

# 50TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL BRUSHING THROUGH THE YEARS

Welcome to the 50th Anniversary Special, celebrating the creative legacy of *Brushing Art and Literary Journal* through the years. We've curated a "throwback" insert that highlights a selection of reprinted literary works and cover designs published in previous editions of *Brushing*. Read more about our featured alumnae below:



## *Chelsea Cutchens*

Chelsea Cutchens graduated from Rollins in the Class of 2013 with a degree in English. During her undergraduate years, she served as an editor of *Brushing* and an intern in the Winter With the Writers literary festival. Since leaving Rollins, Chelsea has had an impressive career in the publishing industry, and she is currently an Editor at ABRAMS publishing in New York City.

## *Kristen Arnett*

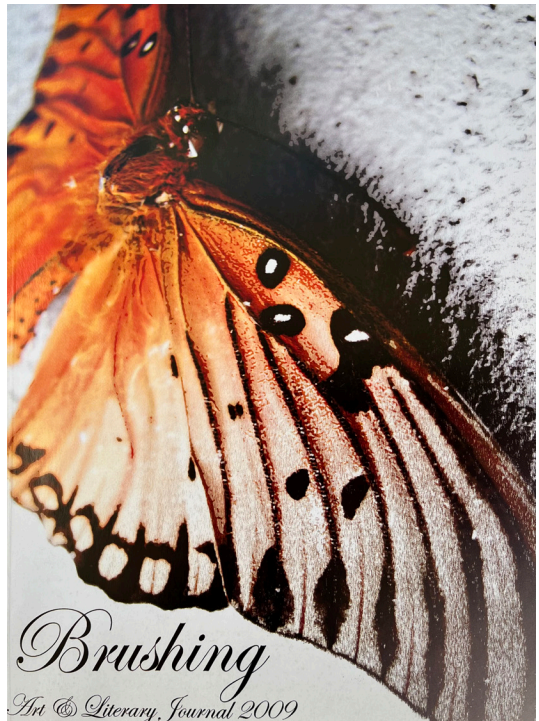
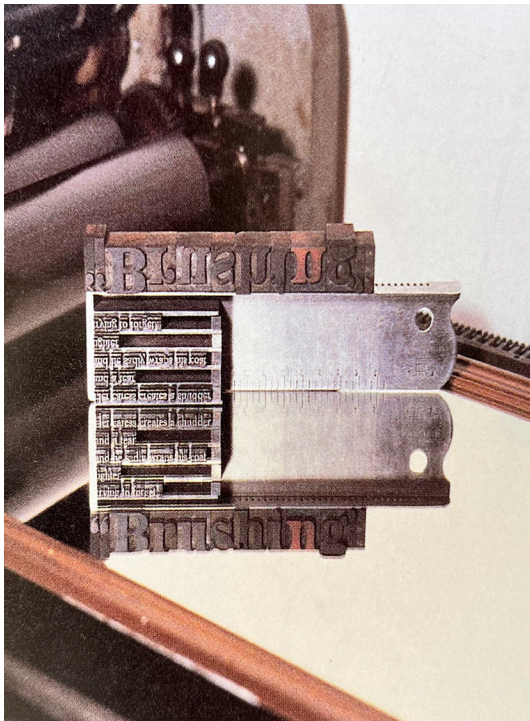
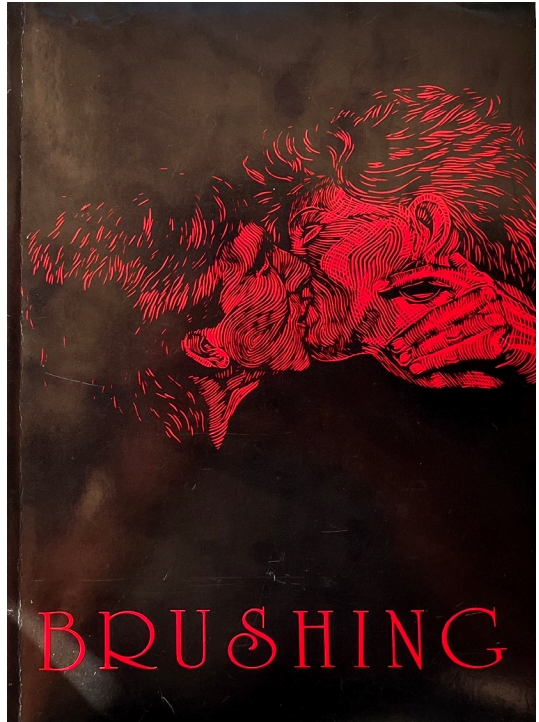
Kristen Arnett graduated from Rollins's Hamilton Holt School in 2012 with a degree in English. She was an intern for Winter With the Writers and returned to speak for the 2019-2020 season as a renowned author. She is a queer fiction and essay writer, and author of two books: *With Teeth: A Novel* (Riverhead Books, 2021), and the New York Times bestselling debut novel *Mostly Dead Things* (Tin House, 2019). She holds a Masters in Library and Information Science from Florida State University and currently lives in Miami, Florida.

# UNDERWORLD

*Chelsea Cutchens '13*

I once rode an elevator that took me fifteen stories beneath the water table. I became the ant, the earthworm, the chalky bones beneath your feet. The yellow canary singing in the mine shaft was long past, three stories above this mirror-walled box and its Muzak. I wanted to fashion for you a kingdom of dirty diamonds down there, but the bleached overworld beckoned.





# OFFSPRING

*Kristen Arnett '12*

The cortisone shots aren't working.

Regina knows by the nests of hair. Piles of it; spun brown sugar woven through the bristles of her daughter's hairbrush, sewn and draped along the white cotton of her nightgown, coating the kitchen table next to an uneaten plate of cold eggs. The hair moves and breathes and replicates itself. It spreads the expanse of the wide-planked floor of their farmhouse, strands trailing down the staircase, floating through the breeze of the open windows and the flapping screen door. It is dull, the sheen tried by fire through the disease overtaking her body - a sickness that perforates her young limbs, poking her joints full of holes. The lupus has turned her gait rickety; made bones ache and break with frightening regularity.

A single fall down the stairs or one bad cold could end her daughter's life.

So Regina collects those loose strands, bundles them into forget-me-nots. Slips them into the pockets of her housecoat and smoothes them flat between the pages of her Bible. She searches out those brittle tufts when she dusts the shelves or when she makes the beds. Then she surreptitiously sticks the hair under her nose. Breathes in the clean, living fragrance of her only daughter.

But now she's not cleaning; she's preparing their lunch. She sings hymns under her breath as she slices up apples with the sharp edge of her kitchen knife. "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine."

Lately all her daughter craves are pickles, cold and crisp from the icebox. Her cheeks are gaunt; the flesh beneath her eyes stained the purple of a fresh bruise. Every time she sees her daughter, it's a shock to the senses, like encountering a stranger in her own home. Will she be bloated, thick through the middle from water weight? Will she be slim and bony, knees cracking at the bend? So she does the only thing she knows how to do: she cooks. Regina fries up two ham sandwiches and pours cold lemonade into glass tumblers. She is certain she'll only get complaints for her efforts, but she'll handle the dirty looks with aplomb. That's a mother's job. When the food is done, she calls her daughter from the foot of the stairs.

"Lunch is ready."

From behind the closed door of her daughter's workroom there is a muffled response, then silence. It is punctuated by the clack of keys in an off-kilter

rhythm. This ruffles Regina's feathers. She cannot bear to be ignored.

"Mary Flannery, I mean now."

The clacking slows and stutters to a sullen stop. A chair scrapes against the floor in angry submission. Regina smiles to herself and goes to set the table. She puts out nice white china plates for their shared meal. The center of the table holds a crystal bud vase with a rose inside, plucked damp from the flowerbeds that morning. They might live out in the country, but that's no reason to forego good manners.

She's already seated by the time her daughter finally appears. Mary Flannery has her mouth screwed up in a knot, blue cotton dress a rumpled mess from hours spent in front of the typewriter. Regina notes the slimness of her daughter's wrists as she plucks up her napkin and smooths it across her lap. The veins in those lean arms run royal blue and pulse darkly beneath thin, translucent skin. The stranger-daughter seated across from her shares some similar features (the small nose, the overlapped teeth), but it's her mind that's the real conundrum. Regina can't penetrate her skull and get inside. Mary Flannery keeps her precious thoughts locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

"Ham?" Her daughter eyes the sandwich with undisguised loathing. She pokes at it with the tip of her fork, like it might be poisoned.

"Eat," Regina admonishes, pointing toward the plate.

"I'm not hungry." Mary Flannery picks up her glass and then sets it back down again. The condensation slips between her spread fingers and dampens the tablecloth. "I was working. You know that I was working."

Regina does not understand her daughter's work. She cannot comprehend the structure of the words, much less their significance, and she remains puzzled over their plots even when Mary Flannery explains them over and over again. There is so much violence in her daughter's writing. So much unnecessary pain. She doesn't understand the all-consuming drive to create, how she'll willingly put her health at risk to type for hours at an unforgiving machine. When Regina tries to coax her daughter from the room, it's like pulling teeth. She can't get Mary Flannery to sit down and have a conversation without the two of them bickering. Even when they're together, her daughter's not present – and at what cost? Mary Flannery enters her workroom looking hopeful and leaves it looking beaten. She emerges with her back aching, bowed, spine crumpled from the strain. And the things she writes about...

There is a soft whirring from outside the kitchen window. A mellow coo and hum, and then a rustle of branches that tap-tap-tap at the glazed panes. There is a deep fluttering that blocks out the sun; throws shadows against the sink and across the floor. A flash of iridescent blue and green.

"Those birds." Regina slaps her hands against the table and gets to her

feet, shoving open the windows. She reaches through and shakes the branches, hard and swift. Peafowl fall left and right from the tree, unleashing angry hoots of reprisal. “Those damn birds roosting again. Your uncle is going to have a conniption fit over that tree. It’s nearly bent sideways.”

Her daughter’s face is myopic in its innocence. “Peafowl don’t distinguish between an apple tree and a roost box, Mother.”

“Well, they should.” Regina sits down and tucks back into her sandwich. “And you need to keep them out of my flowerbeds. Next time I catch one with a rose between its beak, I’m going to chase it down with my pruning shears.”

“Now that’s something I’d pay to see.”

Her daughter’s unwilling smile is almost enough to lessen the depth of Regina’s worry. Almost. Her sharp eyes catch the fine trembling of her daughter’s hands as she picks apart the crust of her bread. Those same eyes snag and catch on the fingertips Mary Flannery runs through the crumbs on bier plate. Her daughter’s illness has transported her back to childhood - she no longer eats her food. She plays with it. She opens up the sandwich and nibbles at the fried meat, gripping it like a savage.

Regina bites her tongue against the nagging words that clog her throat (stop, don’t, musn’t). She wills herself to an unhappy complacency – at least her daughter is finally eating.

As she daintily chews the last of her meal, she tries out some civilized small talk. “Come to the lady’s social this afternoon. My head aches and I’d like you to drive the car. Please.” Regina’s conciliatory tone falls flat. Placating is not her specialty.

Mary Flannery’s eyes narrow, and she drops the remains of her meal in a jumbled heap on her plate. Regina swallows the last of her lemonade to block her sigh of frustration. She can’t win with this girl; she can’t fight an unseen opponent as looming as Mary Flannery’s work. The work wins every time.

“If your head aches, then don’t go at all,” her daughter says, wiping roughly at her lips with her napkin. They come away looking chewed and red.” Just the thought of being stuck in a room with those women gives me a migraine, so I’m no help.”

Her daughter climbs awkwardly to her feet and braces herself against the lip of the table. Her crutches are still in the workroom, but she often tries to walk without them. The girl is too much like her father. He’d hidden from her, too. Edward had always kept his pain private, steadily working through the agony in his joints, covering his lack of appetite with excuses: I already ate or it’s just indigestion; it’ll pass. She hadn’t realized he was dying until he was already in his sickbed; until he was halfway into his grave. Regina supposes that the O’Connor pride makes them unable to ask for help when they really need it.

Like Edward, her daughter insists on suffering in silence and ignominy. It's the Irish-Catholic way.

"Thank you for lunch, Mother."

The fabric of the dress tents around her daughter's waist as the girl juggles her silverware and messy plate. The meal is over and Regina hasn't gotten what she wanted. Her daughter barely ate, just poked at the food she prepared. If anything, the meal has broadened the ever-widening gap between them. Their conversation was stilted and patently passive-aggressive, and it bothers her to know that her daughter will go pour all of her real feelings into her typewriter. All of it will go into her stories, with nothing left over for Regina.

Mary Flannery suddenly overbalances. As she struggles to right herself, she catches her hip on a sharp corner of the table. Her daughter grimaces, teeth biting deep into her lip. She's hurting, must be hurting, but Mary Flannery doesn't make a peep. Regina knows this is because she'll make her daughter take a nap, make her lie down on the settee with a cool cloth over her eyes and her legs elevated. Anything to keep her out of that workroom.

But her daughter is crafty. Though her sallow face is sheened with sweat, she never breaks. Never cries. Regina wants to hold this poor sick thing in her arms and stroke her head, tell her everything is going to be all right. Tell her that things are going to get better soon. That she loves her. But she can't say those things out loud. So she does what she can and takes the dishes from her daughter's shaking hands. "Let me take care of these. You go on."

"All right." Mary Flannery pauses at the door. "I'll go feed my peafowl. Keep them out of your flowers for a bit."

Regina fills the sink with water hot enough to scald flesh. As she passes the soapy rag over the plates, she stares out the window. Through the bent branches of the apple tree she watches Mary Flannery feed her birds from a canvas sack. The sun glints hot off her daughter's head, and she wants to yell out the window to put on a sun hat, but that's not dignified. She wouldn't want the help to hear.

She remembers washing her baby's firm flesh in a basin in their first home on Lafayette Square, tiny body slippery-slick with soap. Limbs still strong and intact, body whole and perfectly formed. This was the beginning, when Regina felt secure in her knowledge of her daughter. She'd tipped that baby's downy head back into the water and her daughter had never cried; just clutched at Regina's arms, latched on with complete trust. She'd understood that baby's wants and needs; she could placate her with simple songs or dry her tears with kisses. She could tickle her behind her chubby knee and make her laugh. There was no mystery. It was all instinct. Regina just knew.

But now her daughter doesn't want or need her obsessive mothering. Mary Flannery wants what she wants. She is stubborn like her father, God rest his soul, but this is not the life that either of them wanted for her – no husband, no children, no real life of her own. Just her work. Only her work.

Regina believes in an omniscient God: one that sustains and refreshes, one that imbues every action with meaning and purpose beyond the scope of human imagination. But as she watches her only daughter wither and fade in the same way she watched her husband waste away into nothing, she prays as hard as she can that there is something that the doctors can do to make miracles happen. Edward was beyond her control, but Mary Flannery is not. Not yet. Regina refuses to stand idly by and watch the same scene play out again. If she can lengthen her daughter's days by pulling her from her work, she'll do it, regardless of the repercussions.

She looks up when she hears a sharp bark of laughter. Mary Flannery is luring her peafowl across the yard with bits of seed from her sack, and one especially adept young male is performing tricks to garner her attention. He creeps along the brush at the side of the house – coos low and whistles shrilly – and spins circles with tail feathers not yet brilliant. Mary Flannery looks on him with affection, smiles bright just for him.

“Come on now,” her daughter urges, trailing seed over the bird's head like rice at a wedding. “Show them how it's done.”

Regina holds her soapy hands to her breast and watches Mary Flannery guide the bird into an assimilated dance: one step backward, then two steps, then three and four. The flush of success transforms her daughter's face into something softer; younger. She's seen that look before on the face of a five-year-old Mary Flannery – the girl who taught a barnyard bantam to follow commands. Her accomplished daughter in the Pathé news, the bright young girl who tamed her charming chicken. That same daughter who still had her whole life ahead of her.

She shakes herself from her reverie and finishes cleaning the dishes. It's the china gifted from her mother that has followed her from home to home all her life, the same bone ware she'd planned to pass on to her daughter. But that dream has passed. The plates will stay here indefinitely with Regina. She dries each one carefully, sliding them back into their lonely nook in the china hutch.

The screen door squeals open and the sounds of the outside world drift into the kitchen. Her daughter has finished feeding her babies. Mary Flannery passes her mother without a single word, without a backward glance. She's already refocused on her work – if she ever left it. Her daughter goes right back to her typewriter. Shuts her door against the world.

Regina bites her tongue and starts planning dinner.