

Lauren Coursey
American Dreams
Writing Portfolio

Frisco Dreamers
Short Story

The park is sunny and hilly, a sort of amalgamation of every park Amy has ever been to. It fades out near the horizon, the minty green of open fields bleeding into the baby blue sky. She wants to hear the small birds in the trees chirping and chiming, but they're all just perched like vultures, their mouths opening and closing silently. Her mind can't fill in the sound like it does with Selena's voice.

Amy finds that funny, because she's heard birds chirping before, but she's never heard Selena's voice in the waking world.

Selena stares at her, worried. Amy can feel almost everything she does, and she knows Selena can feel almost all of her. She crawls over the checkered red blanket, over pimento sandwiches that would ruin her pretty green sundress, because they just move out of her way so she can sit next to Amy. They curl into each other. Here, they aren't really separate beings, but rather two parts of a whole. Amy thinks this is what God must feel like. Selena thinks she's melodramatic and it's probably closer to the sensation of afterglow.

The sky is dark now, and fireworks bloom against the black. Amy and Selena lay on the blanket, food untouched. It doesn't ever taste right to either of them because the dream meshes their palates together, and they have very different tastes.

The fireworks are impossible colors, reds shimmering and turning into blues and violets. A golden explosion turns vivid green as it fizzles out. A series of meteor trails scar the sky, exploding over their heads. Selena gasps. Amy giggles. It's not terrible here, not all the time. Nightmares get worse when they're together, but pleasant dreams like this are so much better when they can share.

Little fireworks like lightning bugs surround the blanket. They don't burn or crackle, they just float there, illuminating the blanket. They're the closest thing to stars that exist here. Neither of them know why, but the night sky in the dreams is always charcoal-black. There are no clouds, but no stars are brave enough to show their faces. Amy wonders if stars get scared. Selena wonders what they would be afraid of.

At first, they thought they had been soulmates, and this was just a beautiful little oasis of peace that they could come to whenever they needed. Whether or not they're fated lovers, though, the dreams are not always peaceful. Their lives are very different, too; Amy thinks that's more proof that they're connected spiritually, but Selena thinks it's another tally against the idea. Selena lives in a gas-stop town in Arizona, though she goes out to Tucson every weekend. Amy lives just outside of Chicago and wants to be a journalist. She's even got an internship lined up for spring break. They have not fallen in love in any conventional sense, but that's not to say they haven't fallen in love at all. They're pretty sure they've been trying to meet up outside the dreams, but neither of them can remember it when they wake up.

The only thing they truly have in common was being in San Francisco at the same time. Two years ago, they both stayed in the same motel - the Marianna - for vastly different reasons. Selena's mother was visiting a few college buddies and dragging along her 15-year-old daughter during the same three days that Amy's family was on vacation because her father got a raise. They've spent hours going over every detail of those three days that they maybe could have met during: they both looked out the window to watch the city burn up in the night. They went to the same overpriced restaurants and watched the same fog roll in over the hills. They were in the same world in every way that mattered. They even went to the same tourist shop on the same day, but even when they were in the same room, they never saw each other. No dark-haired girls out of place in the cold haunt Amy's memories from the trip, and no vacationing suburbia brats stood out to Selena. They never met, and sometimes Amy thinks that's more fate's work than meeting ever would be.

Amy knows that Selena is keeping something from her, or maybe something from herself. She's not influencing the dream as much as usual: by this point, instead of a pitifully ambiguous Chicagoland park, she'd expect them to be sitting in the middle of Saguaro. Selena arguably has much more control of the dreams than Amy. They wake up together in Tucson, surrounded by golden city lights, much more than anywhere else. On the other hand, Amy can sometimes end the dreams or change the setting quickly if she wishes for it desperately enough. It's a kind of desperation she can rarely allow herself to feel, but it's usually how the two of them deal with nightmares. In peaceful dreams, Selena is usually the main influence; tonight, she supposes, something must be different. She's not a fan of the idea.

Selena has changed her life, through the power of her sheer blasé attitude. The dreams are just another part of life, to her, and that's what gives her the ability to control them. She treats the dreams like she would anything else; like it exists for kicks and kicks alone, to serve her and her whims. Still, she has this hidden depth to her; she's worldly in the way saints are, with a look in her eye Amy hadn't seen before and hasn't seen since, albeit she's taken a wildly different path than most saints Amy knows. She wonders, sometimes, if Selena is her guardian angel; if even

angels struggle like ordinary men and women. What's a modern angel, anyways? What Lord would she serve, what holy messages are left to bring?

"You think so loudly. I'm flattered, though," Selena doesn't need to say in response to Amy's passionate internal ramble. Amy turns red and hides her face. Some of the grass around them dies and withers, replaced by sand. She can feel Selena start gathering herself, breathing out calmly as she thinks about her city and the thing she won't let Amy see. They will visit Saguaro tonight, after all.

"I'm not hiding anything important from you- well, nothing that immediately affects you," Selena's voice comes to her, placid.

Amy can think of three different arguments against that statement, and she lays them out neatly where Selena can hear: "One, nothing in our separate lives applies to each other outside the dreams, but we still talk about it anyways. Two, even if it doesn't affect me, it affects you, and that makes me want to know. Three, I'm worried about you. What would make you think you can't tell me this, whatever it is?"

Selena flinches hearing the last argument. Amy knew she would. Selena is uncomfortable with worry. The only kinds of worry she knows are the unending, sharp worries of money from her mother, the worry of being a gas station attendant forever, and the private, late-night worry of living and dying alone, the only light in her life being the neon glow of stranger-city Tucson. But Amy brings about a different worry; she worries about Selena. Not about her spending habits, her future, or her failures, just if she's alright. Gratitude, fear, and bitterness mix in her stomach. It makes her speak impulsively.

"I'm going up to Chicago over spring break, two weeks from now, to look at colleges. I'm taking my mom's car, I've already let her know. Mine can't make the journey. She'll be using it. I'll only be up there for three days, I'm not planning to see you." She communicates it very simply and honestly, even though they both know Selena has never planned to go to college. She's just had a change of heart. Amy reacts with a nod and nothing else. She knows if Selena was planning to see her, she'd forget her plans entirely on waking and they never would meet; but she knows even if Selena forgets just by mentioning Chicago that her mother will remind her - her car is at stake. She does not shriek in excitement and she does not put her knees to the dust, clasp her hands in prayer, and beg Selena to take her to Tucson for just one night.

"I've got a lot saved up from work, too, and I'm headed to San Francisco afterwards. Alone, unless I pick up a stray." Selena continues, testing Amy's ability to control herself.

“For a week,” she adds. “I’m staying at the Marianna Motel. The blue-and-white one on the hill. You know, where we met. It’s a shame I’m going without you.”

“I’m so happy for you!” Amy channels every ounce of genuine joy in her body into the message - the world shifts from wild Arizona to the heart of Chicago, and it’s so blindingly bright that it wakes Selena up. She wonders if in a few weeks, they’ll dream of the same city they’ll wake up in. She doesn’t dare to think they’ll stop dreaming.

Antigone: A Ramona Kondracki Novel
Novel

Synopsis:

Ramona Kondracki has been a Private Investigator for five years now, but she's never been pulled into a case like this. After a blow to her career, she decides to lay low and pursue the less exciting case of the week: a multi-million dollar museum-robbery. While entrenched in the mystery of an unspeakably expensive dress torn to shreds in a poor man's apartment, the heiress to the Smith fortune vanishes, leaving only a cryptic note: *everyone is lying to you*. Meanwhile, her professional rival James Mancy is leading the hunt for escaped killer Vinnie Randell. Randell's only surviving victim, Sidney Black, is living in fear, even under witness protection. When Ramona uncovers a lead connecting the disappearance of Katerin Smith, Vinnie Randell's murder spree, and Sparling City's eternally flourishing organized crime scene, she's ecstatic; the only problem is, it paints a much more complex picture of Randell and Black than she ever imagined. Will she pursue the truth at all costs, or play it safe for her career? No-one knows, least of all her. Then again, what does she have to lose? And when has she ever turned down a mystery?

Excerpt:

Ruth Darling, waitress extraordinaire, has kept Culvetti's Diner in the running for "Best Diner in Sparling City" for the past twenty years. She can make any dish on the menu, and make it better than a Michelin chef. She can control any rowdy customer with little more than a raised eyebrow. She never leaves a customer unsatisfied, not even picky private eye Ramona Kondracki. No matter what Ramona's on the hunt for this month, be it embezzled money, missing people, classified information, or a five-million-dollar dress, she can count on Ruth to make the best 10-pm fried eggs known to man, and do it before Ramona's finished her cigarette outside. She watches the cars and bikes race eagerly into the bright maw of Eastside. The view is better when she isn't behind the glass, and Ruth would also murder her if she tried to bring tobacco inside of the diner. She doubts that her corpse would ever be found.

Ramona tries to avoid smoking, on principle. She's got too many addictions already; her job, her city, getting stupidly, unendingly entangled with reporters. She doesn't need nicotine on that list. It's only on cases like this, on weeks like this, that she ends up with a Newport or two between her fingers. It's something tangible when everything around her feels as real as a pig walking on its hind legs. Then again, she's met quite a few of those on the job, especially within the Sparling City PD. She feels a headache coming on, reminded of how terribly the SCPD and her handled Vinnie Randell's mysterious escape from custody. She understands, begrudgingly, why Chief Anderson didn't put her on the manhunt for Randell, even if she got heckled by two different reporters - James Mancy, who makes it a habit to heckle Ramona specifically whenever possible, and Angel Winters, who famously only heckles those responsible for tragedies - while trying to

get home that night. She had laid awake, concerned not so much for her safety but that of Randell's only survivor Sidney Black.

Sidney was wide-eyed and nervous when Ramona first interviewed her almost two months ago in a faintly pink Westface University dorm. She stumbled over her words and feet, even after being assured Ramona wasn't police. She didn't have many answers about Randell based on the classes and extracurriculars they shared, but she did ask questions - lots of questions. She had true crime posters on her wall. Ramona chalked her up to a harmless junkie, but thankfully kept an eye on her. Two weeks after the interview, Randell went after Sidney with a knife and managed to gash open her side before being apprehended. Sidney hasn't left the eye of policemen since, currently in a safehouse somewhere on the riverbank.

At first, being approached by Kat to help solve the disappearance of the Antigone Dress from the Smith-Whittaker Museum of High Fashion was a welcome distraction. Sade Adegoke, Ramona's beloved college buddy who also runs the Westface Archive, managed to procure an entire book about the Antigone for her. It was designed and unveiled at New York Fashion Week twenty years ago, initially in replacement for a Dior dress that went missing in transport. It was a collaboration between almost twenty different designers of different nations, brands, and styles the night before the show, and no single one felt they could take credit for the masterpiece that came out. The Antigone became symbolic of unity during tough times in the fashion industry, eventually worn by late women's rights leader and designer Ginnie Rousseau to the Met. Since then, it's been kept under lock and key in shining bulletproof glass. Until a museum tech named Liam Xi stole it, ripped it to shreds in his apartment, and shot himself in the head this week. At least, that's the only theory Ramona has been able to come up with so far as to why he was found dead via gunshot surrounded by said tattered historical artifact. She really wants to call it a murder, but every scan and test run on the scene showed no fingerprints but his own on the dress. The gun is missing, so it's technically still inconclusive, but Officer Delgado thinks it's a suicide and will undoubtedly throw a fit when Ramona says she's wrong.

Ramona's head throbs. It halts her train of thought, and she realizes she's smoked half a pack while ruminating. She can feel Ruth's eyes on her through the window, concerned she's letting her food get cold while filling up her head and lungs with ash. She swore two months ago she'd never be an addict, never make it a habit, and never smoke more than three cigarettes in a night. She's afraid they've lost their kick, and she'll have to move on to something stronger. But she throws the pack away as she goes inside and sits at the counter where cold fried eggs await her, with no one to blame but herself.

"Tough week, 'Mona?" Ruth asks in that soft, comforting drawl that warms up Ramona's cold, unforgiving world. She swears Culvetti's is the best thing to happen to her since she met Sade.

“Oh, you’ve got no clue, Darling. It’s been straight from hell.” Ramona laments between bites. Ruth fills up Ramona’s coffee cup - Americano, hot, two sugar, no milk or cream - without being asked. She always gets it perfectly right, down to the type of sugar packet Ramona prefers. After all, she’s been making Ramona’s coffee for five years now.

Ruth has seen every phase of Ramona in her twenties: first, a naive student with a love of sugary iced lattes who always went on about wanting to solve crimes and do good for her town. She didn’t even smoke, back in those days, and she was never alone. Then, she was a young professional only just scraping by, ordering plain black coffee she could barely drink without burning her palate. It was all she could afford. After her first big break involving the disappearance of roughly half a million dollars’ worth of money from the Sparling City Council’s treasury - embezzlement from the Assistant Treasurer, a nepo-baby who thought he deserved more cash on hand after his parents cut him off - Ramona started ordering the most specific coffee known to man (12-ounce vanilla-hazelnut latte, brewed hot but served cold, sugar-free, frothed soy milk) in a pitiful attempt to feel like a big shot. After that brief phase, she’s more or less settled down into Americano bliss. She might need to change it up after this case, though. She can feel how it’s rearranging her mind, creating a labyrinth of possibilities where the true solution is always just out of reach.

Ruth has just finished giving her their regular Saturday gossip brief, carefully avoiding the subject of the Smith-Whittaker robbery.

“Fascinating,” Ramona says, not having taken in a word of it. Ruth looks at her with pity. She knows it isn’t personal; Ramona just can’t leave her mind right now. The labyrinth has trapped her, but she knows she’s near the center; there has to be more to it than this. She won’t leave yet. Ruth chats up various customers while Ramona watches on from her seat at the counter. She looks out over the river from the back window, the Great Bridge shining pearly-white in the night. Headlights flash across the surface of the water like icy, foreign meteors. The river glows brighter than the sky here, with reflections of orange-gold halogen lamps strewn across the shore and candy-red city lights dipping down and slithering across the distorted black waters. Ramona wonders what it would be like to see the stars above her here, like when she was a gas-station town kid 200 miles and a lifetime away from Sparling. She used to go out every night just to see the sky, dreaming one day her life would be flooded with lights. She got what she dreamed of, like so few do, so now she has new, pitiful dreams every day to get by.

Liam Xi, age 25, a museum technician who by all accounts loved his workplace. The curator loved him. No criminal record. No incriminating texts, emails, journal entries. No girl to steal the dress for, much less brutalize it. The Antigone Dress held no significance to him. *So why in God’s name was it found ripped to shreds in his apartment?*

Something itches in the back of Ramona's mind. She's had to rely on Delgado so much for this case, thrown off her game by Kat's vanishing act, which she can't even investigate because the Antigone case is still fogging her up. Kat's scribbled words haunt her. *Everyone is lying to you. Everyone. Lying.*

Delgado gave Ramona the half-burned note five days ago, the night Kat faded into neon oblivion. It was found in her room. Delgado said she found it burned. Ramona knows Kat smokes, they shared a pack of Luckies on the roof of the museum while Ramona was still only knee-deep rather than neck-deep in all of this. She kept a lighter on her person. Maybe Kat ignited it herself; it seems like something she would do. Ramona remembers she still has the paper in her pocket and practically slams it on the counter in front of her. The paper is blackened and frayed at the bottom edge. It's folded over itself. The writing is still frantic and curling in on itself, but Ramona is looking at it differently now. At the time she first got it, Ramona's head was spinning far, far too fast to properly analyze it. She thought she had everything figured out, like an idiot. The first lesson anyone should learn in investigative work is that they know nothing, and nobody is meant to know anything. The goal is to find out what it is that they don't know. She unfolds the paper and takes a deep, deep breath, folds it up again, smacks a 10 dollar bill on the table for Ruth, and leaves Culvetti's, headed straight for Delgado's apartment. The flashing lights of Sparling swallow her dingy black Mustang whole and spit it out in the middle of East Winter Avenue, in front of Delgado's cheap brick apartment complex, blood-red in the night. "What are you doing here, Kondracki," Delgado tries to bark at Ramona as she slinks inside the small apartment on the third floor, throwing her coat on the back of Delgado's cheap couch. "How do you know my address? Your librarian friend? Or that reporter, Mr. Mancy? No, seriously, how-"

"You leave your mail on your desk, where I can see it. It has your address on it," Ramona responds plainly as Delgado finally gives up her pointless plight of trying to get Ramona out of the dingy apartment, coming to sit opposite her on a stained loveseat with a heavy sigh. Ramona knows how she probably looks; an addict looking for another fix. She can feel mania seeping in and out of her like breath. She's polluting the air with it. Delgado has never been immune, it's why they get along as well as they do. If Ramona is an addict, Delgado is a faithful gambler who'll always bet on her relapse. She can see the dice roll in Delgado's eyes as she unfolds the paper and reveals what it was before Kat tried to turn it into kindling.

"Oh, Christ," She hears Delgado breathe, reaching for the copy of Solomon Whittaker and Eva Smith's joint financial records. It's an open secret that the Whittaker business mogul almost single-handedly keeps Sparling City's black market for stolen luxury goods afloat, but there has never been any direct evidence linking the Smiths to that until now. Now, Ramona and Delgado stare down months and months' worth of illegal transactions, printed out on a yellow bank note.

She can feel Katerin Smith's speech about Smith Industries' ten-year plan at the Museum Gala, where the heiress had first approached her, ringing hollow in her ears.

Ramona supposes that when Kat said everyone was lying, she was including herself. But *why*? Kat had always seemed so genuinely passionate about changing Smith Industries; she had already orchestrated a fifty-percent switch to clean energy in the scant two years she had been working under the watchful eye of auntie Eva. Kat grew up working class; Eva had designated her as heir only because she had no other choice. Eva Smith never married, had kids, or respected anyone in her office enough to think they deserved her position. Kat, estranged from her aunt, made her own headlines at 18 leading an environmental-activism student union that actually accomplished something meaningful in getting her university to stop investing in all nonrenewable energy ventures. She was named the Smith heir soon after.

Would Kat betray the morals she seemed to hold so close for the sake of keeping the family name scandal-free? If so, why would she put out the paper and not burn it whole? Was she interrupted? Did she even burn it in the first place? If not, why was it in her room? How did she get it? Was it the main reason she decided to leave, or just the icing on the cake? Did it factor in at all? Why leave the note? Was it really just for the police to find?

Above all, two questions propel Ramona further into the labyrinthian case: what else is Kat hiding? Where is she now?

"Oh my God!" Delgado screams, throwing down the paper, which she had picked up to further examine while Ramona got lost in her own mind. "Oh my holy - oh, God!"

"What? What is it?" Ramona snaps, pulled out of her reverie.

"Whittaker is sending money to Sidney Black," Delgado responds, muffled by the hand pressed over her mouth. Ice falls down Ramona's spine. "He's paying her for - something. Five thousand a month for the past six months, possibly more. Records don't go back farther than that on this. She's still in witness protection, isn't she? Can we bring this up to Anderson or something? Oh my God, what if she's extorting him? What if he's-?"

"It's blackmail," Ramona asserts confidently. She's beginning to understand something she should've realized the first time she saw Sidney Black, red-eyed and twitching, hiding in her own dorm.

"Sidney is getting money in exchange for staying quiet about his involvement with Randell. Randell worked for Whittaker, as a PA. He hasn't been seen in public since Randell was identified as the killer who mauled six people and left the bodies in Chaney Square. He knew. I'd

bet he knew. One of the bodies was a journalist, wasn't it? Cory Thomas? Oh, oh, Christ almighty. Mancy knew him. Said he was working on an expose on Whittaker. Oh, no." She begins rambling and pacing. Whittaker is paying Black to stay quiet about Randell - but that means Black must have known who Randell killed, and why. Black had said that she had known Randell from a few classes, but they weren't close. When Ramona interviewed her in that dorm room, she saw a polaroid of Randell sitting on the desk beside the bed, but chalked it up to morbid curiosity about the serial killer she went to school with. It struck her as unusual though, even then - Vinnie Randell was smiling, in that photo. Grinning widely and sincerely, looking at someone she cared about. At the time, Ramona assumed the photo had been stolen. But it wasn't, was it? Randell and Sidney had been close. So close, in fact, that Ramona feels stupid for missing it. She had looked so guilty, jittery and nervous when she tried to respond to Ramona's basic questions. Randell probably went after Sidney under suspicion she was a traitor. God, she was a terrible actor, and Ramona was a terrible fool for falling for it. She has to make this right. She has to confront Sidney. She has to find the truth. And maybe, just maybe, this truth will lead to other truths, and she'll be rid of Antigone's shadow forever. She dreams that after this case she can stop smoking, knowing it'll never really happen.

"You gonna share all that with me, genius, or leave me to figure it out on my own?" Delgado asks eagerly, watching Ramona's madness unfold.

"Third option, you'll learn as I find out," Ramona says, going to grab her coat, tugged towards the next step in the case. As always, Delgado follows her, drawn in by the promise of some precious truth unfolding itself. As always, Sparling City awaits them both with lazy, open arms and a heartbeat full of mysteries.

It's So Cold Out Here

Poetry

When I was just a kid, swallowing the spit / that all my teachers fed me, I was doing just fine
I had my fair-weather friends, one thing begins, another ends / A dreamer for a penny, I thought
destiny cost a dime

But, oh, the trees were taller than I thought / And all the fruits, they had to rot
I couldn't pretend to be something I was not / A small-town punk with an echo of a shot

I kept following the sun / Deep into winter, past the fun
Every night, I'd dream to run / out past the state lines
I heard my father shriek and scream / Saw my mother start to drink
I knew I had to get out quick / to keep these dreams of mine

Oh, but the future hollers for random callers / With money in the bank and friends in high places
Ones with pretty little mothers and white-collar fathers / And everything to lose should anything
change

Justice hollers for only low-ballers / They're criminal for being too poor for a lawyer
And just when you think you're safe with all you hold dear / she'll take it away from you, you'll
think, it's so cold out here

I got older by a little bit, / starting living for the fun of it
I thought my dreams were safe / tucked away in the colleges

They told me to get out / I swore I didn't cheat
But I had nowhere to go, now / I had to get back on my feet

I tried to live a little normal, / I tried to stand a little taller
My father started smoking / He couldn't handle all the drama
Wine-drunk lips, bleeding fists, / This is it, there goes momma
My sister falls in debt, ever-deepening / I know we can't take it much longer

Oh, but the world, she hollers for those who still bother / Those still trying to go farther than fate
dares to take them

Those who want to believe, those who try to wander / Through busy, filthy streets under watchful
eyes of angels

Faith, she doesn't holler, only whisper in the darkness / And only loud enough for those
desperate to hear her

She might be a savior and by nature, a martyr / She may be sweet, but I at least still fear her

I look at midnight for a miracle
All these prayers are too loud, I don't think God can hear at all
I might have a penny but I have a dream
Out past all the known, I want to see what all of it means

I can hear the angels calling out past the galaxy
All the demons haunting my bed grow quiet

The coldness of their song envelops me
And I am too hell-fired to fight it

Let the fates keep the score, and we'll clear the board / We can be the kind of giants that were
once adored
And the world will keep turning only for forevermore / That isn't long enough to find what we
should be searching for
Come hell or a biblical storm, I've sworn / My heart, I'll keep you warm

Chaos, she hollers for all of us marauders / Tragedy's always modern and every soul's a little
fallen
And you can't escape that from which you ran / Is it your fault or simply part of God's plan?
We're all cannon fodder, sit back and wait for the fuse to blow / 'Cause it could make you
stronger, but till it's over you'll never know

And just when you think that it's all so bleakly clear / You'll shiver, cause it's so cold out here

The road home is a cigarette

Poetry

The road home is a cigarette
and you have been an addict
your entire life.

After a certain point, it no longer matters
how high you get,

How long, wide, full the road
how many lights are put to it
where this dark line leads you.

The black marks of destiny
and the pale light you chase

Give way to your endless,
aimless
search under the emptiness.

It stops mattering how the ashes
cling to you, the scent of burning and
compulsion.

It's not something you can
hide. Everyone
can smell it.

All of this is
meaningless where
the asphalt leads,

only endings are real.
The ending cannot be seen
beyond an orange flame.
You can imagine
where it leads.
It will be waiting for you.

The only thing that matters
is how far
You can get this road to burn.

Whiplash: Why Government Policy on Transgender Rights Affect Everyone Else, Too **Critical Essay**

In February of 2025, Iowa governor Kim Reynolds signed a bill revoking “gender identity” from all civil rights protections in his state, meaning that discrimination and harassment on the basis of gender is no longer considered a violation of the law in Iowa. According to the Washington Post, crowds gathered outside of the government building to protest the decision, but it did not change the outcome (Washington Post, 2025). His administration is not the only one to take steps to remove protections for LGBT Americans from the state legislature. The passage of this law leaves only 23 states that still include civil rights protections for transgender individuals in the absence of nationwide protections. Although transgender people live in all 50 states, this means that they are only protected from discrimination based on their identity in less than half.

No matter what laws are passed barring it, transgender and queer people will continue to live and love here. Denying LGBT people their rights only harms them, not erases them. It is written in our constitution that every American has the right to pursue their happiness, have their liberty, and stay alive. However, a very dangerous precedent has been set recently. Dangerous misinformation has been spread in pursuit of targeting the transgender community. Transgender people’s rights as Americans have been meddled with, including their rights to life-saving civil protections. Furthermore, many transgender Americans have been denied from seeking medical care, which is a violation of their autonomy. This is a crisis that not only affects transgender people, but every citizen in the United States - and we as a whole must fight to protect our fellow citizens, regardless of their gender identity, to protect the principles of this nation.

Many changes have been made regarding the national consensus on America's health this year. One of those changes is that the government's definition of sex has been reassigned, unbacked by any new research. The new definition was given in a White House order in January. The order, titled “Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government”, states that the new definitions are these: “Female” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the large reproductive cell. “Male” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the small reproductive cell.” (White House, 2025). While on the surface this seems a simple and accurate solution, in truth it only creates slightly different complications. This definition is based on sexual reproductive cells. While these cells are defining features of how the sexes differ, they are not present at conception, and they are certainly not the only factors that define human sex - genes, hormones, and genitalia have all traditionally played a role in identifying sex. Contrary to popular belief, there are more genes involved in human sexual differentiation than just the SRY gene. These genes do have a rate of failure that can cause XY embryos to develop as female, which puts people with this condition in a very awkward position regarding where they fall on this scale, technically “belonging” to the male sex but developing entirely as female. (Wikipedia, 2025). Cases like this

show the need for a multifaceted definition of sex from birth - depending on the definition, some people may find their sex much more ambiguous than they could have imagined. The second failure mainly affects menopausal women who no longer produce gametes and people who are infertile, who never produced gametes in the first place. These people are no longer considered of any sex, which causes several problems when attempting to hand out legal documentation and other important records to them. Redefining the nationwide consensus on sex complicates much more than it solves, especially when more pressing issues exist and the previous definition filled its role well.

Secondly, fear-mongering regarding transgender people, especially youth, undergoing transition has caused the current administration to act against the interest of the people. Due to a lack of public knowledge, many people immediately think of sex-reassignment surgery as the first option for care for transgender individuals, including young ones. According to Human Rights Watch, however, “Gender-affirming care for youth encompasses a range of practices, which may include medical intervention such as puberty blockers and hormone therapies delivered through a tailored, multidisciplinary approach.” (Human Rights Watch, 2025). These therapies are often given out at local sexual and reproductive health centers under the watchful eye of professionals who understand how to keep people transitioning safe, no matter their age. Transgender healthcare itself harms no one. There are in tandem several conflicting sources of information, not all of them scientific, about people detransitioning. These are often used to discourage young transgender people from undergoing gender-affirming care. While detransitioning does happen, it is far less common than people think - and often for more complex reasons than regret or fleeting fancy, such as discrimination or unforeseen health issues.

By making this reasonable and safe care less accessible, the administration is only leading to more harm. In the same article as quoted earlier, HRW states that “Approximately 26 percent of US transgender and questioning students surveyed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2023 said that they had attempted suicide during the prior year alone. Research consistently shows that access to gender-affirming care can reduce this risk.” (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This shows the benefits that young transgender people gain from gender-affirming care, and the risks associated with shutting down access. People most often undergo these procedures as well as other health procedures such as mammograms or vasectomies at centers such as Planned Parenthood. By defunding these centers in an attempt to pause one kind of care, a ripple effect is created for other forms of life-saving healthcare. This reflects the fact that discrimination towards one group can often have unintended consequences for other people, and why we need to protect sexual and reproductive health industries for all Americans.

Another urgent facet of this issue is the fact that anti-discrimination laws are being repealed or changed - a fact that should induce worry among anyone at risk in the absence of civil rights

legislation. Trump has repeatedly questioned the validity of harassment based on gender identity and sexuality as discrimination, and has now dismantled DEI entirely. Many states, such as Iowa, have taken this as a green light to remove protections altogether for transgender individuals. DEI is not an attempt to elevate people because of factors such as ethnic background or sexuality, but rather an extension of civil rights protections to prevent these factors from being something that holds them back. As Renika Moore, ACLU activist, puts it, “These programs are not discriminatory; they are essential to creating environments where everyone has a chance to succeed and addressing persistent barriers for individuals to advance in their careers.” The disappearance of these programs points to a worrying larger trend regarding anti-discrimination laws being ignored, putting many Americans who rely on these laws for protection in danger. Finally, the idea of discrimination against transgender people and preventing them from seeking care infringes on their autonomy. In our constitution it is written that every person has the right to pursue their own happiness. The policy the current administration enacts towards transgender people does not reflect that. By insisting that because of the way one person was interpreted by doctors at their birth, they must act a certain way their entire life or lose their sense of safety, the idea behind one of our most fundamental rights as Americans is violated. A violation of this magnitude should draw attention all by itself, but even then, the ramifications of this breach of national trust extend well beyond one group. If a certain kind of person is denied a fundamental right, it is an exercise in the use of power to enforce divisions that already exist in a society. It has happened over and over again in history, and it will likely happen here unless the people of America make a stand to stop it.

Every American citizen, regardless of their background, has equal rights. It is the backbone on which our country is built. Any threat to this basis of equality, no matter who it is directed at, is a threat to the equality of all Americans. Under this precedent, the rights of our fellow citizens who are transgender are under duress. Therefore, every American should be concerned, for their fellow citizens and themselves. From the exclusion of certain groups from civil rights legislation to the active repeal of protective measures, to the spreading of medical misinformation and denial of healthcare, these legal changes harm the rights of everyday Americans and infringe upon their autonomy. It is therefore our duty to protect those who need it and fight for the rights of all Americans in the face of discrimination, because it does not only harm the group it is directed at; it affects every American that cares for their countrymen and their own freedoms. We must actively work to protect our LGBT community, because they deserve just as much access to their constitutional rights as anyone else.

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Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain": the Cat, the Wife, and the Shadow of Societal Change **Critical Essay**

When a person lives through drastic change in the world around them, how deeply does it erase who they were before? Ernest Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" is a fascinating story that, despite its brevity, uses fluctuating agency, precise imagery, and subtle archetypes to create insight into how the forces that bring about change on a society often have unintended consequences, and the glamour that came with life post-tragedy does not erase everything that came before.

The story follows the journey of an American wife who was travelling across Europe with her husband who, while staying at an Italian hotel, sees a cat in the rain & goes on a small journey to retrieve it. Although a simple concept, the story is executed wonderfully and gives the audience an interesting glimpse into the time period & the struggles associated with it that still ring true. The use of archetypes is weaved intricately into the story, so as not to overpower the unique characteristics of each person featured. Nonetheless, they have a powerful impact. The most obvious archetype is found in the paternal nature of the hotel-keeper. He is painted as fatherly and caring throughout the story. Hemingway writes that:

"As the American girl passed by the office, the padrone [hotel-keeper] bowed from his desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance." (Hemingway, 2).

The language around the girl paints her as youthful, and almost like his child; she feels both "small" and "really important," the way a child would feel around a parent. His parental nature extends to when the American woman is unable to get the cat that she wanted to protect so badly. At the end of the story, after she had failed to retrieve the cat, gotten back to her hotel room, and gotten into a fight with her husband, it is revealed that the padrone had retrieved the cat for her. The kindly, welcoming old man purposefully took on the role of a caretaker, retrieving for the American something she desperately wanted the way a parent would get a gift for his child.

The American woman also falls into an archetype, albeit more subtly and an archetype we rarely see in writing outside of this specific time period; she embodies flapper culture, and is also a criticism of it. She is short-haired and presents herself youthfully and joyfully, but is unfulfilled by the life she leads. "I get so tired of it," she says, referring to her travelling, untethered lifestyle & her close-cropped hair. (Hemingway, 2). This shows that even though she is supposedly a liberated woman, she is still trapped in an attempt to pursue a limited ideal. She expresses a desire to explore other forms of femininity, domesticity, and ways of life, if only because she has been, quite ironically, shackled by this one.

The imagery used in this story is both succinct and very effective. In the opening paragraph, the location of the story is described as an Italian hotel facing the beach, and how pretty it looks in good weather. Then, it is swiftly revealed that the entire scene is drenched in water when. “The rain dripped from the palm trees. Water stood in pools on the gravel paths. The sea broke in a long line in the rain and slipped back down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain” (Hemingway, 1). The use of repetitive imagery around the sea helps set the mood of monotony that the American woman so desperately wants to escape, and the heavy description of water makes the scene seem desolate and slippery, much like how she feels. Imagery is also used to illustrate the sort of life she feels herself longing for after failing to get the cat. She blurts in a rush that she wants “it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes” (Hemingway, 2). The use of spring and newness helps us understand that she wants change, while she uses traditionally feminine associations (cats, hair & vanity) to show how she wants to explore that side of her.

The woman herself is characterized by how she wishes to exert her agency, but is denied it again and again. She is not named in the story, only referred to as the wife or the girl, and does not have a title like the maid or the padrone. She is nameless, where her husband is given a name, which serves to show how little independence and identity she has when separated from him. When she first sees the cat, her husband offers to go retrieve it for her, but she responds by saying “No, I’ll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table” (Hemingway, 1). When she goes to retrieve it, she is unwillingly given a maid to go out with her by the padrone, which shows how little ability she has to exert her will alone. In her tirade, she only describes herself, her wants, and what she wishes she had. She later says that “if I can’t have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat” (Hemingway, 2) to try and justify her intense desire to possess the creature. She describes not having anything “fun” despite her lighthearted lifestyle, which explains to us how little she enjoys her life and how lacking in control she may feel.

When reading stories like this, it can feel as if they have no relevance to modern struggles. However, they are essential reads because by analyzing them, we can understand timeless concepts and struggles; the American woman struggles to find herself and follow through on what she wants, and even though she lives an idyllic life, she is still sad. Our ability to draw from these stories translates into our understanding of reality and the patterns around us, and the message the author is trying to send.