

THE MASTHEADS X The Berkshire Eagle fold #10

Our final fold of 2019 is a celebration of the great creators whose work has been a part of the Mastheads this year. They include: **Historical figures of the Gilded Age Berkshires:** James Van Der Zee, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Mark Twain, W.E.B. DuBois, **Commissioned visual artist:** Felt banners by Megan Craig, **Writers in Residence:** Toni Judnitch, Rachael Uwada Clifford, S. Erin Batiste, Sam Max, James Davis, and **Fireside poets:** The Third Grade Class at Morningside Community School.

Thank you for participating in the Mastheads!
Tessa Kelly, Sarah Trudgeon, Jeffrey Lawrence, Chris Parkinson



TONI JUDNITCH

Bird

If you're alone in the dark, there are things you can do. You can count to one hundred. You can look at the plastic planets glowing green on the walls and green on the floors because they fell down, the tape wouldn't stick to them. You can press your fingers into your eyelids until you see white splotches. You can. You can wait and wait and wait because you are alone. You are alone, and you can't sleep, and it's okay not to sleep sometimes, Jake says this sometimes, it's okay to stay up all night, and then you can sleep all day, and you are alone, and it all works out. It does.

Sometimes, when you and Vera wait, you ask each other questions. What happens to bugs when it rains? What does it feel like to be a crow flying in a thunderstorm? Does it hurt? What does it look like inside an anthill and if you pour water on it, what happens then? Do they all drown? Do their rooms fill up? What does lake foam taste like? Is it salty? What happens when the sun goes out and it's dark all the time? What happens then? How do we know it's going to rise anyway? And in the dark the questions feel bigger, they feel giant, and so you have to stop thinking about them.

You can count. You can count again. By twos. By threes. You can look out the window and try to see something. You can wait, and the sun comes up eventually, it does, and it's you and you are waiting on the bed with the crinkly plastic sheets when the boys come, and they say, breakfast. They say, mom is sleeping, and there she is, on the floor, her arms spread out like a bird. But you don't have a mother. Your mother is under dirt somewhere, and it's easier not to have one. It's easier, you know this now. And it's easy to let the let the boys lead you into the small kitchen and watch them shove hamburger buns into the toaster, and there is nothing to put on it, the tub of butter is growing green, and the hamburger buns have circles of blue, but you don't have to say anything, you can stand there and smell them burn. And when the smaller boy hands you a piece, and it's black, and he asks you, why don't you talk, you can shrug. You can eat what you're given.

You have a shirt that's not your shirt, and you don't know where your clothes are. You ask the boys, and they shrug. They say, maybe in the wash, maybe thrown out. Yeah, maybe they're in the trash, they say, and they step on a little button on the can in the kitchen, and you can look in there, but there's only eggshells and pieces of plastic. You can keep looking. There is a big pile of laundry in the other room on the floor, and somewhere in that pile is your clothes, and in your clothes the piece of paper sits crumpled with the phone number on it, and now it's lost. Now the paper is gone. You lost it.

RACHAEL UWADA CLIFFORD

Teeth

The sleeping began sometime in the last year—the members of the Nnaji household falling asleep without notice, at unusual times of day, in unusual and uncomfortable places. In their house, people sleep deeply and are almost impossible to wake. Michael, who is sixteen, falls asleep on the bathtub's edge or the back porch steps, hunched into himself, his mouth resting on his hand, like the Thinker. Easter, who is eight, falls asleep playing tea party in the scrubby patch of yard. Her back leaning against the oak tree while her dolls' careful triangles of bread go stale, are plucked away by birds. Mrs. Nnaji falls asleep coming home from work, after she parks in the street but before she unbuckles her seatbelt, her thin hands still gripping the wheel. In the mornings, after getting up and going down to the kitchen, Mr. Nnaji falls asleep standing in the quick, pale light, the wide pages of his newspaper enveloping his head. Peter is the only one who doesn't sleep.

Peter, almost thirteen, is a skinny, broad-shouldered boy. Eyes set wide. Each side of his long head is trimmed low, and a thicket of dark curls, shaped like tiny pen springs, rises from his crown. He has his father's jaw. Square, solid. And his mother's symmetrical, cavity-resistant teeth. (That was among the other strange things that happened, that year: A whole, beautiful, intact tooth fell clear out of his mother's mouth without warning one evening while she was drinking tea. An incisor.) His skin is deep brown, his lips an even deeper brown, except for a rosy flush just inside the lower one, which makes him avoid smiling. He tends to set his mouth in a line, as though he is walking in the cold.

Peter doesn't sleep. He tends the sleepers. He carries Easter and her dolls inside, feeds the forgotten tea to his father's plants. He gently pries his mother's fingers from the steering wheel and reclines her seat. He holds Michael's shoulders and walks him from the bathroom to the bedroom. He folds his father's newspaper and eases him into a chair. Sometimes, in all of this, the Nnajis speak their dream-language—they mumble dream-words to Peter. But they never wake.

S. ERIN BATISTE

WANTED:

BDDQ-4-FVRF5

Bed dwelling drama queen now hiring forever friends on a full-time basis. Veteran thrifters and enthused brunchers are encouraged to apply. Must have experience in dealing with an extroverted introvert. Contradictory as a sunshower. Showy. Possessive. Weepy. Prone to loneliness, even at a crowded party or poetry reading. A penchant for dresses, oversharing, making lists and tea recommended. Trained to gracefully tackle trust issues and social treasons as dainty, as delicate as lace. Never forget her birthday or the death anniversaries of anyone who ever loved her. Able to steel themselves against gossip, pettiness, and manipulation. Though these days she uses her powers for good, mostly. Tracking trines, squares, sun and moon cycles, early warnings for every retrograde are prerequisites. She is her own time zone. Willingness to work bewitching hours, overtime may be necessary to charge, channel, align crystals and chakras alike. Competitive salary consummate with companionship.

WANTED:

HPYPSMT-4-SS

Once-in-a-lifetime soulmate, sturdy. For a happy pessimist but polite Sunday-everyday-dresser and good enough hostess if she'll have you inside awhile. A pillow princess, sure, please indulge her: fussy lilies fresh with spring, bubbles, butter, rich truffles are said to stir her interest. Loyal to a fault. Hates all small talk but desperate to be known. Secretly sensitive, easily wounded, cries over the littlest of losses. Closets her miseries in bad tempers and repertoire. Craves sharing meals but also space, sleeps alone. Craves a reliable, consistent, brick house gentleman. Age in light years. Must ask about her day daily. Skilled in actually listening. Must tolerate stubbornness and stanzas. Who will still allow her room to grieve her father: mortal, martyr, myth near perfect now, now saint man, canonized in memory. Longs for warm arms. Longs for softness. A candlelit classic sweet tea man. Must have a strong heart. *REFERENCES REQUIRED.*

WANTED:

DLD-4-RMGGG

Doll seeks replacement mother, grand or great to tend her yesterdays. She has amassed each hurt into her own galaxy. Must not mistake this shimmering sadness for beauty. A soothsayer who specializes in the area of repairing auras. Provide unseasonably sound structure. Quilting a plus. Said surrogate must be expert nurturer, certified. Stitch insecurities and nurse betrayals leftover from the era of afterschool television. Carefully handle episodes of rogue locomotive chatter and scalding, volcanic tears. Can manage late blossoming. Teach her to lessen grudges, and control. Prefers a baker, whose desserts and buttery essences will exorcize her laziness and love of linens, their spiced cinnamon laced cakes coaxing and causing her to forsake all foam and comforter fortresses. Velvety midnight spirit, whose lavender speak restores.

SAM MAX

Natural History is a play that follows four teenage boys who were involuntarily grouped together to complete a school project in the woods. Excerpts:

Silas speaks to the audience.

SILAS

So you're on this road trip in 2005, right?

It's you and your sister and your mom and your dad. All four of you are driving through the Midwest to your aunt's house in Kalamazoo. You've been sitting on your asses for like five straight hours. The end credits for the first Spy Kids is playing on the in-SUV DVD player. And what really starts to horrify you is that someone's paused the video on the name "Alan Cummings." It's not the name that's scary, it's the fact that the screen's been stuck like that for a full century. The name "Alan Cummings" looks like it's supposed to be in motion, but someone paused it right at the moment his name is supposed to sweep across the screen, finally transitioning to a different godforsaken name.

Over the past two hours of the film everyone has become permanently damaged. Your family is wilting. And no one cares to actually shut the movie fully off. No one even wanted to watch the movie in the first place. But here you are. You finished it. You swallowed it whole, like a programmed fucking automaton, while your mom pawed at her Blackberry.

"This is not what winners do" is a thought you have. "This is not what being a winner feels like." Something has seized your body, and you've wasted your life, but you can't do anything because you're stuck in a car that smells like a congealed carton of milk, and it's hurdling through space, and if you get out, if you just roll your body out the door and onto the highway like a dumb log, the consequences will be much worse.

The Michigan-bound-hell-machine glides on. And everyone is breathing through their mouths. You're not hungry but you could consider being hungry.

But your sister? Well, she passed out halfway through the movie, and now she's woken up and she's licking her teeth. She just decided she's ready to murder someone with a pair of rusty fingernail clippers for some food.

And what's worse? There aren't regular restaurants for miles, and your sister is threatening to rip out every single one of her head hairs if she doesn't eat soon. Your whole family quickly realizes that you're all going to have to bend to a tiny person's forceful whims. The only way out is to feed your parasite.

The birds on the telephone wires peter out. They give way to an enormous yellow sign. And that's it.

That's when you realize you're going to have to eat at the Golden Corral.

A pause

There's nothing as depressing as being strung along for something you don't want.

...

In the woods, Adam stands naked before Silas.

ADAM

All four of us were building a diorama. You were in charge of making the animals. Gabe was in charge of making the trees. Caleb was in charge of making the labels. I was in charge of making the grass. We were all sitting at the same table, I don't know where.

Adam sits on a stump across from Silas, looking into Silas's eyes.

You were drinking a glass of just coffee creamer. The rest of us were drinking pop. Then some other stuff happened – and then all of a sudden you started freaking out. Your scissors weren't working or something. You were screaming about your scissors not working, but everyone else was already using theirs. You kept begging for our scissors. You said you needed us to finish your job.

Silas looks at his lap.

We couldn't figure out why you were screaming And then inside the unfinished diorama, there appeared this little tiny figurine. Almost like it crawled out of the cardboard. None of us could remember making it. And then we heard this tiny sound, like a fly darting too close to your ear. The figurine was calling up from the mess of shredded construction paper and spray-painted sand and shoddy trunks of trees that hadn't been glued down yet. And it said:

Adam puts his head down.

SILAS

Hello?

Adam brings his head up.

ADAM

(tiny voice calling up)

"There's something about the feeling of being watched when you're completely alone! There's something about how your actions come from people who have been watching you, even when they're not watching you! Even when you're all alone in your bathroom!"

Adam puts his head down. Lifts it again.

All of us heard it. The tiny voice. But we all just got up and left, man. You stayed at the table, staring at the haunted figurine. I don't know why.

JAMES DAVIS

Bo

"a pal" –
The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

An oh short of honey, my friend-zone bo.
A why short of youth, my good ol' bo.
An all-American homey-nym, my unromantic bo.

A ho short of homeless, my sheltered, privileged bo.
A gum short of creole, my bland, Yankee bo.
A les short of queer, my cisgender, hetero bo.

Au naturel, my crunchy, granola b.o.
Not Hollywood gold, nor silver-screen b.o.
A Craigslist compromise, my \$25 o.b.o.

A terrible dancer, my jangling Mister Bo.
Kind of a schmo, my so-so, bobo bo.
We see each other, though.
Good peeps—my dude, my bro.

Do

"the first tone in the diatonic musical scale"
"to begin and carry through to completion" –
The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

See "ho." See "mo." See "am" and "be" and "is." See "up" and "go."

See "fag." See "luv" and "law," "how" and "cum," "why" and "you," "out" and "now."

See "echo." See "here" ("hear.") See "kiss" ("tell.") See "home" ("poof.") See "done" ("gone.")

See "major," "sharp," "panic." See "drone," "yearn," "alone."

See "prayer" and "closet" and "church" and "family" and "fucked" and "futile" and "future."

See "honesty." See "abandon." See "goodbye." See "forward." See "through."

See "beginner." See "finisher." See "discrete" (not "discreet").

See "complete."

from Ta

"an expression of gratitude" –
The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

Ta, my depression,
for the days off work
for teaching me to appreciate k.d. lang
for slowing my roll, as the kids say
for disinterring my live-buried childhood, brushing the soil off its body,
pumping air in its lungs, and making it speak the terrible things it
had been led to believe:
love never lasts
not even the other faggots want you
you are not beautiful, nor do you deserve to be beautiful
you have been left for dead
for leaving me at a loss for words
for needing more than words
for needing sobs and wails, screams into throw pillows, bawling and
puling, snot, silent tears in grocery aisles, on hold with the
insurance agency, on the Free Mall Ride, on therapists' couches
and yoga mats and gay-church pews, crying until my throat was
sore, crying until my tear ducts bubbled
for not being *about* anything
for raising your voice loud enough for me to acknowledge you
for shutting the fuck up

Ta, God,

for existing and not existing
for being non-binary that way: real and fake, a quantum
for being way cooler than church
for the baroque art of blasphemy
for the Bhagavad Gita
for the Tao Te Ching
for the Bible, its many horrors and absurdities and ditties and arcana
for *Paradise Lost*
for Leibnitz
for Nietzsche
for Flannery O'Connor
for, believe it or not, *Game of Thrones*
for the beauty of men
the meadows of their stomachs and legs
their thick, bosky eyebrows
their stupid pouts and exaggerated repose
their cubist chests and cocks and posteriors
for the word *callipygian*
for shutting down heaven
for shutting down hell
for the sound of tangerine wedges as they separate

