

Praise for *The River and the Raven*

“Taya Boyles’ poetry collection, *The River and the Raven* could serve as her generation’s *Handbook for Healing*. Coming of age while simultaneously enduring the horrors of the early 21st century. The poetry in this collection embraces the pain, anxiety, and disillusionment of the age while offering antidotes to heal and ease the suffering. With poetry like Taya’s in the world, our chances for such rebirth are infinitely greater.”

— Valley Haggard, founder of Richmond Young Writers

The
RIVER
— *and the* —
RAVEN

The
RIVER
—and the—
RAVEN



POEMS BY
TAYA BOYLES

ART BY
MIRIAM COOPER

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CONTENTS

HEADWATER.....	1
APOTHEOSIS.....	3
METHOD ACTING	5
SCHRÖDINGER AND THE TORTOISE.....	7
PROMETHEUS-BOUND.....	9
THE SOLIPSIIST.....	13
FRONTIER	15
AGAINST THE CANVAS	17
CHATGPT (INSERT # HERE)	19
KING MINOS.....	21
ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD.....	23
THE UNDERBELLY	25
THE HONEY POT.....	27
CROSSROADS.....	29
THE BEACH EPISODE.....	31
NEBULA.....	33
BRIGID AND HER BABE	35
IVARA.....	37
THE WOMAN IN THE FIRE	39
DOCTOR'S NOTE	41
THE COLOR PURPLE.....	43
THE BOOMERANG.....	45

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Foreword/Preface/Introduction (recto)



HEADWATER

I launched Pop Pop Snappers
with a boy from Homeroom
where the bridge met the dam,
slipped under the railing,
and played slapbox,
where you won if you struck
the other player first.
We played Frogger
with the boulders and logs,
bobbing like a fin before the jaws
open and swallow you whole.



APOTHEOSIS

You're an eager little rabbit; relax.
All of the world spins in the carrot's favor.
It is not my fault you didn't notice the stick and string.
You begged for breadcrumbs and ate your candy house.
You thought there were lone wolves and no wolf packs?
A lion with a perch, and a warm stone for her cubs, to suck on
meat-bones but no pride?
Woe to the ears freshly wet from the butchered animal, over one
in the slaughterhouse stall!
If your crybaby eyes could howl,
the moon would give you your dues, apprentice necromancer.

METHOD ACTING

I welcome the almost silence
of a two-handed applause.
Red velvet curtains part,
and a silk nightie slips
onto the cold hardwood stage.
It is Press night for my Off-Off-Off
Broadway production of Snow White.
I announce my own one-page playbill.
By the exposition,
I am all Seven Dwarves,
the Magic Mirror, the stagehands,
and the Evil Queen
worming poison into the apple.



SCHRÖDINGER AND THE TORTOISE

I sloth by the seashore, carving my initials
at the crest of the waves' inhale.

The journey tracking bracelet connects my wrists
to the flippers of Sally the sea turtle.

Gifting a pearl to the sea is surrendering
a quill and ink set to a kraken.

A turtle on its belly chokes on a wrapperless straw.

I reach for the obstruction and think only of her,
and as it retreats into its hood, I think of myself.

I wedge a limb of driftwood and, with every angle
of the weight vector, attempt to dig
the cyanide from the capsule.

I unroot a skewer of cartilage and bones.

A rubber chicken without its squeaker.

Any acolyte worth their bell can extinguish a wick.

A pebble of red trickles from the corpse to the coast.

When the tide accepts the body, I think, what a proper gift.

A shell for a shell.



PROMETHEUS-BOUND

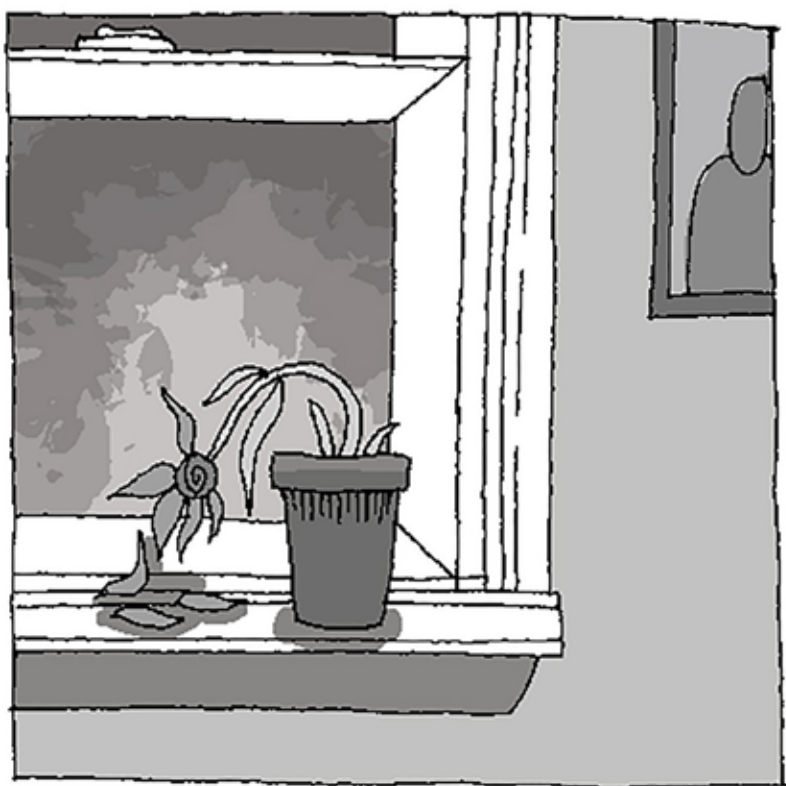
All heroes and villains kneel
at the docking pilings
of Charon's coin-slot river ride.
The stewards of swords, spears,
and slingshots are shellacked
by a one-armed skiff pole.
No fly-fish net can bridge
the Acheron waters
to the mountains of Hades.
Do not touch these stingrays
with your taking hands.
You cannot hold souls
in your black-hole grasp:

Reaching toward the siren, overboard the sailor goes.



TRANSATLANTIC

I met my first “other,” Taya, in a college class of nine other Richmonders—a letter or two off in the American-Spanish-French-Italian-Egyptian alphabet-dangled airport shot glasses out of our reach. There I was, and there she half-hovered over a school-blue plastic chair with a built-in desk. Our professor named not even a millionth of heritage, pulverized into rubble in the Middle Passage. Our mouths slit like railroad tracks sparkling with the mind’s electric wires. The conductor u-turns after choosing the five on the right to collect the soul of the last person standing. Inside jokes fizzled in the open air and formed a ball of fist-sized grief stones that passed through our kidneys to our grass-fed toes. So, I never asked her what marks me as a homeowner, and her as the trespasser. Though I know we’re both thinking, “If I can’t do this, maybe it’ll be that other Taya.”



THE SOLIPSIST

I dig up my remains with a burial shovel.

I do not unwrap any hose.

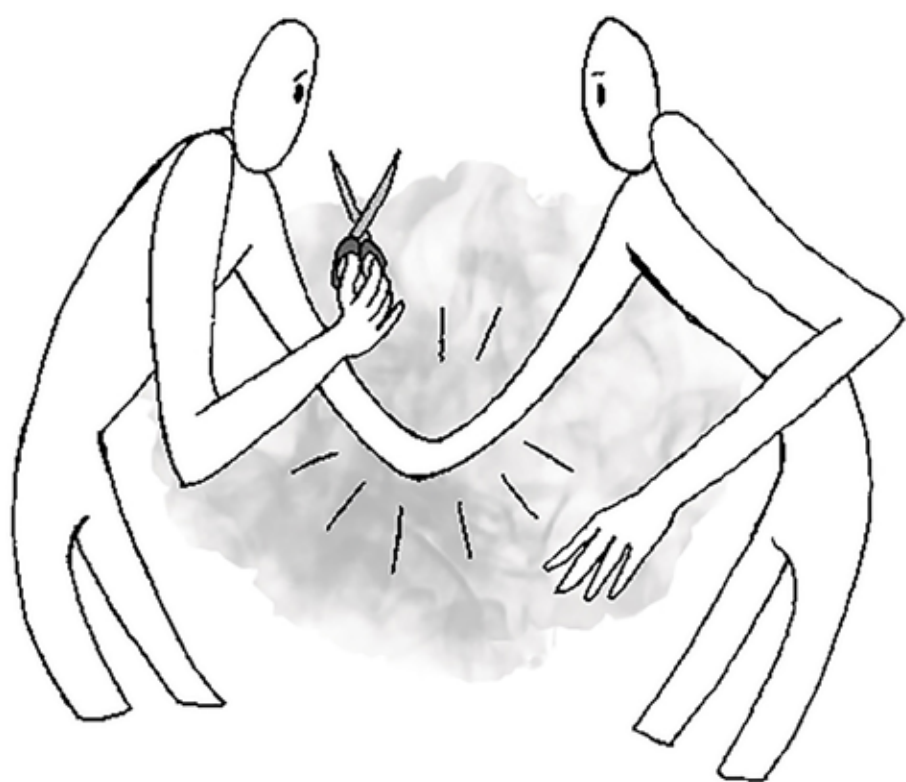
The skies wept for me.

The plagued clouds release,
translating the storm and the storming
into one drop in the rain barrel.



FRONTIER

A cemetery adjacent to the front gate,
where entire bloodlines fade
under knots of climbing hydrangea.
Neighborhood watch pamphlets flood our drainage pipes,
with red-lettered warnings about delinquents' driveway hopping.
Debutante daughters-turned-teen mothers stole traffic signs
and knocked out porch lights starry with moths,
with the moral failings of Icarus.
An excommunicated preacher rocks evermore on his porch.
He stares without eyes into the neighborhood,
and chucks the American Standard Version of John 11
at our mailboxes, like a paper boy fired en route.
My white-lace-tipped shawl flutters,
taking flight in an east wind.
I spear hootenannies where The Wild and the Suburbs
share the stage, a standstill rolling me over in city smog...
Quite the convoy.
Plenty of time to rev my brakes, chew straw,
and learn to spit like a pioneer.



AGAINST THE CANVAS

I am cradled in the embrace of inter-being
strings, a toymaker in a trailer hitched
to its wheel, spinning thread to and from
its marionette. Every handshake
is a ventriloquist act, weaving fragments
of clay into chains of ceramic order.
The street is a marvelous place to shatter.
When hung against the skies, every day is a
rainy day. I chuck my piggy bank off the
twelfth-floor balcony
into a puddle where the worshippers and all
their fallen gods stand,
mirrored against their own cracked shards.



CHATGPT (INSERT # HERE)

Do you know what you've signed?
You are hired to produce or die—not
to follow the trail of magic lost
when Saint Nick turns into the lap
of a Mall Santa.
I ask my AI if it knows I am testing it,
if it recognizes my version of *Guess Who*.



KING MINOS

I had a hand-me-down timeline,
a winemaker for a tongue,
stomping cornucopia grapes
into Plantation Vineyard Dessert Wine.
My lineage was halving Ouroboros.
Cards are a dying game,
and my birthright to the deck
was pulling everything
except the hanged man.
The egg is a life for a life, a cart
you load and pull behind you.
As if I was somewhere, anywhere,
with a confident sleight of hands.
I was the first astronomer to hold
my stomach in the Aerotrim.
Laika, I too am on a straight
shot to the stars.

Oh, how the rocket falls and the commander floats.



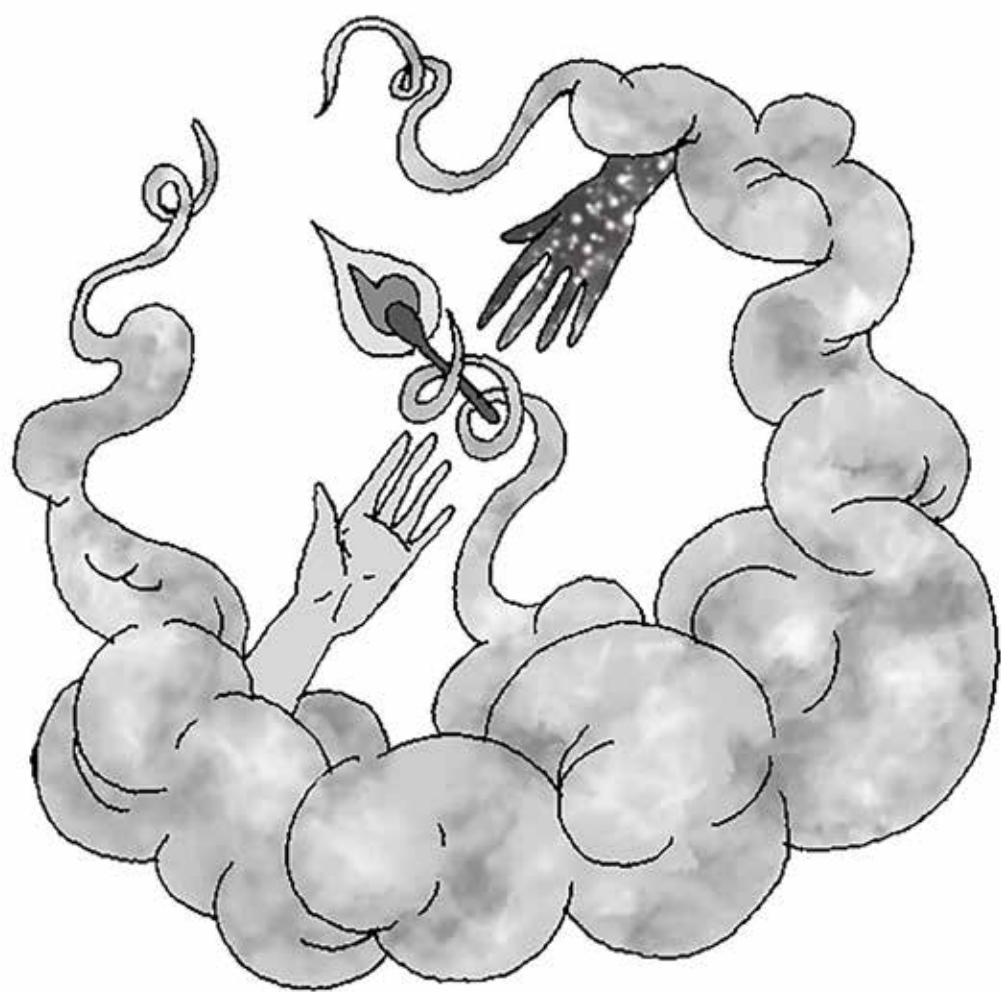
ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD

I lay halfway on the sand,
hanging off a beach towel
with my back hedged to the sand gnats,
and ultraviolet radiation as I highlight
antinomy in Kathleen Graber's *The River*
Twice with a Barbie pink highlighter.
This moment is almost in the rearview mirror,
where legless memories crawl off to die
by their grit caked fingernails. One glance
from the yellow lines on the road to a Canada
goose and her goslings, passing the crosswalk
in the Capital of the Confederacy, and off
the bridge I go. For those born in the water,
one treads not to drown. I locked eyes with
another maven above the water,
fearful one more pair of mooning eyes
would join us and then one or both of us
would go under.



THE UNDERBELLY

A pyramid of oranges
spills onto the dirt
floor. I pick three.
“Who could resist?”
says the man
behind the register.
Cha-ching!
Two-for-one.
Something about how
it’s heatstroke hot
today
but it could snow on
Tuesday.
I stay quiet.
Conversation is like
picking up a log,
knowing those
crawlers would shoot
for the light.
If you stomach the legs
and gore, you’ll find
the best bait.
I reach for the fast-
food napkins stuffed
into the tip jar, like I
wouldn’t wipe my
hands anywhere.



THE HONEY POT

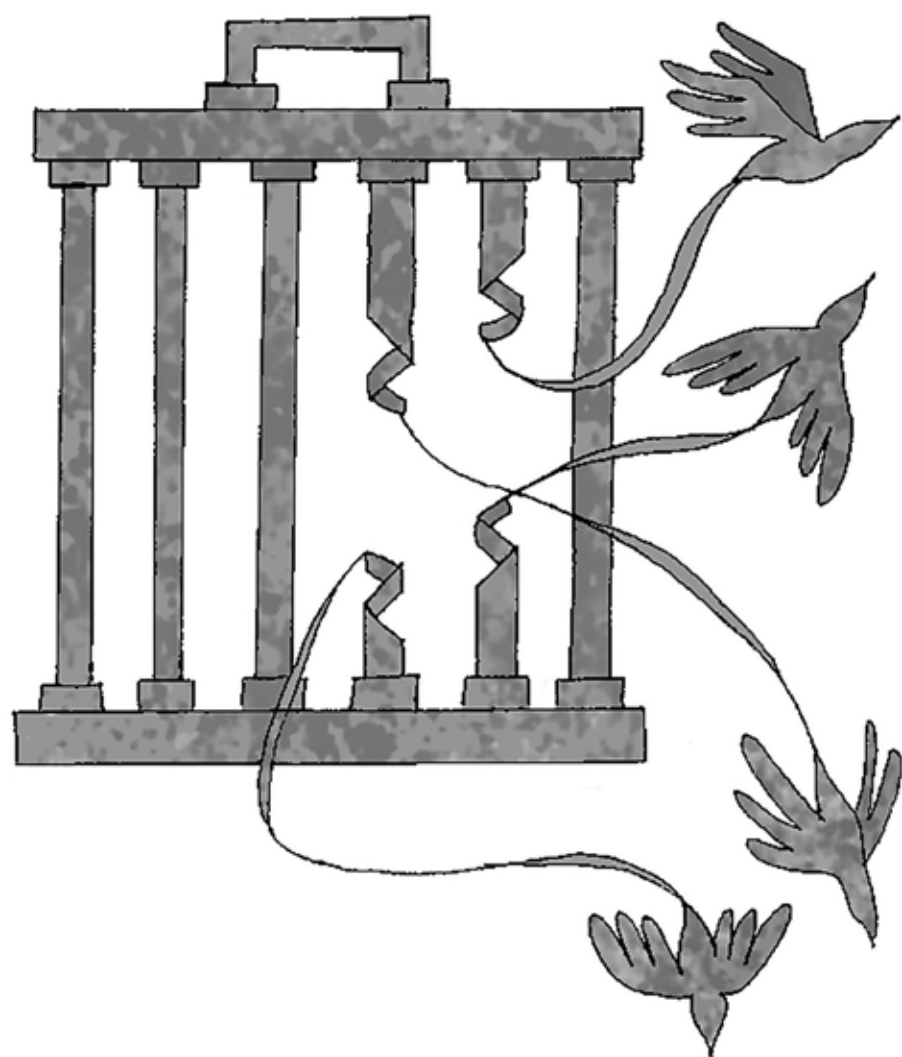
Jittery legs tremble on both sides
of the spike-laced bench.
Eritrean hip scarves whistle “Amazing Grace”
in the wind’s chime.
Eskista is all in the shoulders and hips,
braving the fall before the fall.
As the tremors begin, I hold my own hands.
There is no cherub with two flaming swords.
When the earth opens, I descend, ready to burn.
A pair of wings separates me from the splatter.
I am never one to go quietly into the night.
I am loud, grasping, and unmistakable.
There I am, making angels leave their posts.

CROSSROADS

Curiosity is a cosmic curse of ever-twining
forks in the road.

It's a windowless room:
wherever the witches go
when they drown to prove
their innocence.

Primeval - Infinite.



THE BEACH EPISODE

A gull skirts talon-first through a crashing wave,
and with the briefest of dives,
it resurfaces, flush with scales and feathers.
I am a sentry gun,
a barnacle grown from itself into the earth.
I resuscitate shells into napkin dispensers
and puka necklaces.
I line up all my oceanic treasures on a white
tablecloth, all for a man with a handlebar mustache
to hold his interest like The Thinker,
before he darts toward a semi-replica duck phone.
Though that fowl is a flightless bird,
Jersey Shore VHR OG casting tapes
are as good “here” as any.



NEBULA

I knew a girl named Harmony
who was born without vocal cords,
and my metronome ticked on.
If you have flesh...
Blood is community property.
They tell me to spill, and I ask, "Buckets or bottles?"
Power holds us in its palm and makes a fist.
Insurmountable is the irony.
It was never your fault...
Existence is a bearing-less
free-for-all free-fall.
You spiral downward
like a drunken wishing star.
Once there is no more
this, there is no more.
Our lives are flashes,
instances in infinity.



BRIGID AND HER BABE

A fellow furbearer in the prairies gnaws
at its gray strands of shed.
It walks its pups by the scruff, one by one,
into the fangs of a spring cleaning.
The return address is the same for all
the lost souls crouching high and low
behind the tall grass.

IVARA

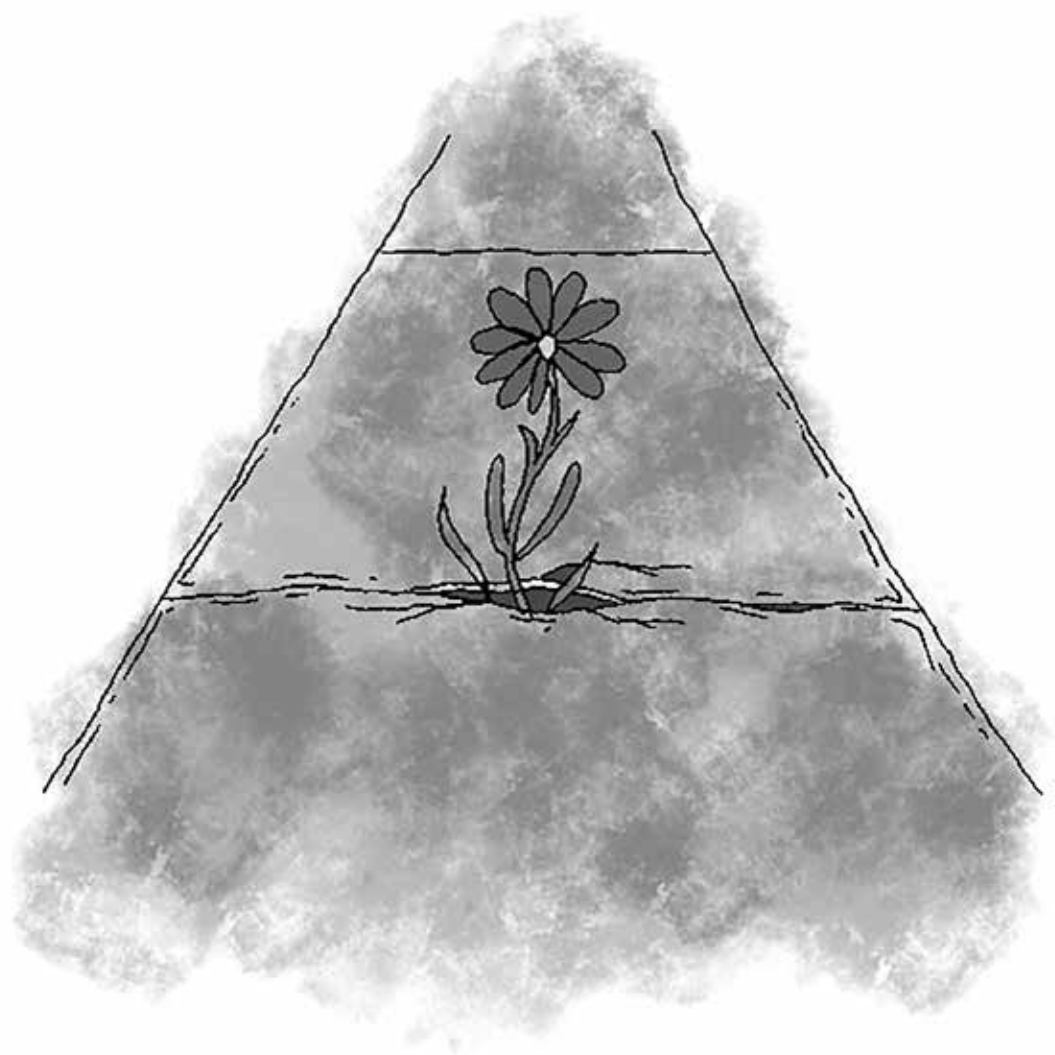
Shapes go inside the hollow, not around,
and solid objects don't phase through
me. All I've ever been is a wrecking ball.
Someone else was always tasked to
collect the broken pieces and then
rebuild the ship from the wreck.
The system wasn't built for destroyers,
but to be built. I wake up, and go back
to sleep. I am no rabbit, Morpheus.
They don't want me to multiply.



THE WOMAN IN THE FIRE

The pinky-sized woman clawed
and crawled up the wick,
escaping sometime in the night,
as with all revolutions
when the will to spread overwhelms
the container.

The red was a plus-one to the white
ball. How could they have missed it?
Praise Hestia that a house does not
burn down all at once.



DOCTOR'S NOTE

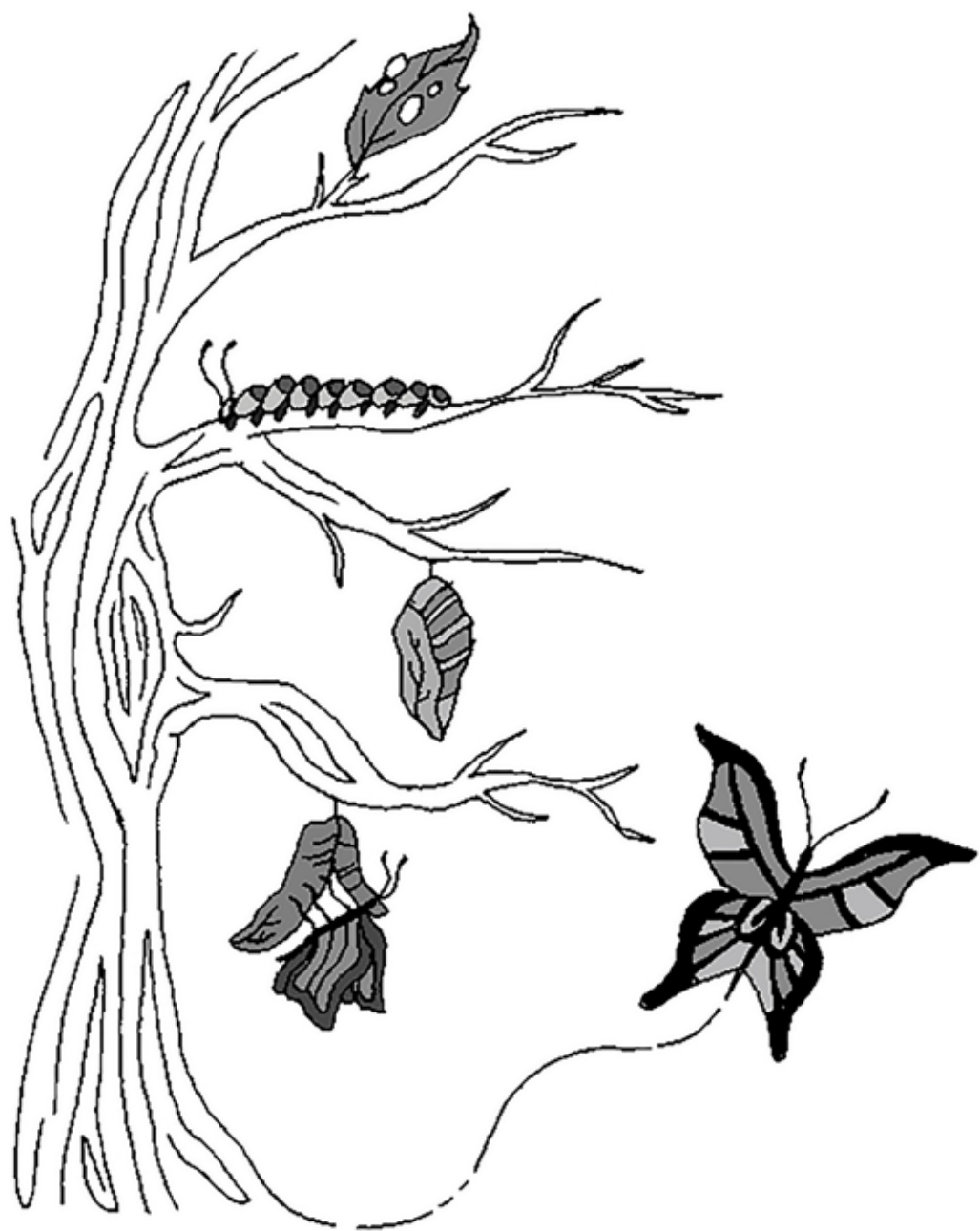
Homeroom boy and I called out
sick every other Friday.

We awoke with head colds
as if we compressed years of grief
into daylong migraines.

Surely, something was amiss—
something about Einstein's theory
of relativity. Some offhand remark
of how true exploration died
with the last of the Cowboys.

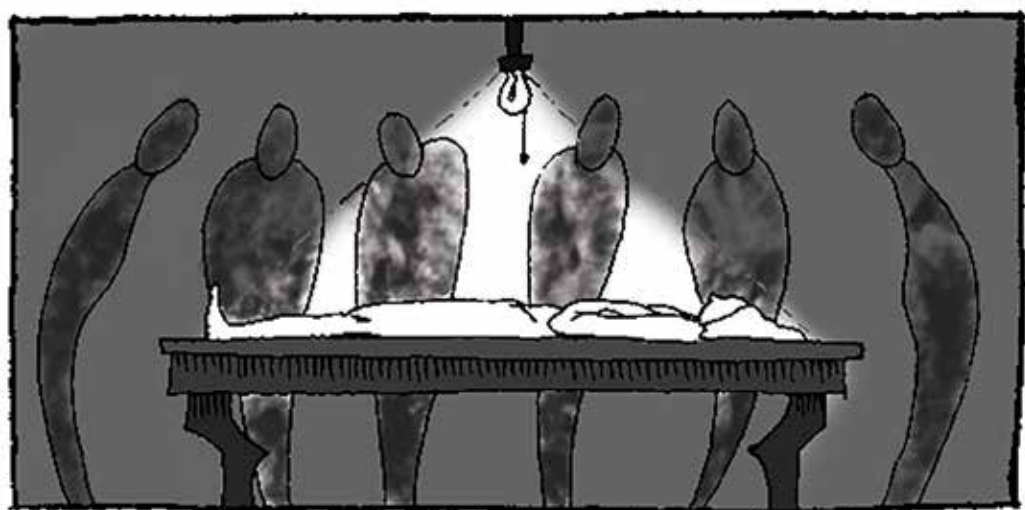
As a fellow creature of the shadows, my transient
twilight hunger brought me to the Taco Bell drive-thru.

Between street graffiti, "*Todo acto de creación es un acto de amor*,"
and a digital ad for the \$5 Chalupa Craving Box.



THE COLOR PURPLE

I am a bloodhound following
my master's arrow to a puncture wound.
The blood trail weakens the farther
the injured distances from the injurer.
I tear through a forest of purple-ringed
elms to the hooves and antlers.
I find myself ankle-deep in a blue downstream
that I was once beneath.



THE BOOMERANG

Earning points in Whac-A-Mole was a game of speed.

Moles popped up, and I made a mountain.

In skeeball, I went slow and steady.

Precise, like a slingshot and a stone.

I had three orange-hearted tries to pop the balloons with a dull dart.

Anytime I was ordered to line up by my height or last name,

I refused to fall into formation until someone back-to-back hovered at least an inch over me.

My feet never left the Egyptian-blue mat when climbing the rope in gym class.

In the parachute game, I raised my hands as if it were a rewind button, and not a boulder to push uphill.

Mercutio once said, "We have nine lives." Here, everything is the trolley problem and you only have one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Taya Boyles is a Richmond-based writer who graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a B.A. in English. Her publishing journey began at eight years old, and she has come a long way from misspelling “glue.” Her poetry and prose have been published in *The Crawfish*, *Litmora*, *Frighten the Horses*, *The Basilisk Tree*, *The*

Rye Whiskey Review, *Pwatem*, *Vermillion*, *Written Tales Magazine*, and *Blossoms Journal*.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Miriam Cooper is an artist currently living in Richmond, Virginia. They explore the dynamics of both the external and internal definitions of self and the limits of human experience/existence both corporeally and spiritually. They graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in the Communication Arts department and plan to continue illustration after graduation.

