.

In the morning, the interventionist will perform a miracle.

Your son will get into the white truck with the interventionist who is not a scientologist and go to rehab in the mountains and get well and this will be a dark blip in the past that you managed to survive as a family. Parents, grandparents, friends.

Hail hail the gang's all here.

You will save your son by seven a.m.—maybe seven-thirty.

You will reclaim your life and your beautiful boy's life.

That's what you think.

That's how dumb you are.

★

Afterwards, two friends helped me to lie down, for it had not gone well. Calvin peaced out about forty minutes in, but not before playing a duet on the piano with his cousin. An improvisational rift on family interventions. Then he was gone. Bye. Farewell. See you later. Fuck you.

Words and words. A suggestion to rest. Rest? The house was so messy. How does one clean for an intervention? Take a nap. Close your eyes just for a few minutes.

As I grabbed my friends' hands, it felt like my bed was in the middle of the ocean, salty waves lapping up over the mattress.

Since there wasn't an addict to take to rehab, the interventionist advised us to go to a full week of family therapy in the desert even if he refused to go. So, my husband and I went, and my parents joined us, too.

And the four of us were willing. It was a loaded 9 a.m. –3 p.m. schedule of group therapy, grief therapy, lectures, counseling, drum circles, and your basic tools to keep living.

In group therapy, I spoke to an empty chair, since our addict didn't come with us. I told the chair how much I loved him, and I thanked the chair for showing me how to be a mother. My own mother, in a different therapy group, yelled at her empty chair and said later by the pool, "Well, I told that chair a thing or two!" She also told her group, "I don't even

understand what crystal meth is, and I watch *Breaking Bad!*”

Then one morning another mother approached me in the hotel exercise room and said, “I know you’re trying hard here with your husband and your parents, but your son is not going to care that you went to family therapy.”

She wasn’t being mean. It was just the truth. It felt like we were like two prisoners on a chain gain of parents of addicted kids.

The last day was a grief lecture by Sister Geneva, and I didn’t want to go at all, but it was so full of love and joy and light and forgiveness. Sister Geneva was so beautiful and I was crying. Afterwards I went to the bathroom to wash my face and pull it together, and when I was finished, I walked out and ran straight into Sister Geneva. And she saw my face and she grabbed me and held me so tightly and said, “You have loved someone so much and isn’t that a wonderful thing?”

Eventually, Calvin went to rehab and relapsed and went to rehab and relapsed and went to...and so on. And my tears became so boring. You again? And the shame of being a bad mother was something I couldn’t shake. Somebody told me to find an object that represented all the feelings I had about being a bad mother. My friend advised me to find this object because that way I could look at the object and recognize that these were just feelings and put them down.

And so, I found my bad mother object. It was bone - a large cow bone femur from the Tennessee farm that the kids found on a vacation visiting my husband’s family when they were little. They’d gone on a bone hunt as explorers with their cousins and come back ecstatic with treasures.

That big family intervention was over six years ago. I used to watch my son from behind a kind of giant aquarium. Actually, he was in one aquarium and I was in the other. Side by side...I could check his Facebook status. *Active one hour ago. Active one day ago.* He might have posted an Instagram of himself tightrope walking a bridge in downtown L.A. Then abruptly he closed down his Instagram account. We’ve

unfriended and blocked each other countless times on Facebook.

Where are you now, Calvin? Have you forgotten us? When you show up in your hurricane suit, storming up the street, a chorus of furies, yanking up tomato stakes as you yell, “En guard! En guard! Take that and that!”

Have you forgotten me, my boy? When you fall on the couch only to rise four days later refreshed and ready for the fight to begin again?

Smashed chairs, broken cups, a spray of cereal—addiction porn, that’s what this is.

What did he do now, bless your heart?

Have you forgotten everything, my boy?

Do you remember the day we rode razor scooters to the movies and stuck them under the seats? Do you remember the day we looked for dinosaurs behind the secret steps of Silver Lake? Do you remember when we made those awful donuts from the Elvis cookbook, *Are You Hungry Tonight?* Hard as stones, we threw them like baseballs into the garden. Do you remember when we substituted rock salt for regular salt while making chocolate chip cookies, since we had no salt in the house, and we thought maybe it would work, but we watched people flinch when they took a bite? Do you remember how we called flour “winter” when mixing the cookie dough? Because, after all, what did you, a Southern California boy, know of winter? When it was time to add flour, you said, “Let me pour in winter, Mama. It’s my turn to pour in winter!”

Later, much later, winter came and stayed even on the hottest of L.A. days.

I held and rocked Calvin every day as a baby in that studio apartment on Valentino Place in Hollywood. His father wore him in a baby sling and danced with him. We sang and laughed and stomped the wild rumpus when I read him *Where the Wild Things Are*. In those days, Valentino’s ghost roamed the hallways, and Aphrodite lived upstairs.

I mostly manage the ache of missing someone who is here but not here. Who walks the earth and lives and breathes, but I can't call Calvin because he doesn't live anywhere in particular and he can't hang on to a phone. My father loves his grandson, but my father now has dementia that is progressing, and it's like he and Calvin are on parallel train tracks on some distant railroad, and no matter how much I think or wish or contrive, I can't figure out a way to make those parallel tracks come together one more time.

Sometimes, I want to say: *Haven't we had enough of this?* But how many times must I learn that it does no good to ask these questions? So whenever possible, I hug our grown girls a little closer, because they miss their brother, too, and they long for him to be a brother again. One of his sisters just got married, and her brother's chair was empty at her wedding. This would have once seemed unfathomable. Relatives and friends looked for him in pictures and inquired—*was that him I saw dancing?*

No, it wasn't him you saw dancing. But I try not to think about those things.

Instead, I hold my husband's hand and we go for a walk and look at trees, or I bake a pie or make a wish or write a story to somehow reclaim our lives. Sometimes, I tell myself that our boy is on location on a film shoot far away. But then I remember that somewhere on the West Coast our boy, now a man, still lives and walks and breathes and dances and sings and tells stories and bathes in buckets and sleeps under trees.

But, maybe?

One day, like Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*, he'll find his way home.

Ann Fisher-Wirth

POSTCARD OF AN ANONYMOUS WOODEN CARVING

—for Lucas

Oh child, the heft of you in her lap,
sit bones grinding into her, little toes
extending from your stiff carved robes,
orb with the cross in one hand,
other hand raised in benediction.
Your overlarge head and mild wide eyes.
Her hands poised to embrace you,
here you are calm, in this narrow alcove,
as you both gaze into eternity. Suffering
is not yet. A light pours down around you
and around her. When you scramble
from her lap, run outside and see
if the peaches are ripening on the trees,
see if the lambs in the fields skip sideways.

Kerry Madden is the author of a new picture book, *Ernestine's Milky Way*, published by Schwartz & Wade of Random House and selected as the State Book of Alabama at the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C. She wrote the Smoky Mountain Trilogy for children, which includes *Gentle's Holler*, *Louisiana's Song*, and *Jessie's Mountain*, published by Viking. Her first novel, *Offsides* (Morrow), was a New York Public Library Pick for the Teen Age. Her book *Up Close Harper Lee* made Booklist's Ten Top Biographies of 2009 for Youth. She also wrote *Writing Smarts* published by American Girl, filled story sparks to encourage young writers. Her first picture book, *Nothing Fancy About Kathryn and Charlie*, was illustrated by her daughter, Lucy, and published by Mockingbird Publishers. Kerry is a regular contributor to the *LA Times* OpEd Page. She directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and teaches in the Antioch MFA Program in Los Angeles. The mother of three adult children, she divides her time between Birmingham and Los Angeles.

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Charlotte Pence's first book of poems, *Many Small Fires* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015), received an INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award from Foreword Reviews. She is also the author of two award-winning poetry chapbooks and the editor of *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Her poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction have been published in *Harvard Review*, *Sewanee*