

# THE FAVORITE

by ALISON TOWNSEND

from RIVER STYX

You know you're not supposed to have favorites,  
but can't help liking most this girl  
with auburn hair, and the name of your best  
friend in high school, the one who recites  
swathes of Emily Dickinson aloud, standing out  
like a shining blade among the bored, pasty faces  
in Freshman English, announcing that she  
wants to write *her* research essay on love,  
eighteen after all, despite her way with language.

You don't know yet you'll be her favorite too,  
happy whenever you see her name on your roster,  
as you watch her hammer a house of words together,  
board by shining board, turning your slightest  
suggestions into windows and doors—apertures  
that could open on almost anything. And do,  
the day she comes to your office, an essay  
cradled in her arms for you to read before  
class—the one thing (she tells you)

she is afraid to write. Though she has  
written it, fighting her way back inside  
her fourteen-year-old self so convincingly  
you can feel lilies blooming inside her skin  
and the way her eyelids flutter, taste Juicy

Fruit, smell the talcumed longing that pulls  
her to the carnival that night with her best friend,  
flat-bellied and sparkling, looking for the kind  
of boys she doesn't even know to watch out for.

But this is where things jumble and blur, her story  
suddenly yours, the twinkling Ferris wheel  
a circle of boys with joints you and your friend—  
the one with your student's name—  
found yourself trapped inside one New Year's  
decades ago, the memory pushed down the way  
those boys pushed the two of you from one  
to another, The Beatles' "Come Together" loud  
in the back of your head. As your student flirts

down the midway, through the hot scent of cotton  
candy and popcorn, everything about her unbearably  
young, from the small, hard apples of her knees  
to the way her braces cage the candy-cotton-stained  
red of her mouth. To the moment you know is ahead  
when the boy she shunned a few steps back grabs  
her arm, then yanks her under a tent flap,  
the way a boy pulled you under the stairs  
at that basement party. Pushing her down the way

that boy pushed you, his friend there too, and another,  
then more, then you fighting free, and somehow  
your girlfriend underneath them all while you  
tried to think how to make it end, *Come together,*  
*right now* playing over and over. Or is it  
that carnival honky-tonk, sweat and beer and  
sawdust and dope, the short skirt pushed up,  
the boys' movements jerky and sharp?  
Because you got away didn't you? hitch-

hiking home in the dark with your friend,  
who couldn't talk about what happened.  
And they didn't—your friend, and your student  
who was held down, the secret of it clamped  
deep inside like a hideous pearl. Until this week

when she sat in her dorm and typed  
what you now read aloud. So she can see how clear-  
sightedly she reaches back and puts her arm  
around that girl, washing her off, throwing

the torn skirt out. So she can know  
it was not her fault, the most beautiful  
room in her whole house built from the ugliest  
mud, terror a blue vowel that kisses  
the hurt. As you read back to her  
what she has written, thinking of your lost  
and silent friend, the iodine sting  
of your student's words burning,  
healing, alive in your mouth.

*Nominated by River Styx*