

SIGMA TAU DELTA JOURNALS
INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

SIGMA TAU DELTA
RECTANGLE

Journal of Creative Writing

VOLUME 96, 2021



SIGMA TAU DELTA
REVIEW
Journal of Critical Writing

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2020–21 WRITING AWARDS
FOR SIGMA TAU DELTA *REVIEW*
AND SIGMA TAU DELTA *RECTANGLE*

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Aiden Evans: “Hell of a Land: The Sacred and
Perverse Landscapes of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Taylor Garrison: “NASA GIVES SALLY RIDE ONE
HUNDRED TAMPONS FOR ONE WEEK IN SPACE”

E. Nelson James Poetry Award

Sarah Hilton: “Lockjaw”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

Sofia Rabaté: “Cabo San Lucas”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-Fiction Award

Cornelius Fortune: “Scenes from Buchanan Street”

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SIGMA
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RECTANGLE

POETRY

Lockjaw

Sarah Hilton

Noun

The use of the gag the hand the cock for his pleasure muffled safe word hitting a wall hitting his flesh and calling out not loud enough to sound an alarm

Verb

Your own mouth—how it gawks and gapes a reaction unable to speak unable to breathe at the forced entry into your sex into your house

Etymology

The moment of stiffness as you're taken into custody of another body the moment where the flag flies white the banner of subservience becoming a veil the moment where his hand at your face is enough to wire you shut

See also

1. Aristophanes' Reconciliation—brought out naked onstage, splayed out as the map of Greece and parts are claimed as city states are fought for and won
2. Terence's lyre-player—no-named, a non-speaking role; rushed into the house of Aeschinus and bought from her pimp

3. Shakespeare's Beatrice—kissed into submission, bound by marriage
4. Ovid's unnamed Galatea—statue composed into living; composed for fucking composed
5. Io—transformed for his transgressions in the body of a heifer

See also

1. Mary Anne Evans
2. Rosalind Franklin
3. Elizabeth Warren
4. Susan B. Anthony
5. Anita Hill
6. Cecile Richards
7. *Ad Infinitum*

NASA GIVES SALLY RIDE ONE HUNDRED TAMPONS FOR ONE WEEK IN SPACE

Taylor Garrison

but says nothing of the loneliness. Moon bulbous,
almost intrusive against a nearly blank sky.
They say *well just to be safe* as if she wasn't
being flung into nothingness. Distant whirring
of a robotic arm, the satellite Sally grabs
saw Earth in all its ugly blue swirls:
soldier-boys marching, husbands come-homing.

So maybe she preferred it, the choice
of solitude I mean, because for so long, the silence
was imposed by mouths not her own. And isn't
history written the same way? Collection of
forced-mouth silences.

And yet,
ferns & songbirds, engines
dropped into the ocean—a starfish
attaching itself to the cooled edge—
drew her back.

Earth-returned, a reporter demanding
to know *Sally, do you weep?*
but does not ask for whom.

Autumn

Taylor Garrison

rises with the smoke
of a freshly kindled fire.
The bitter scent of wood
seeps into the cushions
of our lawn chairs.
Sumac is the first to turn
a poisonous crimson.
Morning arrives heavy
with hunched clouds
& quiet geese flapping
across a greying sky.
The stain of mushed raspberries
fades from my old t-shirt—
the last humid memory
of summer. The corn,
standing in silence,
is left to rot
in purpling husks.
A fox bellows
a cry. The golden
birch colors the asphalt

with the last of
its chlorophyll,

a sacrifice.

Last Night

Kieron Walquist

—for my grandfather

I dug you from death
& remembered what a decade
had taken:

your pale blue, WWII-soldier eyes;
your full head of cowlicked hair;
your dry, wrinkled skin like Sunday newspaper—
 ripe of Old Spice & tomato vine;
your Swede tongue that drank Dr. Pepper
 but not my name.

I sat your Alzheimer's & anger
down in that wheelchair—feathered
with grocery bags for wet tissues—
& I waited
at your feet.

You said you saw the devil. Swore
he was inside you.

I wanted to say
so much—

*No he's not, Grandpa.
You should rest now.
Do you know who I am?*

—but instead got up
from the pink carpet, found a knife
in the kitchen sink & said, *Show me.*

Show me the devil & what
I'll inherit.

We shucked your cardigan, your
undershirt stained cigarette-colors,
& I touched the patch
of freckles on your shoulders—
just like mine.

You smiled & shook as you put
that Nazi medal in my hands. I wanted to say
so much—

*Grandpa, did the devil give you this?
Did you take it off someone? Some body?
What were you fighting for?*

—but instead pocketed
the worn swastika for when I
have a grandson.

Then you became volcanic.

I caught the red rivering
out of you & wept
into that rush.

Doesn't hurt, you said,
but I knew it did:

to feel the devil breathing;
to have a body betray you;
to forget & forget & forget why.

I wanted to say
so much—

*It's okay, Grandpa.
When will it be me?
I really loved you.
Do you know who I am?*

—but a lightning bolt
bleached my room & I woke
to neon without
you.

Now, I'm not sure what
was worse:

that I'll remember
the dream more than I do playing dominos
or eating lebkuchen with you—

or that the bolt hit a tower &
our phone rang

once, twice,

then died in the dark.

Jincha

Gabriela Szczepankiewicz

Take me home to La Isla del Encanto.
With the taste of arroz con habichuelas
like a plena that pleases mi cuerpo.
Spices flavor the smells and músicas

in orange days spent chasing lagartijos
with my primos. And you watched me, mamá.
I remember the tales from my tíos
as I slept to the song of the coquí.

But why don't I feel Puerto Rican?
Is it the fault of fair skin and freckles?
Or does my claim to heritage weaken
when I only speak Spanish in speckles?

Unlike a true native, like my mother—
I am only my father's white daughter.

How to Remember

Taylor Gaede

clouds fissure in wispy streams
revealing sectioned land, lines drawn and redrawn
where six million trees honor the dead,
thousands more remember the righteous,
and an individual stands uprooted.

there is no telling where these hands have wandered.

beyond encapsulated memory lies
limestone deserts shelved against lush agriculture
and receding seas;
and language that bleeds across history
drips into the present until a large thumb
smears it.

like a kiss that is not a kiss, wiped away in undecided wonder.

but nothing here is destroyed, only buried or repurposed
names passing through grinders until new ones emerge.
blind seekers remove rubbish to reveal

old roads and walls, cities that died on land, then lips,
generation forgetting generation.

forgetting is innocent, but what if someone desires to forget?

. . . then forgetting is only hiding.

Antiseptic

Emiliya Mailyan

—babulya Nelly, when you call on the weekend

On Mickey's banged-up knees,
I poured iodine all over.
The bronze met scarlet, turning dark, volcanic—
smells like the taste of cherry-flavored syrup and old pennies,
feel the sharpness in your nose and throat when you swallow.
Bad blood, how do you get rid of that taste in your mouth?

I don't know, so I call *babul*.
Bad blood? she sighs. Settling in, she tells me:

It all came from the sea.
The oil there, crept its way over the blue waters of my youth,
made a stain on the land that no one could remove.

Patch tests of naphthalene on mice, mixed with the black mud of Sunday
mornings.
Sometimes the antidote can be the poison;
it all comes from the same place.

I'd show you the studies I've done but they've
removed my name, cut out my face.

On any given day the sea smelled of kerosene,
but the black caviar kept coming so there was no need to worry.
Onyx pearls to celebrate the wealth of the land;
ancient and cruel, they kept adding to the fuel.

Pyromania in the land of fire,
so it didn't really make a difference when everything was burning—
cleaning up is all they were doing.

And as the winds of Baku swept us all away,
they kept the flames burning for days.

Some ashes may settle but our blood continues to boil.
So tell Mickey to shake off his knees,
and gargle some water with salt from the sea.

Hearing Impaired and Socially Awkward

Ashley Paul

1)

B: (H/B)i/ye

A₁: —

A₂: *Did they say “hi” or “bye?”*

A₁: Hi?

A₂: *Sorry*

B: (How) are you?

A₂: *Huh? How?*

A₁: Uhh good . . . I guess.

2)

C: Hey, do you want breadsticks?

A₂: *What??*

A₁: What?

C: Are you going to get breakfast?

A₁: Oh . . . yeah.

3)

D: (Hello HelLO) HELLO!

A₁: !—Oh, Hi!

4)

E: I'm going to the store, do you wanna come?

A₁: What?

E: I'm going t— A₂: *to the store*

A₁: Oh, yeah, sure.

E: What do you need to get?

A₂: *What*

A₁: Umm . . . I'm not sure. I'll figure it out.

5)

F: H is.

A₁: _____

F: _____

A₁: Sorry, what?

F: Never mind.

A₁: Okay . . . cool.

6)

A₂: *Funny how everyone just kinda leaves me alone.*

A₃: *Everyone must know you prefer it that way.*

A₂: *Right.*

7)

A₂: *Please say something.*

G: _____

A₁: . . . Hi (?)

G: Hi.

A₁: How's it going?

G: It's going.

A₁: That's good.

A₁ & G: _____

8)

A₁: Why is social interaction a thing?

H: Heh, I know.

A₁: I mean, why people? Why is life?

H: Good question. Not even What is life? Why is life?

A₁: I mean, it's a pretty fair question.

9)

A₁: It'd be nice if I could hear.

10)

A₁: You know, it's really nice not being able to hear sometimes.

11)

A: *Do you think things would be different—if I would be different—if I weren't hearing impaired?*

A₃: *Probably, but who knows how different?*

A₂: *Right. This is my life. I suppose I wouldn't really know who I was if I woke up one day and suddenly I could hear what everyone else can.*

Clay

Erynne Jamison

The touch of hands softens the mass,
folding and unfolding flesh upon flesh.

Wrists grow raw from every thrust
into the yielding body.

Pressure of fingers hollows the form,
molding the muscles beneath porcelain skin.

The furnace burns red, humming
the sound of blood and breath.

it is January and stagnation takes over

Meg McCarney

on autopilot, i trudge through honey
to reach for you, to remind you that
i'm still breathing.

nobody wants to talk about this—
this crumbling, this low libido,
the spirit crushed between two fingers.

pulling a loose string tight around my lips,
this isn't the place where we speak of broken
wonder. we learn to endure, heads between
our knees, waiting for the captain to turn off
the seatbelt sign until we lose consciousness.

decay is only interesting to the mentally-sound;
it's a bore to the rest of us, pooling in the gray area.

it's not a shock to the heart,
a trip to the electric chair,
a gasp.

it's the sound of the basement door closing,
the last guest leaving, the drone of the
microwave whispering
 done,
 done,
 done.

Hemisphere Head

Cadence Summers

Begin as blue
quiet, curious, unwavering,
 [here]
Let me love each plane of your face
especially your nose,
your chin in my hands
and lips pressed against mine.
Let's bloom like mushrooms,
like cloister domes behind my eyelids.

Slide next into yellows
knock, quiver, and loose
 [nothing is as easy as red love is with you]
I love the way you breathe
especially the way you crackle
ragged as lightning with the weight of wet sand,
your texture like arrows,
curved sounds like a bow

Deepen with me
into purple

[between-behind-below]

I love your extremities,
especially your hands.
I reach for the way you fall across me
like long grass to the scythe,
like firmament,
like fabric.

Rise in me, orange as a sickle moon
I have only the strength to surrender to you.

Akin

Caroline Huff

I'm found beneath the mud, the cabbage rot,
melting runoff, windswept cardboard. I'm found among tilled rows-
cantaloupe rind, fennel leaves, lost glove. Abandoning my station among
the unopened seeds
from some elapsed millennium.

I will soon forget the clicking sound from the door lock
that brought me to this festering state. I will soon forget
shaving your face, mouthwash scent, razor's edge.

The ground where I settled, ravaged with rain. My sweet mire
did not demand to know. Laid to rest, for once,
without the threat of crashing plates nor chains on bedroom doors.

Now, I hear the frogs, awakened to their hymn,
awakened mud floors, dewy lips,

the way morning takes up residence, crisply
over me. Suppose you continued along

in circles? I'm returning to hunt for their speckled backs,
counting the seconds without seasons.

Nutrients

Eden Prime

In a desert (a wasteland of nourishment, hollow and full;
cactus trees and jackrabbit teeth
in a circle by my feet, rattles and ruins).

I woke to find you, an outlaw on the run.
The world around me dry,
the sheets dissolved in my small, yellow hands.

Once, I thought we would grow up—saguaro,
become two to the power of—whatever.

Taller, sturdier, but for that we would've needed
roots.

April 8

Sarah Robbins

The Bradford pear tree's flowers
do not smell like spring.

They smell like mushrooms
on a good day, fish on bad ones.

I hear the wind before I see
it,
then here comes the convulsing, then here
comes
the slowest,
gentlest

rain. I cap my hand

atop
my coffee,
but soundless
petals still
sneak

between

my fingers

anyway.

Jane Eyre Leaves Thornfield

Madison Rodak

Not even the coachman asked my
Name. Here, I am not Jane. I am
A bird caged in braided branches,
Knotted heap of my own making.
Snarl of thorns around my heart.

Winter bites my fingers. Here,
I am threadbare skirts, buttermilk
Stockings. Knuckles ache for new
Beginnings. Every pulse humming
With thatch-roofed cottages and
Shuttered windows, bread steaming
On hearths. Snow drifts yawn wide as
Falcon wings, robust as bird cages.
Frosted windows fog my reflection.

If I am a bird, I am a bird of prey—
My fingers talons, soft until they strike
With kisses, in hunger, or to turn the aged
Pages of books. In the span of my wings

Sleeps this shadow of a girl. She is cold,
Alone. Waiting for someone to notice.

Ghost stories dwell in every village.
Here, I am the spirit of a whispered girl
Who leaves no print in the snow—
No outlines, no wisps of black hair.
Girl who warns off passing strangers
With the notes of a broken melody,
Singing: *you were meant to be alone.*

Day Dreaming

Raegan Thomas

Bare wintry branches scratch
against my barren house

Smudges of wet leaves decorate home, tracked in by his work boots
a swirl of white wine in one hand, soapy dish in the other, I trip and
slip
on the mess he brought in, and my wedding band clinks against the
glass
with its untenanted wine bottles
and scratched re-re-re-

Red blushing tulips on the table shock me and the groceries jump
from my astounded grasp, but he saves our needs-to-be-mopped floor
I tearfully hug him awkwardly, thanking him as my bump bumps him

cord player
glass is stuck in my nails

Tiny arms latch around my neck, smacking me in the head with a
bucket
of dangerous yellow dust, burying my face alive. Mini-him cackles as
I sneeze

out the poisonous pollen. “Mommy, now you can fly! You have pixie
dust!”
blood splatters my knuckles
but all I see is my bare finger.

My Missing Tooth

Susana Spradling

Fill the gap between my teeth
where my dreams collect.
Explore them,
take solace in the space.
I wish to carry
you, my special cavity,
fixed in a world,
worlds away.

You can sleep on my nerves,
eat my crumbs,
drink my saliva.
When I'm done
with you
I'll lap you up with my tongue,
swallow you whole
swallow you with my other tired dreams.

I will have loved you
to the pit of my stomach.
But soon

you'll be gone
far away
from the place
only I
could hold you.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Scenes from Buchanan Street

Cornelius Fortune

Waving hello, waving goodbye

I don't remember moving from Scotten Street to Buchanan—the memories oscillate from one to the other, but there's a line of demarcated feeling; the images cleanly separated, as if grazed by an unforgiving razor drawing across a curtain of fragile, fragmented memories.

There's me standing in the dark dampness in the space between houses, the part that separated ours from our neighbor's, where I made odd noises and vocalizations because in the cool dampness—the smell of green moss permeating everything—you could hear your voice echoing, repeating your utterances imperfectly, a weird incantation from another dimension.

Then running around the house with a makeshift cape made out of bed sheets, hearing the *Superman* theme swell in my head and putting my fists through the glass in the screen door . . . followed by the spraying blood and my grandmother taking me into the bathroom, pouring alcohol on the wounds; wincing from the pain of not being so super after all.

Now I'm finally riding on my motorized scooter, which had been put up since Christmas, and gratefully, the spring weather had arrived. I'm riding up and down our street, past a yellow and white house, and down maybe five houses total, since my mother would make me count to five then ride back toward our house. There's this old white man with curly hair down

at the end, who always asks me how my day's going, and this "high-yellow" lady with pretty silver hair next door to him (in the yellow and white house), who always waved. I remember thinking how nice she seemed. I later discovered that she was my paternal great-grandmother and this was the house where my mother played with my aunt (my father's sister), and where she later developed a crush on him. That yellow and white house was where it all started, the "planet" of my origins.

Sadly, my parents' orbit wouldn't hold; in fact, it was explosive. My mother was 17, my father 19, hardly the star-stuff of parenthood or marriage; the raw materials, perhaps; a comet's tail dissolving into the fabric. I was the inverse of the famous nursery rhyme—first, the baby carriage, then came marriage, and about a year later, divorce. No rhyme. No reason. Love lingered, but would not tarry for very long.

Green and white

Our green and white house on Buchanan was a mirror image (though much smaller) of the larger house in front, what I came to call Big Mama's House (my paternal great-grandmother), although at the time she shared it with PaPa (I pronounced it PawPaw, that's how everyone pronounced it). It had a two-person swing where we often sat and PaPa sat in his chair by the front door and watched the cars go by. Oftentimes, he'd jump up and ride the Buchanan bus, just for kicks. He knew the bus driver well and he'd ride the bus down the line, talking to the bus driver. PaPa was a mulatto man who was fair enough to pass for white, and Big Mama's mother had been of Cherokee descent, her hair was darkly woven, like the shiny coat of a black cat. She had deep-set eyes and a chin that reminded me of witches for some reason. And yet, Big Mama was a very slender woman with a delicate frame.

They were country folk from Walnut Grove, Mississippi, and apparently when opportunity knocked in the '40s and '50s to come to Detroit for a factory job—at a parts distributor called Kelsey-Hayes in the North—they went for it. So inherently and inevitably, Big Mama's house felt like a country house on a city street. And this anachronism: the painted sign in white words and a black background in front of Big Mama's house said WASHING MACHINE REPAIR.

My great-uncle, Uncle Randolph, was Big Mama's oldest son (her only

son, in fact), who was in his 40s, still staying with his mother and father. I came to later understand he was also illiterate. He “dropped” out of 3rd grade never to return, but he “fixed” washing machines. There were washing machine parts strewn everywhere, and when he wasn’t fixing washing machines, he was drinking whiskey out of a paper bag. He’d put on his best suit, a weird Southern confection of threads, his wiry six-foot-two frame ambling down the street, saying loudly, “Slow motion. Watch out! Slow motion.” It was a nonsensical response to everything, but usually it served as a greeting. “How you doing?” someone might ask him. He’d answer: “Slow motion.”

He owned this black *Sanford and Son* style truck that I’d always promise to buy from him when I was old enough; not to drive, just to have it as a novelty of sorts. I never knew if it was in running condition because he rarely started the engine. Mainly it served as storage for washing machine parts, cans of paint, and other things Big Mama probably didn’t want littering the house.

In the summer the walkway leading to our house in the back was littered with pears from the towering pear tree in our modest “front yard,” so we’d have to dodge busy yellowjackets on our way to the door. It’s a wonder I was never stung.

At night, the winos in the alley—my bedroom was a couple flights up—traded stories, broke bottles on the gravel path, and laughed until I went to sleep.

Superman Ice Cream

“There’re roaches in the ice cream!”

That’s what the kids who didn’t have ice cream said to those (like me) who did. I don’t recall the name of the ice cream parlor, but I do remember that you had to walk a couple of blocks down to go there, and that a kindly man and his wife ran the shop. You could buy candy as well, but the ice cream was what you came in for. Maybe it was homemade. In the summer heat I ate as quickly as I could, because you didn’t want the red to mix with the blue or the yellow, you wanted them separated, enjoyed in parts.

That same summer, I discovered another treat.

Leaning on the fence holding a paper bag stood my Cousin An’gelee

(this is what my mother told me to call him with the “cousin” as an honorific), brandishing a pocket knife, and snipping off pieces of something that he quickly popped in his mouth. He cut off a piece, a very small piece, and handed it to me.

“Good innit?” he said, eating it with relish. “You don’t know nothing ’bout this.”

“What is it?” I asked. I chewed it and an explosion of sugary goodness awakened my mind; I was instantly sugar-rushed.

“Sugar cane,” he said.

“Can I have some more?”

Up until that time I’d always thought sugar came from square white packages in grocery stores situated adjacent to the all-purpose flour, or white—and pink—packages at restaurants. I reached out, hooked on a feeling.

“Boy, gone somewhere,” he said. “Get.”

Limo ride

Suddenly, he was gone. The chair was empty for days. That’s not the way it happened, but it’s how I interpreted the empty chair on the front porch. It took a long time for my mother to tell me “PaPa passed away,” and a couple of weeks for the arrangements to be made.

Ice Cube’s line “Why is that the only time black folks get to ride in a limo?” in the song “Dead Homiez” resonated strongly with me. I mean, this was a somber occasion, but I remember the excitement of the black limousine pulling up alongside the curb, having the doors opened for us, stepping into the limo, and sitting on the cushy seats. I’d never rode in a limo before.

When we reached our destination, there wasn’t a dry eye at the funeral home, nor at the cemetery, but once back to Big Mama’s house, it became something of a celebration—a celebration of family, of PaPa’s 78 years. I can’t go into a KFC without associating that smell with our repast feast, which included several boxes of Kentucky Fried Chicken Original Recipe, with homemade collard greens, mashed potatoes, and sweet potato pies. Friends of the family dropped off even more goodies to consume.

My Uncle DeWitt and Aunt Irene from Chicago drove up for the funeral

to stay a few days. Chicago then sounded so exotic to my ears, it was like another country. Uncle DeWitt was a graying, slight man with light skin, while Aunt Irene was a woman nearly twice his size in weight and height. "C'mere, baby, and give me a kiss!" she'd always say to me, and reluctantly I'd move slowly in her direction, knowing what was coming. "You better bring yourself over here." My cheeks would be drenched in a wet kiss that left my cheeks cold with saliva. To call it wet would be like calling rain wet, which people often do, because it's such an easy metaphor to reach for, so let's try this instead: her kisses were rivulets of Southern love.

Uncle DeWitt, sitting in PaPa's favorite chair, cranked up his portable radio and played "Down Home Blues" by Z. Z. Hill. Uncle DeWitt was a blues man through and through, 24/7. He popped his fingers to the sound of the tune.

"How's that trumpet playing coming?" he asked me while scrutinizing Aunt Irene's behind as she swayed to the music, and him, giving me this wink like, *yeah, I like 'em big*.

"I'm learning how to play Chuck Mangione's 'Feel So Good.'"

Uncle Venon (pronounced V-non), also from Chicago and a funk bassist in a former life, but a hustler by trade, with the distinction of being Big Mama's cool, older brother with the handlebar mustache, looking like he walked straight off a blaxploitation poster, said, "Yeah, DeWitt, you ought to hear the boy. He's bad."

"Keep on playing," Uncle DeWitt said. "Never give up, but be sure to get that piece of paper, because ain't nobody can take that away from you."

"Yes, sir," I said.

The music droned on as the daylight waned, opening a window to the stars, and we honored our dead with song, dance, and funny anecdotes throughout the night.

Family Ties

"Robbie, meet your older brother, Corney," my father said.

My mother was pissed.

"Why would you bring your other son here on your visitation day?" she demanded.

"I didn't think this would be a problem, Diane."

“Robert . . .”

“Son,” my father said, “can you take your brother upstairs?”

“Ok,” I said.

I wanted to really enjoy this moment, talking with the brother I never knew I had, showing him my toys, my music collection, discussing my love of Anime and comic books. I was 13, he was 9. We had the same father. I found this so intriguing. How much alike were we really?

From below the voices were rising in a chorus of the “same old, same old.” The argument got so bad my father said, “Come on, Robbie. We’re leaving.”

The first time my father walked away, I was too young to remember it. He told me later that it was one of the hardest things he had to do. I watched my father walk away (again) and wouldn’t see him again for another seven years, when I was 20 and living on my own.

That last time didn’t seem that hard at all from my perspective. He just put one foot in front of the other with his namesake (Robert Jr.) in tow.

Numbers Running

“Here, boy, over here,” Big Mama said. I was standing right there, adjacent maybe, but in those days I had a tendency to daydream and I often had to be jostled from my own reverie. “I’ll give you fifty cents if you can run these numbers down to the cleaners for me.”

She had written a series of numbers in a notepad that had a carbon copy underneath. Once she had taken a dip of snuff (spat the brown grime in the fruit jar lined with toilet tissue paper), she ripped the pages out and handed me the money.

“Now, don’t lose that,” she says. “Tell Tommy I’ll give him a call later.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said, pocketing my fifty cents, trying to calculate how many Boston Baked Beans I might be able to buy at the corner store.

Janik Cleaners was a couple of houses down from Big Mama’s. The only expectation was that you just handed him the numbers and the cash, and if he smiled his gold-and-silver-toothed grin you were all set. His tiny bespeckled wife was always pressing some garments, steam rising around her dark form, Morticia-Addams style, sweat dotting her brow.

You went in there and prepared to sweat. It was hot all year long in

Janik Cleaners and you hated to go inside (even in the winter). I heard Big Mama hit some numbers, but it was usually when her numbers were boxed, not straight. I never understood the point of playing the numbers at a cleaners if she just could have took them to the corner store. Maybe it was Big Mama's way of keeping black money in the black community, however tenuous such a prospect might have been.

Gone, gone, gone

Returning to the street, Buchanan Street, the street of my youth, recently was more than a surrealistic experience . . . it left a hollowness inside me.

This once bustling block with characters of all types, the Buchanan bus speeding by every 35 minutes or so, the cleaners where they pressed your clothes and ran your numbers, the ice cream shop on the corner. Nothing. Nothingness. My memories had been turned into an abandoned war zone.

I didn't get out to walk the street, because there was nothing tangible for my feet to cross, to gain purchase. Where Big Mama's house had stood proudly, now there was an empty space. Blasted houses scattered in the background, some covered with the sooty blackness of a fire that had claimed them long ago. So much negative space. Where once the streets were crowded with kids, with adults going about their daily business, where the drug addicted hung out on the street corners, where once I ran into my substitute teacher, a pretty young lady by the name of Ms. Brown, who encouraged me to keep up with my writing and drawing. All of this was gone.

Where once there was so much green and white, now there wasn't much green at all. The grass was overgrown and yellowed. Janik Cleaners was gone, had vanished into time's trapdoor. The black-owned ice cream parlor was a dirt field no longer capable of giving nine-year-olds the electric shock of a brain freeze. The hope of the Great Migration had faded. Our address, 4323, was a distant memory, a warning perhaps, that all things must pass. Gone, gone, gone.

Breathe Again

Via D'Agostino

May 9, 2018

Today's interrogation room has color on the walls. Last time, it was cracked white paint and fluorescent lights. Now, I can stave off the tears threatening to dissolve me into a puddle of my own misery by focusing on the single adornment: an abstract representation of trees. They're all smeared lines and jagged edges, carved with fracture lines—the way my heart looks even inside my chest. The trees are proof that the things they did damaged me, chipped away the girl I was, leaving something ragged and broken; an artist's interpretation of agony.

"Any questions or additions? Clarifications?"

Chester Marshal, inquisitor extraordinaire, sounds so nice and reasonable, so concerned for my understanding of the proceedings. I know that they don't believe me: cordiality is only "the procedure." The moment we begin to discuss what happened to me, he becomes a ruthless investigator rooting out the facts. *The facts*, as though my testimony is worthless compared to Brayden's. *Just the facts*, as though being the victim of sexual assault means that I ought to be treated the same as my assaulter.

That's not my intent, he insisted last time. *This is just the procedure. Would you not agree that we need to stick to the facts?*

Fact: Brayden Hack put his hands on me.

Fact: I did not give him permission to do so.

Fact: This is called sexual assault and It. Is. A. Crime.

Fact: The above facts are not being treated as facts—they think that *I* am lying.

Blood and bruises are the only kinds of injuries that anyone pays attention to, and because Brayden gave me none to show—only furthered my desire to hurt myself—the school wants to crush my voice, get me to drop the case, and keep the whole thing *hush-hush*.

I want to walk out, but I know that would mean surrendering the case, and I can't do that. Even if it's the healthiest choice for me, I can't stand the idea of this scene playing out with another victim. I want to end the injustice for good.

"Can you tell us what happened on January 20th?"

For what must be at least the fifth time, I explain the nightmare that began on my 20th birthday.

January 20, 2018

The cake is messy and sticky, but cake is cake to broke college kids. Even with six of us, we can't eat it all, so my brother Leo, his girlfriend Annie, and I end up outside on the sidewalk, smashing it in each other's faces. The rest of Leo and Annie's friend group—Colton, Ian, and Brayden—watch.

Annie's fistful of goo catches me in the ear. I shriek, hopping on the spot. "Not the ears! Ooh, yuck. It's squelchy." I bend over, scooping up some cake residue to return fire.

Something smacks into my rear; I nearly take a header. I stagger forward a step, regain my balance, whirl. Brayden, binder in hand, backs away. I start forward, furious, ready to smack him across the face. To defend myself the only way I can.

He turns and runs.

"Brayden, get back here!"

He doesn't listen, but I don't give chase. He has too much of a head start; he's heading towards a group of strangers; I do not want to cause a bigger scene than we already have—and chasing him may well be what he wants.

I stay with my brother and the people he calls friends. We sneak into

freshman dorms to scrub the chocolate from our faces and hair. We go back to my brother's room. We try to have a normal night.

May 9, 2018

"And then?" Marshal asks.

"And then Brayden came back into Leo and Colton's room."

"And that's when you slapped him?"

January 20, 2018

The feel of my hand against his face is unsatisfying. I catch more hair than skin. I want it to hurt more than what he did to me. I want to make a point he'll remember. I don't want to win just this one battle; I want to end the entire war. To never fight this fight again.

I want in vain.

"That was inappropriate and it will not happen again," I say to Brayden, voice solid and stiff, hand stinging from his face. My butt still aches from his binder, unalleviated despite all the time he was gone.

His messy, honey-brown curls cover his face and he doesn't reply—but neither does he leave. He sits. He stares at me when he thinks I'm not looking. He remains silent the night through, but because of his selective mutism, this isn't unusual. For a while, Ian, Colton, Annie, and Leo stare at the two of us, but I sit, and they sit, and then the night continues as though nothing happened at all.

ironic, *adjective*: occurring opposite to the expected, typically causing wry amusement.

May 9, 2018

"We are going to be transparent," Marshal says. "And we need to inform you that, because you were physically violent towards him that night, Brayden Hack has filed an assault claim against you."

self-defense, *noun*: the defense of oneself, especially through physical force, which is sometimes permitted in response to charges of violent crime.

May 9, 2018

"Seriously? He hit me first!"

Marshal raises his hands, placating, as though what he's just told me is somehow the definition of reasonable. "Just as you have the right to press charges against him, he has the right to press charges against you. We will decide later if those charges stand."

"He. Hit. Me. First."

Marshal only smiles. "Let's move on to the night of March 13th, when you say he sexually assaulted you."

The emphasis lingers on the "you say."

The inquisitors bring up their carefully selected texts, taking them out of the context of reality to make their job easy. "You invited him over."

"I didn't invite him to assault me. I didn't know what he was going to do."

But my interrogators do not care.

irony, *noun, literary*: a technique wherein the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character.

March 13, 2018—Just Before

1:18 a.m.—Brayden: And what do I do if you fall asleep on me?

1:19 a.m.—Vera: Don't rape me?

consent, *verb*: give permission for something to happen.

March 13, 2018—Morning After

10:19 a.m.—Brayden: That was a pretty good time

objectification, *noun*: the action of degrading someone to a mere object.

November 2017

"I wanna fuck you."

Carter Street, pants around his knees, body pressed against mine, his voice in my ear. There is no love there, only raw, unbridled lust. I don't know what to say, because telling him *no* doesn't seem like an option.

"Not tonight," I say instead, and it isn't the first time.

He grinds himself into my hip, and I do not say that it hurts. When he finishes, he throws the paper towels at me—then kicks me out of his room into the frozen winter midnight.

He broke up with me because the answer was “no” too many times, but at least he bothered to ask.

blame, *verb*: assign responsibility for fault or wrongdoing.

May 9, 2018

“What does your ex have to do with this?” Marshal sounds bored.

“There are many contributing factors, not least of which is the fact that I have been dealing with depression brought on by life at this school. I’ve been in two unhealthy ‘romantic’ relationships since coming here, and I’ve been bullied and belittled by my ex-friend group, my ex-frisbee team, and several of the other English majors for reasons unbeknownst to me.”

depression, *noun*: a mental condition characterized by feelings of severe despondency and dejection, typically also with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, often accompanied by lack of energy and disturbance of appetite and sleep.

May 9, 2018

“I feel sick before, after, and while eating—if I eat at all. Sleep means horrific, vivid nightmares. My body aches; my eyes have sunken into my skull; I lie on the floor for hours, unable to move; I forget how to breathe; everything is my fault.”

Not one of the “trained professionals” says that it isn’t.

“I hurt myself because pain is the only thing I can feel.”

Marshal cuts me off. “Skipping ahead to March—you invited Brayden to sleep in your bed. What did you think was going to happen from there?”

He says it like, “What did you *think* was going to happen?”

I hold back the scream. “As indicated in the text messages, I *thought* we would work on being friends.”

“Brayden claims that everything was consensual.”

“That is not true.”

“Walk me through what happened.”

March 13, 2018—Early a.m.

His hands on my arms, my torso, dragging me, turning me, rolling me from my right side to my left. He pulls my body against his, his

chest to my spine. His hand digs into my stomach, crushing any space between us into oblivion. The air hisses out of my lungs and every muscle is taut.

"There," he says. "That's better."

I cannot breathe, think, move. *No-get-off-get-out-get-on-the-other-side-of-a-locked-door*. But my scream won't come.

His hand slides up my ribcage, high enough that his fingers press against my right breast. I freeze, force myself to inhale, find my own fingers and make them function. I move his hand back down.

"Too high," I gasp.

His hand moves back immediately. "No, it isn't. This is fine just like this."

May 9, 2018

There is more, and I try to say it.

"He bit me. Tried to put his hands down the front of my pants. Succeeded in getting them down the back. On several occasions."

"And you think that constitutes sexual assault?"

"Sexual assault includes fondling or unwanted sexual touching."

—RAINN.org

May 9, 2018

"And you didn't try to stop him?"

—Chester Marshal, Director of Student Conduct at
Ohio Northern University (ONU)

helpless, *adjective*: unable to defend oneself or act.

May 9, 2018

"You didn't fight him off, or even try to? You didn't scream, or push him off, or kick him out of your room? You didn't get up out of the bed? You didn't say anything at all—just lay there and let it happen?" Marshal asks.

I can't answer. I can't even breathe. The guilt I've been trying to convince myself I shouldn't feel blossoms into something with roots so deep they will never all come out.

“Victim blaming is holding the victim accountable for a crime that was committed against them.”

—movingtoendsexualassault.org

“The first thing you should tell a survivor who shares his/her story is *I believe you*. The next words out of your mouth should be some variant on *It will be okay*.”

—Sage Drew, Title IX Coordinator at ONU

“Survivors . . . often blame themselves for behaving in a way that encouraged the perpetrator. It’s important to remember that the victim is never to blame for the actions of a perpetrator.”

—RAINN.org

“You know what, Vera? Nobody cares.”

—Arabella Laine, ex-roommate

May 9, 2018

“Anything else?” Marshal wants to adjourn and disregard my other claims.

“Brayden put his hands on me on several other occasions. All over my body—including against my groin. He knocked me over and held me down. Once in his room, once in mine. And before that he dragged me across the floor—while I was wearing a skirt.”

“Well then. Thank you for meeting with us.”

And that is all he has to say about the months of torment I have suffered.

I force myself to shake his hand before I flee. I spend the next hour crying underneath my desk, trying to carve some kind of control back into my life with a razor blade. I want to convince myself I’m doing the right thing, that after they’ve had time to think it over they’ll see that I’m telling them the truth—that it will be okay. But the poison-black thorns of guilt veining my chest don’t leave any room for hope.

They call me in for another session, then another. I don’t know how many times I meet with them in those awful interrogation rooms. I only know that now the very idea of walking down that hallway makes my heart rate spike, my lungs constrict, my stomach roil. Rational thought abandons me as every instinct tells me to run away. Every time, I force myself to go

despite my terror, and every time is the same as all the ones before. They do not listen. The truth does not matter. My ex-roommate was right—no one cares.

After

In my nightmares, faces I called friends stab me to death with pitchforks. I drown in my own blood. I hack apart innocent children with a hatchet, their screams ringing in my ears for days after, their blood staining my face and clothes and hands, images of their eviscerated bodies burned into my retinas. I crawl beneath the desk, struggle to breathe, drag myself to class. Again, and again, and again, the thorns of black despair growing wider, digging deeper, seeping into every aspect of my life. I am drowning in sunrises and sunsets, in breaths I cannot force into my lungs, in heartbeats I experience but do not live.

The school calls me with a verdict. I have consented to everything.

In my nightmares, he hurts me again and again and again. It does not matter if I scream; no one is listening.

July 15, 2018

I demand a re-trial; I don't accept the fate they've chosen for me. I fight, because this is wrong, because no one else should have to go through this. Because I have the gall to hope that, even with both lungs punctured, someday, I will be able to breathe again.

Note: This work is entirely non-fiction, but all the names (including my own) have been changed.

Welcome to New York: Fall 2019

Macey Howell

Welcome to the neighborhood. Yes, it's a neighborhood, but not the type of neighborhood you're used to, the washed-out suburbia with its cul-de-sacs and old trees and backyards. Here, it's a maze of crosswalks and sidewalks and streets. Brooklyn Heights is calm, but still speckled with the hectic charm of NYC: the soothing rattle of construction, people shouting God-knows-what for God-knows-why at all hours, sirens and car horns fighting for dominance. Honking is arbitrary here, done when it feels right instead of being purely functional. A honk says *Hello! Coming through! Move it! What are you doing, you idiot? and You piece of absolute shit!* all at the same time.

Still, Brooklyn Heights has a certain weight of stillness that hangs in the air, a sense of history and community and privacy. I'll show you around. Where we are is the corner of Henry Street and Pineapple Street in what once was the St. George Hotel, but is now student housing. Caffeine is always close at hand: a quick skip down Henry brings you to the burgundy-drenched Cranberry's, then the classic Plymouth Café occupying the corner, and further down the block is Joe Coffee with its modern emptiness and clever Beastie Boys quote lit in neon: "No sleep till . . ."

Go past Joe Coffee and turn right onto Willow Street: house number 70 belonged to Truman Capote. Now turn back on Pineapple and keep going until you suddenly break from the urban suburbia and reach the

promenade with its glittering landscape views of Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, an iconic speck in the distance. Parents bike with their kids, dogs patter past, people read on benches. It's indirect community interaction that makes you feel like you're a part of your environment, just not too involved. When it's basically impossible to be alone, you take what semblances of privacy you can get.

It's Friday the 13th, and it's a full moon—an event that won't happen again for another thirty years—so you go to the promenade to look at it. The night is warm with a cool wind, and the moon is brighter than you've ever seen it, or maybe it's just because you're staring at it. You stroll up and down the cobblestone walkway, the hazy orange streetlights to your right, the pinpricks of Manhattan to your left.

This is when you first notice that the imminence of autumn is heavy in the air, and something about the moodiness of the night and the weather and the moon feels right. You never truly believed in the mysticism of the moon, but tonight you allow yourself to have your doubts before the walk back to the St. George shakes you out of the spell.

You will have direct interactions with your neighbors back at the St. George, or at least some of them. In the room next door is a girl with pink hair named Celeste who is a pastry chef and practicing Wiccan (even though she grew up Catholic) from New Orleans, but you know her name is actually Sarah because she dropped her ID card and you quietly snatched that information as quickly as she did her actual identity. She borrowed your milk and brought over freshly made orange cardamom cake and talks about politics and her past romantic flings; you treat her with a mixture of hesitation, caution, and amusement. None of her stories are complete without you adding a grain of salt—by the end of the semester your salt shaker might be empty.

Your roommates are Caroline, Becca, and Daisy. Becca is kind, sincere, and open with a round, cheery face and an unexpectedly candid sense of wit and humor. She's like chamomile tea with the spice of chai. Your conversations jump from literature, to family dynamics, to horror movies, to your shared publishing major, to racism, and then back to literature. There's a mutual agreement to prevent each other from buying too many books that you will definitely both break as soon as you go to Strand.

Imagine walking up to a full bookshelf and then cramming in even more

books, and when it miraculously holds that many, you stack another shelf on top and then to the sides and then repeat—that's what it's like to be inside Strand Books. If you don't have a crick in your neck by the time you leave, were you really there?

If you're looking for a specific book, they probably have it, but it's more fun to let the shelves tell you what you need to read. Maybe it's a classic you haven't read since grade school, or a classic you meant to read but didn't, or it's a new bestseller everyone's buzzing about, or it's a novel you've never heard of by an author you don't know. Here, the books choose the reader, and it's your job to listen, then read, then return.

Becca is a spirited mixture of pop culture and confidence—nice enough and level-headed with a good work ethic, but more prone to talk than listen. You haven't met many Californians, but she fits your expectations fairly well: easygoing, extroverted, decisive, and speaks in a constant stream of vaguely self-aware (but maybe not) mentions of her music-centric life, such as her many interactions with her favorite band (including a private flight to their concert for her birthday), throwing parties featuring B-list bands (it's just what everyone in California does), and working for an up-and-coming boyband for a semester (who she refers to as, simply, "the boyband" until someone asks which band). But she's fun to shop with, even if the two of you have completely different styles.

Daisy is Becca's cat, and you want her to like you. In a way you're thankful for her because she's always a conversation starter, which helped dampen the awkwardness of first-week roomie bonding. She rotates from bed to bed for cuddles and attention, finds her loudest toys as soon as you turn the lights out, and likes to think of herself as your personal alarm clock when she paws on the blinds, or at your face, early in the morning. But she's cute, so you tolerate it.

The three humans in 215 stay up late talking, ranting, sharing, venting, like a sleepover you can never leave. *What do you think about . . . ? Well, there was this guy . . . Ooh, that's a cute dress, but is it worth buying?* Room 215 will slowly become your entire home. It's a nice room, even if it's inexplicably cold and the closets are musty and the beds are shakily lofted and the bathtub water was brown that one time and there's three of you (four, counting Daisy) all sleeping in one room. You know there are far worse places to live in New York for more than what you're paying, so when anyone asks, you give the basic answer: "It's nice, but it's a dorm. Still, I'll

probably never be able to afford to live in Brooklyn Heights again, so I'll take what I can get."

You like your little corner of the room: your bed with the hand-stitched quilt made by your great-grandmother; the silk scarf from your grandmother featuring bright fruit, foliage, and a butterfly; and the window beside your bed with its view of Pineapple Street and the flower stand on the corner. Even at night, the flowers are lit up in an array of muted vibrancy patched together like the quilt. And in a way this city is like a quilt, too, geometric with odd pieces that somehow match when all stitched together. The NYC experience is scraps of buzzing color and life attached to the quiet moments in between, waiting for trains and pouring coffee and sitting behind a laptop. Overwhelming, but manageable.

Yes, you can and will figure out the subway (eventually); just try not to look too much like a tourist while doing it. That's survival strategy number one: look like you've always been here, like you know what you're doing, like you belong. Everything here belongs, in a way; everyone, too, so that's why no one blinks an eye at the snarling tangles of traffic or the muttering man on the subway or the drunk woman beside you. It's not an exercise in ignorance, but awareness: notice, accept, move on. You roll with it because that's what you do. If you can't, then you shouldn't be here, can't survive it.

You saw it through the window on the train ride over, but now that you're standing in Coney Island it's everything you expected: fried food and syrupy laughter, neon colors splashed onto murals and advertisements and signs, the beach speckled with tourists and litter. It's campy, extravagant, an absolute tourist trap—and you love it. In the day, the sun glitters on the water and the Steeplechase Face, bleached pale in the light, grins grotesquely as he watches the swarms of people. At night, the neon lights are nearly liquid, and the park hums with the electric excitement that only comes once the sun sets.

Coney Island captures a spirit of shameless vanity, joking self-mockery, and boisterous showmanship. You can't resist riding the Spook-a-Rama with its overwrought mural of monsters and rickety cars that sling you through a haunted house that is basically a warehouse strung with whatever effects the local Halloween store had to offer: fake corpses, cobwebs, a giant bat with glowing eyes. You were more giddy than scared, but you screamed anyway. The Ferris wheel offers the perfect view of the nightscape, all lights and sound. This high up, the park is like a music box you can tuck away in your pocket and open when you need to remember this feeling.

There will be a moment on the train ride to Coney Island—a gem of

glittering Americana, kitsch, and nostalgia that feels worlds away, but it's still in Brooklyn—that you will realize you already love this city with all of its eccentricities and vibrancy and superficiality. You want to belong to it, have the city belong to you, and it will in time. Just hope that you'll never look at Lady Liberty across the water without the pang of excitement and wistfulness that nestled in your heart the first time you saw her, that Strand will never lose its hectic charm, that Coney Island will never become more tacky than kitschy. Hope that when you return—for good this time—it will feel like wrapping the quilt around your shoulders, the weight of it heavy and comforting. I hope it will feel like coming home.

The First Cut is Never Really the First

Emma Slaven

“You shouldn’t do that to yourself,” I told her, letting it happen. I pictured her being carried away on a gurney, head cocked to the side, letting the world think she’s dead only to be dancing in a hospital gown two weeks later. I don’t want to blatantly say she loved the attention, but she loved the attention. She was a fire—everything about her blazed. Her auburn hair glowed when the sun came out, the same sun that gifted her with a thousand freckles she claimed to hate. She had emeralds for eyes that could convince anyone to do anything, even their deepest fears. She was a bit of a narcissist, always making people apologize because she had it worse. Being with her felt like sinning; it was the first time in my life that I knowingly made the wrong decisions while in the midst of them. She taught me not to care. She told me that a panicking heart is excitement, not fear. I still don’t know if I loved her or hated her, but it’s not nice to disrespect the dead.

We happened to cross paths during the worst part of each other’s lives. We were both so messed up that we’d laugh about our eating disorders and bond over our daddy issues. Hers was dead; mine was in jail. Our favorite game was pretending we were fine and getting mad when someone noticed we weren’t, but she enjoyed the attention in a way that I simply couldn’t. Outwardly, she’d binge her food in front of people to seem fine, but she treated the toilet like it was made for her head to be in. The first

time she showed me how to purge, I held my breath while watching the orange and red chunks of food she ate moments ago leave her mouth and spill like water into the toilet. She always wanted me to come with her and watch, as if she needed to prove something to me. If we were normal, going to the bathroom together would be another one of those girl things that you don't understand, you just do. At some point I told her I didn't want to watch her puke anymore, that I didn't like the noise or the sour smell, and that it's not good for her body. She told me that starving myself wasn't any better, at least her body got a taste of the food before letting it go. That's the thing about hurting yourself: you warn others about the same things you'd choose to do to yourself. Advice never exists for yourself, only for others.

I knew her only that summer. Time, God, the universe—they're all fools for putting us together. We made each other worse. The summer reached its all-time heat, the type of heat that makes you forget what being cold is after thirty seconds in the sun. We stayed inside most of that July, sitting in her dark room with only the fan and *Friends* keeping us alive. One night, as it was getting dark outside, her mom left for work, which caused those fiery eyes to ignite and come up with a thousand terrible ideas. Every idea was something she had already made me do: explore the abandoned apartment next-door; stand on the outer railing of the bridge and pretend to jump; light our jeans on fire and see how quickly we can take them off before we burn along with them. I suggested we just stay in for the night, but she had other plans. She stuck her arm underneath her pillow and unveiled three razor blades wrapped up in a bundle of toilet paper. I'd already known she was a cutter even if I never witnessed it; both forearms were stained with deep incisions that weren't going anywhere any time soon. She'd hide herself in bracelets up to her elbows and long sleeves in the summer. It was the one thing she could do without actively asking for attention.

I warned her not to do it. I'm not a terrible person, or at least I tell myself that. But I knew all along no one would ever be able to stop her. She was a fire that could burn bridges when she wanted to, but when that fire went out, she'd jump the bridge.

She told me to watch as she did it. Similar to every other instance in our relationship, I obeyed but didn't want to. The razor looked like something we'd find in the abandoned apartment next to her house, but I didn't ask where she got it. She took the edge of the blade and pressed it into her

skin like a skilled surgeon familiar with the task. She began by reopening her existent scars, tearing apart the seams that attempted to close her up again. Each stab made a popping noise, similar to a bursting pimple, but far more grotesque. Crimson sap spilled from her arm, a deeper color than I imagined blood to be. When she was finished with her existing scars, she started on the fresh skin below her hip bone. The blood was more red than purple once she prodded the unopened skin, the sound more of a crackle than a pop. More and more blood poured out as she unfolded herself, but she didn't seem to care about the mess. I watched her careful precision. To her, it was no different than any normal task. I didn't know when she would have enough of it; it was as if she needed to cut a certain amount until she could finish. Finally, she grabbed a towel to wipe away the blood and sat back as if she'd just created art.

Then she handed me the blade as if it were my turn. That fire returned in her eyes, the one that made me do things I knew were wrong. "I'm not doing that," I told her, but words aren't known for putting out fires. I walked out of the room, trying to rid the image of half a blade in her arm, when I felt a sharp sting run down my right arm. Turning around, I met eyes with the broken girl who only knew how to exist by breaking others. Bubbles of blood began to pool out from me and a sharp sting throbbed from inside of me—the sting of my eyes and throat attempting to hold back tears, the sting of the vertical line that opened my insides to the outside world, and the sting of a friendship that had to end.

I used to think to myself, *God wasted so much time on her*. He crafted her in the deep velvet of her mother's womb, sewing every fiber of her together just for her to rip herself back open and curse the day she was born. But I ended up doing the same thing. Then I watched everyone else around me destroy themselves as well. It didn't have to be self-harm; society mutilates themselves with anything that makes them feel something even if the pleasure lasts a minute. Eve took a bite and the universe felt the crunch.

I left after pressing a paper towel to my muscle for ten minutes and flushing it away to discard any evidence. She kept telling me that "it's not even that deep," but I'd had my share of toxic relationships even at that age, and I knew that the things you try to ignore in the beginning are often the warning signs. I had disregarded the marks on her arms, let her purge away every meal, and followed her along on each death-seeking adventure

she conjured up. I guess it takes the visual of a person ripping themselves open in front of you to see how far they're willing to go.

Weeks passed and the days felt long, but that tends to be a summer thing. Somehow the skies seemed darker, I felt more alone than ever, and everything slowly just lost its meaning. I knew I had to break off the relationship with her before I adopted her destructive tendencies, but it was already too late. I was depressed when I met her, so I can't blame her entirely, but she introduced me to ways of distracting myself rather than letting my mind unravel in all its dark places. A night came when I was entirely alone and found myself fidgeting my own blade in my own hand, waiting for that brave, callous wave to hit me and push the razor into myself. But I couldn't do it. I wondered if this disqualified me from being depressed, or if there was a spectrum and I was on the upper end. I fell asleep trying to decide.

A pang of panic woke me up and filled my chest as the door swung open and my mom pressed a phone to my ear. 7 a.m. "Dad needs to talk to you." His calling hours were 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., but he was only permitted five minutes of phone time a day, which usually came at about 8 p.m. every night. I croaked into the phone and heard the response of a crying and pleading man who certainly didn't sound like my father. He begged me not to hurt myself. How he found out that was even a consideration, I'll never know. He said he had a feeling, called it parent intuition. I could picture him then, sitting with his head down, phone pressed hard to his ear, rubbing his bald spots in frustration over a situation he has no control over. He was hundreds of miles away in a prison I'd only been to twice, mostly because of his visitation limits, but also because what fifteen-year-old girl wants to spend her Saturday in jail? Everything there was a blend of grey and green. The buildings were made of concrete to keep anyone from going in or out, and from afar you could see the section that held the prisoners. No windows, no doors, only an enclosed awning that led to the visitation room. It rained both times I went. I sat and waited in the stone-cold green chair for my dad, right leg bouncing and a stomach full of nerves. Four separate locks clicked before the door that barred him let him exit and he appeared in a forest-green jumpsuit looking thinner than ever. His face sagged down with the weight that used to hold a full face, but he lit up seeing me those two times. I knew it must have hurt him to only visit those

few times, and that pain magnified as he whimpered on the phone begging me not to do anything stupid.

That's what they always call it. "Don't do anything *stupid*." It's usually said by the ones who have never been pained by their own existence, those who think that suicide is selfish. These are usually the type of people that believe "everything happens for a reason," too. Their answers always trace back to some Bible verse or meaningful story that "couldn't possibly have happened by chance." But what if everything just *happened*? What if there was a god that created everything and on the seventh day he sat back and let the world run its course? What if there wasn't a heaven or hell, only an eternal black sleep known as the night sky? Would that add peace or fear to one's life, to live a life undestined? Everyone wants their life to mean something bigger than it really does and they end up going to extremes just to leave an impression. They'll strive for control even if it means taking the blade in their own hands just to avoid letting the world cut them.

I never physically hurt myself; I always chose the safe route of internal warfare rather than proving myself with battle scars. My friend went in the opposite direction, however, by downing twenty-five tablets of Advil. The doctors pumped her stomach and kept her for about a week to prevent organ failure before sending her out to a mental rehabilitation center in Charlotte, NC for three months. I visited her twice, similar to the jail, partly because of the distance between cities and the distance between each other. I hadn't seen her since the day she used the same blade to cut us both open as if we were making a blood pact that would force us to be miserable together forever. The clinic wasn't that much different from the jail. The walls were a lighter shade of green and the staff seemed less icy, but there was still that feeling of detachment in the air, the kind that visibly separated the allegedly normal, law-abiding, healthy people from the hospitalized rule-breakers who didn't seem to care for consequences. I guess that's why they were there in the first place.

My friend made it two-thirds of the way into her stay before she chose to end her life on the roof of the place that was supposed to save her. The night sky gained a star that day, a star that would burn like a fire in the night. I still can't decide if I hated or loved her, or if I resent her for what she did or not. That's the thing about sharing a part of your life with

someone: you begin to understand everything they do. She cut herself to feel something, anything, even if it hurt her, because at least that meant she was in control. She didn't believe in anything bigger than herself, which may have been her downfall. The top of the world is the easiest place to fall off. I still see her emerald eyes twinkling back at me when I can't sleep and I stare out into the night sky for answers, but she just keeps telling me, "It's not even that deep."

Our Own Worst

Katelyn Ward

PTSD

Unrelenting fears unpredictably triggered. Jarring fight-or-flight reactions over common occurrences. Deepest regrets haunting the mind in ever-changing and ever-present and ever *ever* ever. Knowing it's irrational doesn't seem to matter.

This was something no one knew about when I was growing up. Now it's so popular everyone thinks they might have it. Meaning they still don't understand. Life in itself is traumatic, we all got problems, just 'cause people can't handle they shit don't mean they should git special treatment. I don't know what they think . . . I guess constantly looking for the exit signs or tossing with fitful nightmares sounds relatively normal. I mean, if the only way you can tell my father's even been through a war is his Vietnam Veteran's cap, you must not think much of it.

Of course, out of respect for the Father, I do not complain of the times he's peed on my bedroom floor, or drove me into a ditch, or started shooting off guns into the midnight sky all while trying to numb the pain. To honor your father means never contradicting his public reputation of open kindness and boundless joy with his unpredictable, profanity-filled tirades, yelling so loudly at my mother that the windows rattle and the earth shakes.

So, whose fault is it really that no one understands? I haven't really given

them any reason to think I shouldn't be as happy as my father pretends to be. And clearly there's something wrong with a person who's not pretending. Perception is nine-tenths of the truth, isn't it?

Dyslexia

At nine years old my mother's life changed forever when her father died as a result of Agent Orange. A few short months later she got a stepfather who molested her until the age of fourteen. Despite this, he was the only reason she was able to get out of special education in fifth grade, the only reason she learned how to drive a car; giving her the confidence to become the first in her family to earn an associate's degree in nursing, graduating class of 2002.

As much as we want life to be simple for children, the truth is that it's just as jumbled and topsy-turvy for them as it is for anyone else. Maybe even more so. People have this annoying habit of becoming just grey enough that they aren't entirely black. Even Ted Bundy helped catch the Green River Killer.

I understand my mother. She complains, but tries to make things better. She stands firm in her beliefs and protects them with everything she has in her. Life isn't perfect, and she can't control anyone's behavior but her own, but she can make things a little better if they let her try.

I understand why she needs to put locks on the medicine cabinets and sleep with car keys. And, when I was young, I understood why I suddenly became a bus rider when she got a job at the hospital, and why sometimes I had to sleep with the keys during her night shifts, and why I wanted so damn badly to live in a completely black and white world so I could hate and hate and keep on hating without reservation, hesitation, or calculation. I was so tired of figuring out how much to blame on his disease rather than just him, himself entirely.

I understand my mother, except for how she simply doesn't understand my hatred, like it's not allowed to be there. Maybe not all the time, but at least some of the time.

SPCD

It's not like I don't try. Because I do try. It's just that no one ever sees things the way I do. If someone is sick, how is going to check on them, forcing them to look presentable and answer the door, more polite than

calling? Why do I always have to make sure people are looking at me to know that they're listening to me? I know I don't hear with my eyes and I hate being stared at. How is sharing my opinion on some random topic somehow an attack on your personal character? I've always struggled with leaving room for interpretation, but I've learned that people will make of things what they will.

All of a sudden, I'm perceived as conceited and often compared to Sheldon off *Big Bang Theory*. If that show reflected real life, there's no way he could've managed to keep more friends than me.

Walking down high-school hallways felt like nothing but eyes watching me, hating me, undressing me, thinking I never got the joke because I was too naïve. They could keep their jokes. Truth was I knew plenty enough, and I simply didn't want to know anymore awful truth. But all the eyes! I knew all too well the symptoms of paranoia and that all this perceived hate was 60% in my head. It was the other 40%, the little sparks of intuitive truths that pushed me into this particular rabbit hole, I worried about.

Depression

There's a sudden and strange desire to change something that is within your control. One day I drastically changed my hair. Another day I shopped for random, stupid, frivolous stuff. I avoided people, then I avoided being alone. Until I simply avoided life, burying myself in my room, wanting nothing more than to sleep so that I could be unknown to myself.

Ever since the third grade, when the teacher went around the room asking each of us what we wanted to be, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I hadn't even tried to write anything yet, I just knew. When I tried my hand, it seemed that my work edged towards the abstract, the experimental, and the strange. I could never make work for the selected prompts and, without a grade, how could I know if they were actually any good? My test scores always revealed a greater strength in mathematics than they ever did in English. That made it pretty clear that my destiny in life was bent towards working with numbers, not words. What can you do with an English degree anyway? How are you going to support yourself with that?

Many scoff at the power of depression, believing it to be a weakness in one's character. But it's not in the heart at all! It's a mindset tailored specifically for your destruction, woven with stitches of love from your personally appointed demon.

My Screwtape letter went something like this: Why did you *say* that? Everything I say is stupid. Not saying anything makes everyone uncomfortable. My presence is simply a burden. Why did you *do* that? Everyone must hate me. I know they all say nice things, but they're just saying it to be polite. Everyone might be better off if I could just disappear.

There's only so much room in a bottle. Shoving everything down eventually causes it to crack. Wanting the frustrations to evaporate on their own, given enough time, is not likely to happen. Not soon enough for me at least. Instead, all those tiny, dangerous thoughts gradually merged themselves into a cataclysmic swarm of energy so overwhelming I couldn't ignore it any longer.

In all the intensity, my mind violently imploded into a blackhole that sucked up all the light. Making it impossible to see straight in any direction. I became a shell. Almost to the point of not being a person at all, just a body that was following involuntary commands. Everyone else became greater, so much greater that nothing they did could ever put them below me. I let everyone else make decisions for me, for surely they knew better.

So, I got an accounting degree. Swear to God, I did. Then I got the fancy accounting job at a fancy accounting firm with the fancy accounting benefits. And I went, and did my best, every single day . . .

Until I was fired.

Coping

Floundering in space, so much space. There was no next step, no path, no plan. I don't think many people can say that they were fired out of love. Of course, at the time, I couldn't see it through all the heartbreak, but nonetheless it was there.

"No darkness lasts forever. And even there, there are stars."

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Staying in that blackhole of emptiness would have killed me. Leaving took all the strength I had. Some days I still find myself back there, but the fear is never as strong as the first time, because once you've figured your way out, it's always easier the next time.

"Depression lies. It tells you you've always felt this way, and you always will. But you haven't, and you won't."

—Halley Cornell

I had to take a long hard look at my life. I realized that I was not my own person. I had become what everyone else needed me to be but . . . Isn't that what love is? Isn't that what I'm called to do as a Christian? Isn't that my role as a woman? I believed that sacrificing my own life for the wellbeing of those around me was the right thing, but I was also terrified of the suffering I would put everyone through should I decide to live my own life.

"Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?"

—John Keats

But now, there was nothing else to do. I had to start over.

"That is all I want in life: for this pain to seem purposeful."

—Elizabeth Wurtzel

No, I had to start. I had to move forward with my life with the world waiting for my choice of where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do because no one was going to live my life for me. No one but me. So why shouldn't I do what I think best? Why shouldn't I listen respectfully to advice, but leave the final choice up to me?

"I am going to be furiously happy, out of sheer spite!"

—Jenny Lawson

A dream deferred never dies off, it only festers, ebbs and flows, boils over into rage, then simmers down again. Now I am months away from an English degree, graduating class of 2020. My story isn't over. I have not yet achieved my dream of becoming a copyeditor or writer for children's fiction . . . but I'm on my way. Moving forward and trying to cope.

“There will always be suffering. But we must not suffer over the suffering.”

—Alan Watts

Coping with the past, with morality, with fear of failure, with fear of success . . . and it seems like we’re all just trying to cope with all this space.

SHORT FICTION

Cabo San Lucas

Sofia Rabaté

Before I even have time to bring my suitcase to my old room, my mother puts me on a diet. I've been eating ice cream straight out of the tub and apparently it shows. She tells me this and then pats my belly. "Haven't you heard about body positivity?" I ask.

"Positively porky," she tells me. She smiles at me with her crooked teeth that have never seen braces. "I say this because I love you."

My first dinner at home is a bare filet of salmon and quinoa. I push the little particles around on my plate. "I can't believe you eat quinoa unironically."

"What's wrong with quinoa?" she asks, waving her fork.

"That's what the youths are eating."

"Aren't you a youth?"

"I think it's about twenty years too late for me."

I want to say something about hipsters, craft beer, and health influencers. But it would ruin the joke if I had to explain it.

We FaceTime Katie. She waves from the tiny screen.

"Hi Grandma!" she says when she sees my mother's face press into the frame at an awkward angle, all nostrils.

"Hi sweetheart!"

I take the phone back from her. "Just visiting for a few days." My smile is not very convincing. "Where are you? Is that your dorm?"

"This is our common room," she explains. She shows us the view from her window: endless brick buildings, a rectangular lawn. I glimpse a boy hunched over his laptop, mild scoliosis.

"What's in your room that you don't want me to see?" I ask. Katie sticks out her tongue. Her eyes have more depth to them than usual. "Are you doing drugs?"

"Make sure you're eating enough!" my mother loudly enunciates, underestimating the phone's capacity to pick up sound.

"Look what *we're* eating." I point the phone at the gigantic bowl of shivering, red Jell-O.

"It's sugar-free. Ten calories per serving," my mother says.

"I love you," I tell Katie. "Be good."

"She seems to be handling it well," my mother says when I hang up.

"Actually," I think of the best way to phrase it for minimum damage, "we . . . we have decided we're waiting until spring break to tell her in person."

My mother raises her eyebrows. "She's still adjusting to being over there," I say. Later, she sends me an article from ParentingGuide.com about the dangers of lying to your children. "Are you trying to protect your child from a painful truth? Think again. This might be a choice you'll regret in the long run."



It's hard to sleep in the room. The pictures are eerie: I find some senior portraits where I'm posing with a wooden rose, looking uncertainly at the corner of the frame. There are also stills of me with friends from middle school whose last names I don't remember. I drag a dusty radio out from under the bed. It miraculously still works, and a cassette is still inside it. I listen to "Take on Me" and rock back and forth on the bed, making it creak.

My mother opens the door a crack. Her eyes are puffy. "It's 2 a.m."

"Sorry." I stop the music.



Lunch is miserable. Two hard-boiled eggs, a plain tomato, spinach. “Can I at least salt it?” My mother considers the question.

“Yes, but only a little. Salt makes you retain water weight.” As she watches, I apply some salt. “Slow down, you don’t want high blood pressure.”

“How do you know all this? They should give you an honorary MD.” She doesn’t always like my jokes. She stretches out her hand to take the saltshaker back.

In the picture, he stands beaming next to two near-identical women with very long teeth. He’s wearing wraparound sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt.

“Cabo San Lucas!” Even the name rings like an insult.

My mother hovers closer, the smell of mushrooms in the air. I show her the phone.

“What’s Instagram?”

“A place for pictures. But the important part is that he’s showing off, and all our friends will see him posing with those two . . .” I can’t find a word that is rude but not un-feminist.

“Dirty skanks,” she finishes solemnly.

She makes something different for lunch: ground turkey. “No hard-boiled eggs?” She pulls up an article about the dangers of eggs. “Eating eggs every day? Most people don’t think twice about this easy meal. Eating too many eggs is a sure way to raise your cholesterol, putting you at an increased risk of heart disease, liver damage, and early death.” I point out that it doesn’t seem like a reputable source. “There are more ads than actual text.”

“You only have one liver,” she points out. “And one heart.”

I watch her stir up the turkey bits in the frying pan. She adds chopped bell peppers and they look like Christmas, red and green. No onions, she just discovered that they have a lot of carbs.

“Carbs are worse than fats. There’s a diet where you just eat bacon and butter and cream all day long,” she tells me.

“What’s the catch?”

“No bread, no sugar.”

“There’s always a catch.”

Casually, she starts to ask when I'll get back to work, if I have any interviews, whether I checked at Merrill Hospital. Charlene from church has a niece who's also a nurse, and if they hired *her* at Merrill then they must be desperate. I tell her it's not that simple.

"When your father left me . . ." she says, the index finger of admonition extended.

"You still had to run the restaurant," I say. I know the story.

"And one day, the man comes up to me . . ."

"Yes, the man who sold lottery tickets." I know it. I know it by heart.

She shows me an article about single working mothers. The label is hard to digest. "Do you love your mother? Did you know that 70% of women with children are employed? These are high-powered, insatiable, iconic women. They are setting an awesome feminist example for their daughters. Let's hear it for those boss-ladies and boss-mommies!"

"A lot of adjectives," I say. "You should read some real news outlets."

One time she walks in on me when I'm crying in the bathtub. "Why are you in there?"

"Leave me alone! It's the bathroom; you can't just come in!"

She raises her hands up in surrender, closing the door slowly, so slowly it shrieks all the way. Ironically, I am now crying harder. I will have to restart the count of how many days have passed since I last screamed at my mother. The number must have been around 8,000. I go downstairs and cut the sugar-free Jell-O into cubes. I realize that the reason it's only ten calories is because it's not really food, just flavored water in solid form. What a great metaphor.

I bring some to my mother on a plate.

"Thank you," she says. We never really apologize.

Cabo San Lucas, population 80,000, is among the top five resort towns in Mexico. It boasts activities such as scuba diving (near-nakedness), a thriving nightlife (strippers), high-end hotels (orgies), and it even has its own brewing company (fumbling drunkenness).

“Stop looking at that,” she says. She always seems to know. I close Wikipedia and put the phone face down on the table, raising my hands. See, no weapons. She brings me a glass of water that is strangely tinted.

“Turmeric, ginger, lemon, and cayenne cleanse,” she explains. “It gets rid of free radicals.” Sounds like a political slogan. My stomach seizes up in anticipation.

“What about a diet where you only eat bread, sugar, and ice cream?”

“Is that what you were doing before?”

“Ha-ha,” I say flatly. I gulp down the juice like a shot. It burns worse than vodka.

My mother shows me the *New Yorker*. “Is this source reputable enough for you?” She waves it at me. She folded it inside out in the way I hate. The title is “Moving On, For Now.” It’s six pages long and printed in a tiny font that makes me squint. After two pages of wondering what the point is, I realize I’m reading fiction.

“This isn’t helping. I need a whimsical neighbor who will teach me how to make candles and love myself, and an attractive coworker who notices my new haircut. And a pottery studio.”

“You can fall in love with the attractive coworker if you get a job.”

“You make me feel like a teenager, you know.”

“Great! When you were a teenager, I was so young.”

“Not that young.”

“Forty is young when you’re seventy.”

I’m in my forties now. What about when I’m seventy? I realize. I squeeze her hand, feeling the bumpy veins.

For the first time, Katie is the one who FaceTimes me. “Why is Dad in Mexico?” she asks. He could have come up with a better excuse than a business trip, the business being body shots with ladies of the night.

“Well . . . well . . .” I stammer.

“What’s wrong?”

My mother snatches the phone. She’s wearing her tiny, circular reading glasses.

"Katie, sweetheart. Listen close. Sit down. Hold onto something." They used to give you a leather belt to bite down on, back when there was no anesthesia for amputations.

I hug my knees on the couch. When my mother explains it, it seems better, more easily digestible. The headline: "Grandma Tells You Something Devastating: What Now?" Katie doesn't cry. She says she'll call back later; she has a midterm.

"We can make our own Cabo San Lucas." My mother opens a decrepit bottle of rum that was hidden behind boxes of pasta in the kitchen. The forbidden cabinet: alcohol and carbs. She tells the smart speaker that I gave her for her birthday to play island sounds. The sounds are computer-generated birdsong and repetitive waves.

"Alcohol is like liquid sugar. But you earned it." She pats my stomach, now slightly deflated. "You look great."

I take a sip of the rum. It tastes funny. "How long have you had this?"

She smiles cheekily. "Probably since the 80s."

"That wouldn't pass a Health and Safety inspection," I say. "Is this how you would run the restaurant?"

"Of course! Everything is expired! Only expired food! When they tried to deliver anything fresh, I would say, 'no thanks!'" She laughs at this thought for a solid half minute. Her eyes still look the same, even though her hair and skin have wilted. We clink our glasses.

Blood-Thick

Katie Brown

“**A**nd if anyone tries to get us, I’ll just aim at ’em like this,” my big brother said, pulling back a rock in his red slingshot. We sat in Mom’s parked car while she grocery shopped. She left us with a roll of Ritz Crackers and the old country music station. Right as Glen Campbell wailed *the Wichita Lineman is still on the liiiiiiine*, Tommy’s buttery fingers slipped, sending the rock sailing through the driver’s-side window of Mom’s Acura. The window cracked into a million glass trapezoids. If we’d have known any cuss words, we’d have let them fly, too.

Dad let one fly for us when he came home from work that night and saw the window. I thought he’d be less upset with the mess-up, since he was always giving Tommy guns. When Tommy went into first grade, Dad started taking him hunting on the weekends. Now he’s in fourth grade and I’m in second, but I’ve still never gone hunting. I remember when Tommy killed his first deer, because there was a whole celebration. The little guy only had two small points on each antler, but Dad smeared deer blood on Tommy’s cheeks and bought him his first beer.

But after he saw the window, Dad threw Tommy’s red slingshot in the trash. Tommy knew he’d never win, but he put up a fight anyway. “How am I supposed to protect the girls!” he wailed. In the garage, pieces of glass tinkled on the concrete floor under Mom’s car.

I thought Dad would understand that Tommy needed a weapon,

because Dad always keeps a pistol clipped to his belt inside his pants. Plus, Dad always reads Tommy *The Lord of the Rings*. He says a boy should learn about swords and adventure. Those old yellow copies are the only books Tommy likes. When Dad pours his bedtime Miller Lite, Tommy runs upstairs, leans up against the headboard Dad made from an oak tree, and they read on and on until one of them falls asleep. They think girls don't swing swords, so I go to my room, where Mom reads me *Charlotte's Web* or Beverly Cleary.

I sneak books from Tommy's shelves sometimes. He has a lot of biographies about famous Americans like George Washington and Robert E. Lee, but my favorite one is Davy Crockett, the King of the Wild Frontier. The cover is red, white, and blue, with a picture of Davy running through the mountains and holding a rifle. When I read it, I feel like I can carry a gun too, like I can wear a coonskin cap and help Davy shoot black bears. I know all that's pretend, though. I don't even go hunting with the boys, because I'm supposed to keep Mom company at home.

They bring me a lot of Tommy's hand-me-down hunting clothes, though. I wear his old camouflage coat to school. In the springtime, days start chilly, but the afternoons get sweaty. At recess, I tie the puffy sleeves in a knot around my waist and let my coat slide down my hips while I play four-square. I keep the ball low, spread my feet wide outside the painted lines. I have to step far to reach the inside corner, so I scrape my knees a lot of the time. I just wipe the blood with my dangling sleeves.



Sometimes Dad and Tommy go out on our back porch and shoot squirrels down from the trees. "Buncha damn vermin," Dad says, and Tommy grabs his Red Ryder and knocks them to the ground.

I always hoped I'd get the BB gun as a hand-me-down when Tommy got a new rifle. Shooting seemed like the way into the boys' crew.



One Saturday, the boys were hunting and Mom was in the shower. I tiptoed onto the porch and ran my fingers over the horse and cowboy etched into the wooden end of Tommy's gun. The cowboy's lasso spelled *Red Ryder* in loopy cursive. I picked up the gun, held it to my shoulder, pointed the tip at the trees, and watched birds fly between our house and our backdoor

neighbors'. *If I shot a bird*, I thought, *the boys would be proud. They'd know I'm tough.*

I let my right index finger slide up to the trigger, real slow and steady, then pulled it back fast, with a bang. I didn't see the bird drop down, but I also couldn't find it in the sky. I looked for other animals to shoot, but I didn't see any. I decided to try again later, and leaned the gun back against the wall where I'd found it.

That night, the backdoor neighbors knocked on our door while we were eating supper. Mom set down her fork, left us there to roll peas around our plates until she came back red-faced. "Tommy? A word." He looked up surprised, asked what he did wrong. "The neighbors have a BB stuck in their bathroom window," she said. "They're filing a police report."

Tommy didn't have anything to say. "Imagine if that hit their kids," Dad said. Tommy crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at his plate, all pitiful. To him it was more likely that he shot the window without remembering than it was for me to have picked up a gun at all. I stayed quiet.

Tommy stayed after supper to write an apology letter to the neighbors, while I ate a bowl of ice cream. I was scared that if I told them the truth they'd never let me shoot again. But there was also something sweet about being sneaky, about doing something no one thought I could do.

That weekend, Dad took Tommy's Red Ryder to the hunting cabin, without offering to hand it down to me. I was determined, though, so I started saving up pennies in an empty beer bottle. If I could get my own BB gun, I could practice my aim on old Miller Lite cans and eventually shoot a deer.



Our backdoor neighbors didn't like us anymore, and neither did our front-door neighbors, who had just moved down from Illinois. On bus rides to school, Tommy would get in fights with the new kid, Nick. They fought mostly about words, like *Coke* and *pop*, and *y'all* and *you guys*. One time, Tommy ripped pages out of his math book and crumpled them up in tiny balls. "Stupid Yankee!" he said and pelted Nick with paper bullets. I wasn't sure what a Yankee was, but I backed up my brother. "Yeah! Stupid Nick!"

When we got off the bus, I asked Tommy what a Yankee was. "They're

people from up North,” he said. “This is the South, and we’re Southerners. If we let people from the North be the way they are, they’ll try to shut us up.” I nodded. I wasn’t sure what all of it meant, but I tried to stick it to my brain. “And here’s the deal, Katie. Our people share blood, and that means we’re stuck together through thick and thin.”

I figured this was the kind of important thing Dad taught him at the hunting cabin, the kind of thing I’d understand one day. I kept collecting coins in my beer bottle, feeling like each clinking drop of a penny brought me closer to the deer I’d kill and the lessons I’d learn at the cabin.

The day I broke my bottle was the day I heard a bang upstairs. Tommy and I were practicing times-table flash cards and Mom was stirring chili. Dad had gone to his room to change out of his work clothes. When we heard the shot, it was so loud I screamed, and Mom dropped her wooden spoon into the chili pot. She shot a look at Tommy, who flew past a few flash cards to find an easy one. I watched Mom rush out of the room, but Tommy called my name.

“Don’t move. It’s okay,” he said. “Here, what’s two times five?”

We waited a long time for her to come back. I was so scared I couldn’t remember my times tables anymore, so Tommy asked me to quiz him instead. The flash cards shook in my hand. When Mom finally came back down, she told us Dad wasn’t feeling hungry tonight, and that he was going to get to bed early. She said Dad had unclipped his pistol from the back of his pants, not realizing the safety was flicked off. It fired through their bedroom door and landed at the edge of Mom’s bathroom mirror. “It’s just the mirror,” she said. “Just the mirror.”

After supper and ice cream, I felt better. I snuck back upstairs and peeked into the bullet hole in Mom and Dad’s door. I saw Dad’s empty beer glass on the nightstand. He was shaking a little under his covers. I could see through to Mom’s mirror, too, which had a big crack like a lightning bolt. It reminded me of one of the tall tales I read about Davy Crockett, how he rode away from a tornado by lassoing a streak of lightning and riding it like a horse. For Davy, things that were loud and scary became a reason to be brave. I ran down the hall to my room.

I grabbed my beer bottle full of pennies and dimes and smashed it on my desk. I picked the coins up out of the mess, cutting my fingers on pieces of glass. I burst into my parents' room, blood dripping down my hands. Dad sat up quickly and I dumped all my savings into his lap.

"I'm so sorry, Katie," he said quietly.

"Tommy didn't break the neighbor's window. I did." My voice was coming out loud and fast. "He broke Mom's car window and you broke the mirror."

I started crying. I didn't want to, but I couldn't stop. I tried to keep talking. "I was saving up to buy a Red Ryder, but I don't want anything else to get broken."

Dad didn't say anything. He just watched me with his face all squished up. We stayed like that for a long minute, me crying, him quiet. He must not have known what to say because he just reached for my hands and wiped away the blood with his thumb. He took my cheek in his big, cushiony palm and, sliding his thumb down the bridge of my nose, painted a trail of blood.

Surviving in a Desert

Ezra Rodriguez

Deserts in the Southwest look the same. Once you get past the hill country of Central Texas, the trees and bushes quickly turn into sparse grasses and red dirt along the I-40. One short-lived mountain range after the other the only indication that states have come and gone. Occasional gas stations from huge companies intersperse with local convenience stores if you keep your eyes open long enough to notice. Largely, you miss it all. Because once you stay awake through half of Texas, you come to expect the same scenery to pass you by. Instead, you sleep.

At some point you pull out your phone and stare at the map because anything is more interesting than tumbleweeds and ghost towns. Mile-marker signs are meaningless since you're in states whose city names don't register much for you. People are bickering in the front seat and your younger brother is watching the same movie for the tenth time beside you. The next thing you know you're in a gas station in the middle of Navajo Nation and your mother is asking you if you want a handwoven bracelet sitting in a display at the registers. In the car, you immediately put it on, looping and re-looping vibrant yarn around the pearl clasp. It's important you get it right, adjust it right, measure it right. You don't know why. You turn up the volume of your music. More tumbleweeds. More ghost towns.

You're in a hotel in California. The car arrived later than anyone expected, dinner plans hastily being changed as you wound through Wine

Country. The last time you were here the hills were plush and green. You figure that's something saved only for wintertime, because right now the hills are browning, and it feels like you're back in Texas. But the air is different. It's dry and salty and you think you haven't been able to breathe as deeply as you are now. For whatever reason, you pretend that you aren't as deeply affected by being here as you are. In a few years you'll tell yourself it's because you're nineteen.

Your older brother and his boyfriend arrive. The already cramped car gets more cramped as your mother insists on squeezing them in, too. You're ferried around this town that's *grown so much!* as your mother says. She excitedly points out all the old spots she'd go to as a teen to skip class, mentioning people you've never met. The car crests over a hill, you remark about a small peak in the middle of town, and your mother rattles on about the Seven Sisters, which hold no meaning to you, so you focus your eyesight more distantly. If you squint, you see the coast. You see the coast and you want to run to it, want to chase the glimmer of sunlight on ocean. Something feels different about being here this time. Maybe it's the ratio of queer to not-queer in this car providing a sense of safety for you. Yeah, it's probably that.

Wandering this town with your brother and his boyfriend in the early morning leads you to a café. It's warm in this small building. One wall is lined with stained oak shelves, antique tea sets sitting on each shelf. You marvel. They're intricate and beautiful and delicate. It's a good ten minutes before you're standing at the counter. It's another ten minutes before you process that the owner called you *sir* when she turned to you. Your shoulders relax. You smile softly. You can breathe.

You come back the next morning. You lag behind your older brother and his boyfriend. Slowly, as if to not disturb the fragile veil of the morning, their hands come together. You panic just long enough to realize there are no cars around you; you three are the only souls making a sleepy pilgrimage to a café. They only let go when you get to the café and the walkway forces you single file. They're relaxed. They're smiling. You can breathe.

The conversations with the owner grow longer, familiar. You tell her where you're from. You tell her how long you're in town for. You tell her this is the best tea you've ever had, and have you thought about opening a

branch in Texas? You laugh. You stay in the café for over an hour. You buy dumplings and scream about how they've managed to get these perfect as well. She laughs. A new fragile veil is formed in the warmth of oak furniture and laughter.

You bring the rest of your family that evening. They're not nearly as excited by this wonderful café as you three are. You don't bring them back.

You try different teas again today, taking heaping sips from each other's drinks when you settle into the seats that are far more comfortable than you reckon they ought to be. Your brother's boyfriend is singing along to the music playing in the café, and you and your brother are quick to join in. It's silly and carefree and *American Idol* be damned because you are stars. And the three of you are laughing, truly laughing, and you can't imagine a bigger smile to grace your faces. The teas can only be stretched out for so long before they're finished and other customers finally start opening the door.

But you come back the next morning. The timing is just so that you arrive no more than ten minutes after they open, still always the first customers of the day. You try new drinks, you try each other's drinks, you try food, you laugh with your whole body, you sit attentively as the owner approaches your table and shyly asks if you'd leave them a review. Of course you will, absolutely, without a doubt you will leave reviews. And in a frenzy the three of you are creating accounts for websites you'll only use once, corroborating reviews so you don't mention the same details; drafting, re-drafting, posting one by one. Five stars. The best experience you've had. Distantly you recall telling her this was your last day earlier that week. Distantly you feel yourself storing away this memory, this week, this café and its two owners.

You're in the car again. The ocean fades quickly from your view. The saltiness leaves the air, replaced with the choking dryness of the desert. And it hits you. The next time you come back this little café may not be there. This little happiness may only exist in memories. Soon you're passing through Navajo Nation again, adding another bracelet to your wrist. You loop and re-loop the vibrant yarn. You turn up the volume of your music. More tumbleweeds. More ghost towns.

The House in the Field

Michael Partipilo

Louis sat in his rocking chair on the front porch of his small, secluded house in the middle of the field—wearing his favorite fedora—when he saw a young boy approaching.

The boy couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen years old. He was wearing beige cargo shorts and a blue polo shirt, a backpack slung over his shoulders and a noticeable complexion of dirt on his shoes. He was clearly a kid who liked to walk, though Louis stared at him with dry, stagnant eyes, wondering why he would walk here of all places. There was a reason he built his house in the middle of a field.

Louis did not say a word. It was the boy who broke the silence after stopping a few feet away from the porch steps. His big blue eyes did not stray from the old man: "Was that you that was playing?"

Now Louis was forced to change the mundane look on his face, as he was now genuinely confused with what the boy was talking about. Playing? He wasn't one for playing nowadays. Perhaps back in his golden days, but not today. Especially considering his current status: alone. Of course, being alone in this field, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of crops that were all over six feet tall, was his choice. He was not a player. "Is there something you need, kid? I'm sort of busy here."

"But you're just sitting."

"Exactly. And at about 4:00 I'm scheduled to sit on my couch and watch

the news with a glass of whiskey in my hand.” Louis dropped his head down to glance at his watch. “It’s 3:52 now. So again, is there something you need?”

The boy did not falter. He had no intention of walking away. “I heard the sound of a piano coming from this direction on my way home from school yesterday. I assumed it was coming from you, since there isn’t any other house around here.”

So that’s what he meant by “playing,” Louis thought. That ain’t playing to me. That’s therapy.

“How were you able to hear it?” Louis asked. He stopped rocking in his chair.

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “I guess I have really good ears. And the path I walk is right over there.” He pointed east, but Louis didn’t need to follow his finger. He knew the boy was pointing at the dirt road approximately thirty feet from the house.

The nerve of this kid, Louis thought coldly. Of all the roads he could have walked, he decides to go by my land, my privacy, and listen to my therapy session. Looks like I gotta start closing my windows.

Louis, as fast as he could, went over the several options in his head for how he could respond to the boy. He could ask him why he decided to make that road his path home from school. But Louis likely already knew the answer to that, based on the dirty shoes. The boy was a walker. He could ask him why he decided to walk up to his property and start talking about his piano. Or he could be bitter and tell him to go away. Did he really want to do that, though? No, he honestly did not. This was just an innocent, twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy with a keen ear. Louis went with Option B.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Johnny. But my dad calls me Cash. You know: Johnny Cash? He’s my favorite player. I want to be able to play the guitar just like him.” He paused a moment. “What’s your name?”

“Louis.”

“Good to meet you Louis,” Cash said as he took a few short steps closer to the porch, as if learning Louis’s name made it permissible to get closer to his property. In some ways it seemed to be. Even though Louis preferred to be alone, undisturbed by passersby in his quiet field of thoughts and crops, there was something about the boy that he found both admirable

and dangerous: he was too friendly. Cash seemed to be one of those people that saw only the goodness and purity in everyone. He lived in an indestructible bubble of friendliness, no negativity or animosity able to sneak in or burst it.

That's going to get him in trouble someday, Louis thought with surety. Despite his desire to be alone, he could not bring himself to be rude. "It's nice to meet you too, Johnny . . . Cash," he said with a hint of a smile revealing itself. "I'm a fan of his myself."

Cash's eyes lit up with excitement. "He's the greatest!" he exclaimed. "I mean, I've spent hours in my room listening to his songs and trying to play them on my guitar. He's like a teacher to me, and better than my teachers at school, since I actually like what he teaches."

Louis felt a tinge of resonance with that last remark. He was the same way back in his childhood with his trusty piano. He had indirect teachers like Jelly Roll Morton and Ray Charles. But that was a long time ago. A lot has happened since those days. "So, you like to play the guitar," Louis said, unable to think of anything else.

"It's the best!" Cash said. "I just wish I had friends that played instruments. Then we would be able to have jam sessions." He looked down at his dirty shoes for a few moments, seeming to ponder what he was going to say next. But as he looked back up into the old man's eyes, Louis could tell Cash had already planned what he was going to say. He most likely had it planned in his head before he made his way over here. If it was what he was anticipating, Louis didn't like where this conversation was going. Finally, after several moments of silence, Cash said, "Mister . . . Louis. Do you think you and I ever could—"

"I'm not interested," Louis said abruptly.

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Sure, I do." Louis slowly got up from his chair. "You want to bring your little guitar over here, walk into my house, sit in my chair, and pluck some strings while I play my piano."

"Yeah! We could have a jam session. You and me. It would be awesome!"

Louis looked at his watch. It was now 4:02. He was falling behind his whiskey-drinking, couch-sitting, news-watching schedule. As he proceeded to walk to the front door, he said to Cash, "Look, kid, I'm sure you'll be able to find some friends that will play with you. Heck, maybe you'll put together a band and in twenty years this little encounter between you and

I will be a charming little story to put in your autobiography. I'll probably be dead by then, so don't expect me to buy it. But I'm sure it will sell a lot of copies."

Louis turned away from Cash and placed his hand on the doorknob, ready to settle in for the evening and forget all about this meeting. "Nobody at school likes me," he suddenly heard the kid say, and he stopped. He glanced over his shoulder to see the sheer disappointment spread across Cash's body. His shoulders were slumped, his eyebrows drooped, his arms dangling.

More conflicting thoughts ran through Louis's mind. Would he be considered a bad person if he just turned away, pretending he didn't hear that? No, he thought. *This kid doesn't even know me, and I don't know him. Just go inside. He'll eventually leave and go home to his parents. Let them deal with his issues.* Still, there was a part of Louis that was frozen in time, extremely hesitant to go inside without a word. The world was silent, as if it were waiting for him to say something.

He looked Cash in his big blue eyes and said, "I'm sure you'll find somebody to jam with, son." Louis walked into his small, quiet house and closed the door, not looking back.

Louis continued his therapy sessions at his piano, even bumping his appointments up to every day now. But even after one week of this change of pace, he still could not get that kid out of his mind. What was he up to right now? Today was Tuesday, approaching the early evening hours. He must be walking home from school right about now. *Hopefully he found a different path to take,* Louis thought. He was sure that he did. Cash didn't have any reason to show up in front of Louis's porch again. The old man made it clear he didn't want to have a jam session with him or anybody. He had quickly grown accustomed to isolation, to his life of uncut solitude in this house in the field too far away to be able to hear anything from the nearest town.

So naturally Louis was taken aback when he heard Cash call out to him from outside the house.

He was ready to begin his next session, ready to let the music pick his mind up and gently carry it through the clouds, and before he could touch a single key he stopped and turned towards the undeniable sound of an eager young boy yelling, "Louis! You in there?"

He wanted to feel angry now. He wanted nothing more than to throw his pleasant attitude out the window and go tell the kid to scram or he would call the police. But as Louis got up from his piano stool and walked over to the front door, he couldn't help but consider the persistence in Cash. It reminded him of himself when he was around the kid's age. It was a time when he would sneak into jazz clubs on the weekends, not to drink or anything like that (he didn't get into that until later in his life), but to experience the soothing sound of the piano mixed with the saxophone, the drums, the bass . . . the guitar. Those were real jam sessions and they had enveloped him.

Still, it was ancient history. The bottom line was Louis wanted to be alone. He opened the front door slowly, hearing it creak on its hinges, and stepped out onto the porch to see Cash, not with his backpack on his shoulders, but with a guitar case dangling from his left hand. "I didn't go to school today," Cash said. "I hung out at the park all day playing."

"Go home, Cash," Louis said as calmly as possible. "You're wasting your time here. Go home to your parents. Your mom will probably start getting worried."

Louis didn't want to wait for a response. The matter was done. He was going to turn around, walk back into his house, go to his piano, and let it carry him away. He didn't need to see Cash walk away or hear him say, "Okay, you win. I won't bother you anymore." Louis simply wanted to go inside, close the door, and be confident that eventually the kid would give up and leave.

He turned around to walk inside his secluded house, away from the world, when Cash said quietly and with a crack in his voice, "My mom's dead."

Louis turned toward Cash once again, completely speechless.

"She died last year from a car crash. It's just me and my dad, but he never talks to me anymore. So, I guess it's just me and my guitar." He looked down at the case in his hand and Louis could spot a tear falling on top of it. "My mom gave me this and Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison* album on my eleventh birthday. I was immediately hooked. I couldn't do anything else but teach myself to play. After she died, my dad and I moved out here and he started focusing more on his construction work. He hasn't talked to me in months. Nobody at school talks to me. All I have is my guitar." Cash looked up into Louis's eyes, which were still frozen in time. "You're the only

person I know here that plays an instrument. I just figured having someone to jam with could take me away from everything. Sort of like therapy.”

At that, Louis was now able to blink, bringing life back into his eyes. He still didn’t know what to say. What do you say to a young boy with a wound as fresh as his? He was a kid without guidance in a world Louis wanted nothing to do with. Even though they had met only once before and he turned the boy away, was Louis all this kid had, besides his guitar? He decided to say the first thing that had come to his mind as soon as Cash had started talking about his mother. It was something Louis never thought he would be able to discuss with anybody, as he was sure he would break down as soon as he brought the subject up. “My wife died a few months ago,” he said and paused for a few moments before continuing. “She had gotten sick. Really sick. And it just became too much for her. She was a strong woman, my Lenore. She was stronger than I ever was or ever could be. But it just wasn’t a fight she could win, and after she died . . . all I had left was my piano. There was nothing left in the world for me.” He abruptly stopped talking.

The two couldn’t take their eyes off each other. They both could see the mountains of pain in the other’s eyes and the memories they wish they could forget. They could see each other trapped in their own nightmares, struggling to wake from them. They needed each other. Louis could see that now.

He opened up the front door and said, “Come on in, Cash. Let’s have that jam session.” Cash’s whole face lit up like the sun as he stepped onto the porch.

Before he could walk into the house that would no longer be secluded, he extended his right hand and said, “I’m Johnny Binner. You can call me Cash.”

Louis smiled, his first genuine smile in months. He gently squeezed the boy’s hand with his own and said, “It’s nice to know you, Cash. My name is Louis Nelson.”

Louis sat at his piano and Cash sat on the adjacent couch with his guitar. They played some of Johnny Cash’s best songs, including “I Walk the Line,” “Get Rhythm,” and “Ring of Fire.” The boy still had a lot to learn, but that was not what Louis focused on. He looked over at Cash and saw a wide grin on his face while the music carried them through the clouds together.

the fantastic form of a relation between things

Taylor Drake

“A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing.”

—Karl Marx, *A Critique of Political Economy*

i.

I touch the skeleton named Octavia and come away with white specks on my fingers. There are plenty of larger flecks on the mat where she rests, her bones a rich brown beneath the harsh fluorescent lights—except for the pale resin stains along her rib cage, which is why she is chipping now. The anatomy student says that, before the 1920s, anatomical skeletons were “articulated” (*like dolls*, I think) with regular copper wire and bolts, a process that damages the inner bone tissue whenever they’re moved too harshly. The resin was to help preserve her after she was eaten by beetles, pumped full of chemicals, and then left in a wooden box in a stream to rinse off.

I stand there shifting from one slipper to the other, my phone held aloft to record all of this so I can more convincingly pretend to be a journalist. Anatomical Skeleton B is laid out for us atop a row of green cabinets that jut out beneath the classroom’s windows, the only other light that of the campus filtering through, hazy and yellow.

My practice interviewee has climbed up to point toward different parts as she excitedly babbles, almost close enough to rest the skull in her lap. As she talks, half of my mind wanders to my own dolls, how I would yank their heads off their forked neck-pegs with all the compassion of a raptor biting the head off a chicken, looking up into the hollow, dark pinkness of their vinyl craniums for the eyes' cradles or the nasal spine, that harsh bump along the roof of the mouth that causes brain freeze. According to the anatomy student, Octavia's is slightly crooked, another piece for her pile of evidence that Octavia was European in life. My own favorite dolls are based off European fairy tales and manufactured in China. Before boiling their hair, I like to soak the head in a jar of nail polish remover for about 24 hours, in which it will swell to thrice its original size before shrinking when dried.

Pro-tip: dilute the acetone with a little water if you don't want to wipe her face off.

The edge of Octavia's mat is laced with DO NOT TOUCH, MOVE, OR DISTURB SKELETON B THANK YOU scrawled onto paper towels and taped to the table. "Our skin's oils might damage her further," the anatomy student mentions as she recalls cleaning the mold out of Octavia's skull. I don't know why I'm shocked to learn that; every football player I know has dead toes that ache when it's about to rain.

Despite this, I'm allowed to touch her for a few moments at a time, a necessary evil I indulge in only twice: the first to feel the surprising smoothness of her; the second when the anatomy student takes my hand and directs it towards Octavia's pelvic bones, describing how some women have "pitting"—dents in their pelvis you can feel more than see.

Touching her feels like a violation, though against whom I cannot tell. Still, I let my fingertips be slowly moved across the valley of her hips until they find a circle as shallow as a gently cupped hand.

"This," she tells me with a smile, "is where the baby's head would have rested."

ii.

In September 1716, an ad in the *London Daily Courant* declared the unveiling of "The Moving Skeleton." Picture it: a worn curtain rises to a

skeleton clothed in nothing but a tiny crown, pipe in its rotted teeth, dart in one hand and hourglass in the other. You're sitting in a crowded tavern or pushing your way through a bustling fair to see the other anatomical displays. The owner claims this skeleton can smoke a pipe, blow out a candle, throw a dart, turn over an hourglass, and groan like any living person can.

And as you watch that stiff, wired hand limply bob back and forth, you imagine the dart flying out and hitting the figurine of a dissected pregnant woman behind you right in her wax uterus.

A year later—in November—an ad appeared for the skeleton's sale, noting that prospective buyers should meet the owner at a local coffee shop to discuss price.

The desire for human skeletons for personal or academic use dates back to the 1300s, but the trade of them reached its apex in the mid-19th century, when India became the British Empire's main supplier of human remains, exporting about 60,000 of its poorest citizens' bodies every year.

Charnel grounds are Indian and Tibetan cemeteries where bodies are left to the air, the graveyards of criminals, suicides, unmarried or infertile women, or those whose families are too poor to pay for funeral rites. For several thousand years, determined yogins have journeyed far from their villages to make crude huts among the rotting corpses, performing tantric rituals and playing music on thigh-bone trumpets and skull-cap drums. In much Tibetan art, tantric buddhas don skull crowns and necklaces of faces as they stand on a pile of bodies: the final transcendence of ego.

Back in the lab, the anatomy student has me lean down to be eye-level with the table, pointing her flashlight towards the dorsal side of Octavia's pelvic bone. It has been partially erased, but there is no denying that someone has taken a pencil and drawn a penis on her.

iii.

Nowadays, anatomical skeletons cost up to \$1,000 apiece, although that does not stop my Twitter feed from occasionally blowing up at a woman for buying a nameless child for \$30 at a flea market, or a purse fashioned from a human spine for \$5,000 online. The school can't price Octavia or her coworker Viola, as the records of their purchase have been lost. A common

“accident” the anatomy student explains as our eyes lock, before mine reach up for the ceiling and hers fall down to the floor.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, passed in 1990, was designed to build a process through which all federal agencies and museums can return Native American and Hawaiian cultural items, including “human remains [and] funerary objects” to their descendants or associated tribes. Thanks to new laws piggybacking off the NAGPRA, *any* family is allowed to demand their ancestor’s remains back once an identification has been made. “It was supposed to stop graverobbing,” the anatomy students says, “but has only made colleges not identify their anatomical skeletons.”

Including ours, she then tells me in whispers. So much whispering here. Normally she’s so loud, even when she’s listening respectfully to the others’ talk, her bright clothes almost violent against the mud-brown of the student lounge’s couch. Even now, still sitting atop the cabinets with her legs crossed underneath her, she’s wearing a star-patterned dress in the middle of the night, her hair artificially red.

The worst part of my journalism class has been its inherent selfishness: so far on my semester-long project, I have done nothing but lie about being denied the chance to talk to the mothers at the homeless shelter where I volunteer. In truth, I’ve really just not yet found a way to say, “Hey, mind if I exploit your suffering for a grade?” But with STEM students and artists alike, the awkwardness is cut: all you have to do is ask an innocuous question about their latest project and then not immediately run away.

As she talks, the anatomy student—the only proto-mortician at this entire school—is cheerful, eager. She says that skeletons are great conversationalists; once you speak their language, they can tell you almost everything about them. Gender, race, wealth, age—if you got a callus on your finger from writing too much, yes, you can see *that* on the bone, too.

When she presents in another month, she’ll be wearing all black, and I’ll be wearing red in the front row, pointing my callused middle finger up at her for good luck.

iv.

In between classes, I spend the day of the presentation hyping her up, listening to her practice, and stealing from the table of strawberries and

tiny cheesecakes outside the lecture hall. Ten minutes before she's set to go, I follow her back up to the lab and find her professor, a man old enough to be my grandfather, dressed in a striped shirt and slacks, pulling a black cover over Octavia's head. Octavia is wired along her chest and shoulders to help prevent unnecessary movement, and dangling her upright has further revealed that Viola could've used her as an elbow rest.

Viola is the one I'll be moving.

At first, touching Viola was almost too disgusting to bear. She repels me, yet lingers on my skin, even still. She is whiter than Octavia, save for the yellowing of her ribs. She is smooth, too, save for the holes where capillaries and veins would run. Younger and stronger than Octavia, she dangled in a corner of the lab like any plastic high-school prop, only a thick handle of bubble wrap around the pole giving her authenticity away. Her articulation is done with steel, including hinges that protect her inner tissues, so the anatomy student said I could touch her more freely.

When I reached out for her, I could see little blue strings stitched beneath my skin, and pulled my hand back.

Due to the steel, the anatomy student goes on, we can tell she was made post-1920, and due to several variables, including an innocuous mutation that creates four instead of three bone plates in the skull, we can tell her ethnicity, as said mutation only appears in Native American communities. Her rib cartilage, though brittle and that pale, vomit yellow, is all her own. Her bones are a little bit denser, indicating access to better nutrition, and her spine doesn't carry that slight rightward slope like Octavia's to imply she regularly carried heavy parcels on her shoulder. No pitting on her pelvic bones; no resin flaking off.

The only real problem, as far as integrity goes, is that the minuscule bones of her inner ear have been removed—as is custom—and that some of her teeth are not hers.

Eventually, I worked up enough nerve to stick my finger between the bones of her forearm and wondered who she used to be. The other day my professor told us a story about going to the museum for the first time as a child, bursting into tears at the Egyptian mummies in pristine glass boxes. "Mama, please don't turn me into a mummy." It felt like a violation of their privacy, she says, to see them displayed. Then I thought of myself in a certain Hungarian film, killing myself in such a way as to leave a decapitated statue behind, an art curator's newest bestselling attraction.

v.

When I ask if the skeletons should be returned, the anatomy student's face twists, her pink nails clacking on the countertop. "Think of how many hundreds of students have used them and then gone on to med school and become doctors," she says, before directing me to the glass case of various skulls by the wall where Octavia's old and rusted mount now collects dust. Abreast a cast of Lucy's head is a plastic human skull, no different from any Halloween prop, cranial sutures shallow enough to have been drawn on with a marker. "You don't learn nearly as much from plastic as you do from a real anatomical skeleton," she says, and I watch my reflection nod in agreement.

vi.

When I'm asked to help move them into the auditorium for the big presentation, their feet dangle out from beneath their covers, and I am almost *too* careful not to damage them. After all, as my boyfriend once told me, dead bones can still feel pain.

vii.

During the Q&A, an older woman in a black turtleneck and tasteful red scarf raises her hand to ask about the skeletons in the art department and the frozen German fetuses in the bio labs. I glance at the girl next to me and stretch my face into that implacable expression my sister says makes me look like a frog. She jerks her hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter as the anatomy student admits she's not heard of either. After questions, the rest of the front row organizes a search party for the fetuses, and much as I debate joining, I instead steal for the lobby and find the art professor sitting down, chatting with another woman in yellow.

Eventually, the professor leads me to the upper levels of the art building and into her overstuffed office—forests worth of books and maps and papers—talking of the two human skeletons and bovine skulls her students use for modeling as I scribble along in my notebook. When I mention a

new sci-fi horror game that has just come out, how my favorite reviewer was so terrified of the thought of new technology allowing his very existence to be commodified, she snorts and says, cleaning the lens of her wire-rimmed glasses, “Has he *looked* at Facebook lately?”

viii.

The anatomy student told me the point of her project is to humanize the skeletons: “You’d be *shocked* the kind of disgraceful shit people get up to once the professor’s gone.”

Back in the art building, one skeleton hangs and the other lies down. The hanging one guards the stairs, surrounded by drawings and crude statues of disembodied torsos, lead smudges and tiny pencil tattoos all over its body, and a stamp from a West German company on the back of its head. The other skeleton is missing a few toes from its twisted, blackened feet, but is overall a lot cleaner, lying before a mirror with its arms folded over its chest. I imagined it a woman letting her neck dip over the edge of the table, her hair a wall of shimmering brown as she stares at her own reflection—had she a head with which to do so.

Here’s a happy ending: they’re both fakes.

Here’s, sort of, another: when we finally reach our dorm again, the anatomy student and I, we drop our keys by her jar of pickled cat embryo and my one-handed guard doll. I slump across the couch as she throws off her blouse and digs out the last yearbook from the piles of vegan cookbooks and poetry I only pretend to read, flipping through the glossy pages until she stops and holds it out for me: Viola and Octavia strung up and surrounded by smiling professors, an arm slung loosely around Viola’s shoulder, a hovering hand on Octavia’s, and green and blue birthday hats delicately balanced on both of their heads.

No happy birthdays, but something close enough.

The Birdhouse

Courtney Harvey

Trigger warning: sexually aggressive themes

Where am I? The thought flicks through Cindy's mind as she looks down at her hands. She examines them thoroughly: scanning over her soft palms, flipping them over, picking at her fingernails, noting all the familiar imperfections. Even though they look normal to her, she somehow still feels small. Smaller than she normally feels. When she looks up, she can see the posters on her bedroom wall staring back at her—there's the One Direction poster she got last year for her eleventh birthday, the JoJo poster she got last month on a shopping trip with her mother and her best friend Katie, the painting of her cat she just put up last week. The posters stand out against the pale blue of the wall. Even though it's a familiar sight, it looks different to her—the decorations appear bigger, and it seems as though she's perched up above her bed.

This isn't right, she thinks, looking around. It's then that she realizes where she is: the birdhouse. She's sitting inside the little brown wooden birdhouse nailed to the wall above her bed. *But why am I here?*

She crawls forward and sticks her head out the entrance, peeking over the edge. *Is that my bed?* She rubs her eyes and looks down, trying to get a closer look. She holds tightly to the curved edge so she doesn't fall. Looking

down, she can clearly see the bed, the thick white blankets, the pale purple sheets, the pillows stuffed in red pillowcases, the—

movement

—*wait*. The thought is fleeting. She rubs her eyes again and looks down, her eyebrows furrowing together as she concentrates.

There I am, she thinks, gazing upon her own face. Her head is against the pillow, looking directly up at the birdhouse. Her eyes are open, but barely. She is still, expressionless.

He isn't. He covers all but her head with his body. She can hear the low grunts, the squeaking of the bedsprings, the skin.

Can she see me? she wonders, puzzled by the scene below her. She tilts her head to the side, watching for a moment longer as her double lies still beneath his shifting frame. She pulls her head back inside and peels herself away from the entrance, turning to look around the birdhouse.

This is a nice little place. The walls and the floor are all wood painted dark brown. She remembers painting it with her mother when they were putting all the pieces together. Her mother asked her if she wanted to paint it with bright colors, but she insisted on the more uniform dark brown.

But now, crouched inside, she regrets her bland decision. The room is all bare—empty. Despite the dull walls, the freshness of the room itself is cozy, comfortable to her.

It's completely untouched. No one has laid a finger in here since I painted it and hung it up. She grins at the thought—the uncharted territory excites her, and visions of what she could make of this place flash before her eyes.

Casting her thoughts aside, she crawls back to the middle of the room, feeling the hardness of the wood against her knees, and sits, pulling her knees to her chest. She smiles. She allows her eyes to drift shut, and as she does so, she thinks she can hear a grunt louder than all the others before it.



Cindy opens her eyes, blinking several times and surveying her surroundings. She finds herself clutching her knees tightly to her chest while the barren brown walls once again encompass her.

I'm back, she thinks. She tries to count how many times she's been here now, and she concludes that this marks the seventh occasion.

I should keep track. She nibbles on her fingernails as she thinks, pondering how she might be able to keep record of her visits.

Perhaps, she wonders, *I can make things appear*. She slips her hand into her pocket, feeling around for what might be hiding in there, and produces a pair of nail clippers. *This*, she supposes, *will have to do*. Without thinking twice about her newfound ability to conjure items up from the void, she walks over to the wall by the entrance to the birdhouse and uses the clippers to etch seven tally marks into the wall. She takes a step back to look at them and a serene smile forms on her face.

For a second, she peers outside the birdhouse, once again seeing the posters on the wall. When she pokes her head out to look over the edge, she sees the increasingly familiar scene: herself staring up at her, him facing downward and grunting, the bed shaking.

I don't think that's me, she decides. *It may look like me, but it's not me—I'm up here. I'm not down there with him. I'm in the birdhouse*.

She backs away from the edge, turning away from the entrance.

I should brighten up the place, she thinks, once again taking in the plainness of the room. Then, as if her thoughts bring forth reality, a trunk appears in the corner. She silently congratulates herself on producing something out of nothing again, then she scurries over to the trunk and lifts the lid. She kneels and rummages through the trunk's contents, pulling things out and scattering them around her.

Everything I need should be right in here. Her face lights up as the thought passes by. She happens then upon a rug. The rug is soft, circular, and pale purple with red dots of varying sizes sprinkled across it. The pale purple shade reminds her of her bedsheets, the red of her pillowcases. Holding the rug, she stands up and walks to the center of the room, placing it right at the spot she's normally seated when she finds herself back in the birdhouse.

She looks down at the rug for a moment, adjusting it to be perfectly centered, before she sits down in the middle of it. She rubs its surface with her hands and digs her toes into it, indulging in the comfort of its softness. She lies down, her entire body contained within the surface of the rug, and closes her eyes.

Cindy opens her eyes and is greeted by the cozy interior of the birdhouse. By now she has fully furnished the room—there are paintings on the walls, a couch by the rug, side tables on either end of the couch, a fireplace across from the entrance, a kitchenette in the corner opposite the trunk, and a dining table for one.

She falls instantly into her pattern. She lifts herself up from the rug and stretches her arms up above her head, extending her fingers as far as they'll reach. A smile settles on her face as she drops them back down by her side. Then, she plucks the nail clippers from her pocket as she walks over to her tally. She adds another mark—this makes thirty-four—and puts the clippers away. The curtains she hung over the entrance block her from seeing outside, and she has no desire to look. She doesn't even give the entrance a passing glance. She easily ignores the unfavorable sounds from outside, attending only to the pleasant sound of the crackling fireplace.

She turns away from the tally wall and saunters over to the kitchenette. As per her routine, she opens the refrigerator, scours through it to find something tasty, and prepares herself a meal. Lunch, dinner, breakfast, perhaps even brunch or a midnight snack; it all depends on what time of day she appears here. The preparation never takes long—almost as soon as she sticks food in the oven, the timer will beep to indicate it's done, and it's always cooked to perfection. She serves herself on her favorite plate—a *Hercules*-themed plate she's had for as long as she can remember—and takes her food across the room to the dining table. She gently sets the plate down in front of her seat, then pulls back her chair and adjusts her skirt as she sits down. The smell of the food intoxicating, she eats in quiet peace. Once she's done, she lifts herself from the seat with a stretch of her arms up above her head, then she pats and rubs her tummy when she drops them back down again. She takes the plate over to the sink and quickly washes the dishes—her mother always tells her to wash right after eating. Drying her hands, she releases a relaxed breath before she strolls over to the couch and plops down. She reaches over the arm of the couch to grab her book off the side table. Reclining across the length of the couch, she relaxes as she flips open the book and reads a couple of chapters.

When she's done reading, she sits up, slouching as she inserts her book-mark, and closes the book. She rises from the couch and deposits her book back on the side table—she takes care to leave it exactly where she found it. She squats down on the rug and faces the fireplace, pulling her knees to her

chest as she watches the airy flames and listens to the crackling wood and feels the burning warmth of the fire against her face. She's not sure when, but at some point, she closes her eyes.

Cindy opens her eyes and finds herself again in the birdhouse. The familiar space gives her comfort, a content smile forming on her lips as she takes a deep, relaxing breath, and she jumps straight into her routine. She lifts up from the rug, stretches her arms high above her head, and plucks the nail clippers out of her pocket as she drifts over to the tally. Another mark: fifty-two. She nods at the update as she slips the clippers back into her pocket—

Huh? She glances down confused when she hears the clang of metal against wood, and she notices the clippers beside her feet. *Must've missed the pocket, I guess*, she thinks, not letting the slip-up in her routine faze her. As she bends down to pick them up, her hair brushes against the tightly closed curtains, but she takes no notice. Instead, she stands up and—more carefully now—eases the clippers into her pocket.

The sounds of him grunting tickle the surface, but she disregards them as she ambles away from the entrance and towards the kitchenette. She cracks open the refrigerator, hastily selects her food, and launches into preparing a meal. The whole time, though, she continues to feel annoyed by a persistent itchy feeling at the base of her neck. From there she could feel the noise outside penetrating the surface, inching its way inside her.

That's not there, that's not there, she comforts herself as she continues to cook, but the feeling doesn't go away. It's bearable, however. She can ignore it. She fights against it, holding it at a distance for as long as she can—

But when she picks up her plate and turns—facing the entrance for just a brief moment—the sound of the grunts in her ears pester her like bugs crawling up her arms. The noises are so invasive that she can hear them as though they were coming from inside her own head instead of from outside the birdhouse.

Stop it stop it stop it—

She looks down at her wrists and finds red marks that look as though they came from someone squeezing her wrists tightly with their own hands.

No stop it I don't want to stop it STOP it—

She drops the plate, and the sound of it shattering against the floor is

mute to her ears—she is engulfed only in the sounds of his grunts and the bedsprings squeaking.

Stop it stop it get out of my head get OFF get OUT stop it—

She can nearly feel his stomach slamming against hers.

No—

She rushes to find comfort, stumbling around the room in search for something that will make the ugly, penetrating noise go away. She abandons the kitchenette—not bothering to avoid the pieces of shattered glass on the floor—and she halts in front of the rug. For a moment, the familiarity of the rug soothes her, and she drops down onto it, allowing her tensed muscles an opportunity to relax, but when she blinks, it's different—the rug changed. Instead of being the familiar pale purple with red dots of varying sizes dripped across, the rug morphs to look even more like her bedsheets: the same pale purple, but the red dots moved, creating a new shape that looks more like the crusty, dark-red blotches of a bloodstain.

The sound of the grunts pierces through her, assaulting her whole system, and she has no control over the resulting scream that tears through her throat, emptying her lungs. But even through her own screams and gasps for air, she can hear nothing but the grunts and the squeaking.

She runs to the entrance and rips the curtains down, tossing them aside. She stares outside through teary eyes, and she jumps.

Cindy opened her eyes. Her head was resting against her pillow. The breeze drifting in through the window chilled her legs. She could feel something warm and wet between her thighs.

He grunted as he stood up and adjusted his belt. In his drunken haze, he struggled with it, jumbling around with the buckle as he tightened the belt. He said nothing as he stumbled out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Cindy didn't react to the slam. She simply laid in bed, her eyes glossing over, and she thought of her mom.

The Canary

Isabel Parham

I was twelve years old when the bird first arrived. It barged into my life, plummeted from the sky and burrowed in my chest without a second thought, like when birds slam into glass windows or doors. But this bird slammed into my chest. A tiny explosion, a catalyst, an omen. At first, its presence in my chest was like an insect suspended in amber, motionless, but heavy. I didn't notice the weight much at first, and the bird only chirped quietly, occasionally, or rustled around at night when I was trying to get comfortable.

I was also twelve years old when my father became sick. It seemed to me at the time that he had a bird in his chest too. This scared me. If our birds were the same, I thought, that meant I would become sick like him.

My father spent 56 days in a coma. Heart complications, the doctors said. During this time, the bird made its home in my chest. It pinched bits of tissue from my lungs or stomach, chipped off fragments of bone from my ribs, and built a comfortable nest. It hurt me, this homemaking, though some days were worse than others. Days when my mother would answer the phone with a hushed and tense "Hello?" and the air would stand still in the house, heavy with waiting, the bird would lodge in my throat, choking me, or shove its tiny talons into my intestines so my stomach cramped and roiled. On these days, I wished I could smoke the bird out, or drown it, but it never fled. It huddled down in its nest made from my body, determined to stay.

On day fifteen of my father's coma, my mother took me to the hospital to see him for the first time. The room was cold. The lights buzzed too loudly and cast a sickly yellow-purple hue on my skin, like I was a giant bruise. The smell of disinfectant made my head spin and my stomach churn, so I pulled in sharp, shallow breaths through my mouth. I kept my eyes on the slick linoleum floor as my mother pressed her bony hand into my back, pushing me further into the room.

"Go see him," she urged, and I could hear the sharp, cracking hope in her voice. "He can hear you, even though he's sleeping. The doctors said he can still hear you."

The bird revolted against her plea. It plummeted down into my stomach, tangling itself in my intestines, pecking at them viciously like they were worms. Its desperate shrieks echoed through my body, pounding in my head. I felt as if I opened my mouth the bird's screams would come spilling out. I forced myself to shuffle forward, clenching my hands until my knuckles paled. Barely breathing, as the bird continued to decimate my insides, I slowly raised my eyes to the form in the bed.

For a moment, I stood confused. That man was not my father. This man was a whisper, a ghost, an eggshell ready to break. Sunken, hollow eyes. Lips a viscous purple gash in an ashy gray face. Clear tubes winding from every direction, turning his face into some sort of horrifying deep-sea creature. My stomach dropped. The bird let out its most horrific scream yet, breaking my spell of stillness. My body revolted violently and I gagged, choking on something rising in my throat. I ran from the room, tiny yellow feathers fluttering in my wake. In my head, the words pounded.

This is my father. This is what he has become, what I will become.

We left the hospital in uncomfortable silence, my mother's disappointment palpable between us. I had failed to bring my father back. I had failed her.

After that day, the bird became more aggressive in its attacks, slamming up into my lungs, screeching desperately in my eardrums at night so I couldn't sleep, pounding at the inside of my skull so my head was always aching. It was hard to focus at school. Time seemed to drag. I couldn't stand to sit at the lunch table to eat with those tiny talons pinching my intestines. I couldn't bring my eyes to focus on the chalkboard with the

shrieking, panicked cries in my head. When my mother chatted to me in the car as she drove me home, I barely absorbed a word she said to me, numb to the looks she would shoot at me from the corner of her eye.

The bird was all-consuming, consuming me.

The bird was bright yellow—a canary. I realized this after we visited the hospital, and I still occasionally coughed up tiny, yellow feathers at night. Canaries are used in mines to warn against toxic fumes. They tell you to get out, get out, *get out*. But how do you escape from this?

On day 47 of my father's coma, the doctors informed us the chance for recovery at this stage was low. We might want to consider preparing for the future, they said. At this, the bird charged into my throat, filling my lungs and nose with feathers, choking me. I wanted to cut myself open and crawl out of my skin, to do anything to escape, but I couldn't leave. It pushed into my brain, filled up my vision so I couldn't think clearly. When I blew my nose, tiny yellow feathers came out, matted with blood. I vomited up the feathers on particularly bad nights. The bird consumed my days, flooded them with yellow.

On day 56, I decided to rip the bird out of me. I was at school, in biology class, learning about the death of stars. You don't think about stars dying—you feel like they'll exist forever. But they do. They grow huge and hot and expand and expand and expand until finally they explode.

In the middle of the lecture, a crackly voice filled the room, calling me to the front office. I could feel every set of eyes in the room boring white-hot into my back. As I walked, the bird collided with the walls of my stomach. With each collision, I felt *get out* ricochet through my body.

I knew why I was called to the office as soon as I saw my mother's pale face, so tired and thin it was almost translucent. "Honey . . ." she began, then stopped, trying to choke down a sob.

The bird revolted, tearing at my chest, at my lungs, my throat, my brain, more powerful than ever before. *I am going to explode*, I thought.

I sprinted out of the office and into the bathroom, locking myself in the final stall, the bird's tiny talons lodged in my throat so I could barely breathe. I slumped to the floor, clutching the toilet, desperately trying to force air into my lungs. I wanted to vomit, but the bird left no room for it. I ripped at my shirt, digging my nails into the flesh on my chest, tearing desperately. My whole body trembled and I could hear nothing but the bird screeching in my brain, drowning out my own desperate gasping.

I am going to explode. Get out get out getoutgetoutgetout. I dug into my chest, deeper and deeper, past my skin and my tissue and my organs. My hands kept pushing, grasping, in search of that tiny, feathered body.

I pushed deeper and deeper until I realized I could push no more. I felt only emptiness. It wasn't like an unfurnished room or outer space. It was a lack. There was nothing. The bird had retreated somewhere inside of me—a place I could never reach. It was meant to stay with me forever. Forever.

I sat on the white tiled floor, blood crusting under my nails, and I cried

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REVIEW

Hell of a Land: The Sacred and Perverse Landscapes of Jean Toomer's *Cane*

Aiden Evans

In the final vignette of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Ralph Kabnis hears perplexing lines from the chilling wind outside his chambers:

Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground. (103)

These recurring lines capture Kabnis's strained and contradictory relationship to the Southern U.S.: a simultaneous desire for unity with the Georgia landscape and an unbridgeable detachment from the "land of cotton" where "[t]h white folks get th boll" and "th niggers get th stalk" (87). Throughout *Cane*, Toomer juxtaposes these conflicting impulses through the book's natural imagery, attaching a variety of meanings to the physical land in which his characters live and labor. Moreover, *Cane* alternately recognizes the realities of Black discrimination and exploitation that have historically operated through agricultural economic structures, while also characterizing the landscape as a site for spiritual transcendence. By doing so, *Cane* seems to place the contradictory qualities of the Southern landscape in a paradoxical balance, at once venerating and complicating images of pastoral beauty.

Until recently, scholars have assessed *Cane's* depictions of the Southern landscape unfavorably, arguing that Toomer engages in romantic, idealized treatments of the Black pastoral peasantry and willfully ignores the social and historical contingencies of Black American life. That is, they have maintained that *Cane's* impulse to search for prophetic, transcendent truth in the Black Southerner's pastoral lifestyle often represses the lived experiences of Blacks in the American South, which were marked by tragedy, trauma, and racial discrimination. Close analysis of *Cane's* rural imagery, however, suggests a more complex reading of *Cane's* pastoral themes. Specifically, Toomer renders the landscape of the American South through an elaborate combination of pastoral imagery and religious figuration, depicting an unmediated relationship between physical nature and the spiritual world. Yet even as he gestures toward the land's sacredness, Toomer locates the Southern landscape as the primary site of Black oppression in the U.S., demonstrating the deep cultural reverberations of the Southern plantation structure and its devastating effects upon Black life. In this way, *Cane* depicts a deeply conflicted relationship between the individual and the natural world, manifested most sharply in his depictions of rural labor. Ultimately, Toomer utilizes images of agrarian labor to elucidate the paradoxical connection between Black Americans and the natural world, describing agricultural work as a potential channel for spiritual liberation even as such work reinforces the institutional conditions perpetuating the workers' material oppression.

Many scholars maintain that Toomer's idealized depictions of the land belong to the tradition that distances the Southern landscape from the South's history of slavery, discrimination, prejudice, and violence that persists to the present. Donald M. Shaffer, Jr, for instance—though he focuses primarily on the novel's urban spaces—contends that *Cane's* Northern characters struggle “to appropriate a southern pastoral vision as a way of attending to the urban displacement of black folk in the city” (120). Shaffer interprets *Cane* as a thematically pastoral work in which Toomer produces a positive vision of the Southern landscape. David G. Nicholls similarly notes that “when *Cane* addresses the status of life in the rural South, it does so less to inquire whether agrarian culture could be maintained than to pay tribute to its passing” (152). For these critics, *Cane's* rendering of the Southern land appears an untroubled, romanticized elegy for Black rural life.

William M. Ramsey distills this dominant critical understanding of *Cane's* pastoral themes, arguing that Toomer perceived "two Souths": the "temporal South of disturbing historical oppression and despairing lack of progress;" and "what could be called Toomer's transcendent or 'eternal South,' existing above time and social particulars" (76). Ramsey posits a binary opposition between Toomer's pastoral treatment of the rural South and his recognition of Black social oppression and historical trauma. For him, *Cane's* depictions of nature dissolve the appalling social conditions and traumatic histories of its Black characters, as these "particulars are transmuted to a higher plane of reality" (Ramsey 87). Ramsey thus contends *Cane's* pastoral visions provide "an escape from history's burden" (86). In his efforts to evoke the land's potential for mystical truth, Ramsey argues, Toomer averts his gaze from the historical realities of the Black experience in the American South.

Like Ramsey, other scholars note a pure opposition between *Cane's* mystical images of the Southern landscape and its references to the socio-historical conditions of Southern Black Americans. For example, in her assessment of *Cane's* critical heritage, Barbara Foley observes that many critics foreground the novel's tendency to subordinate "the representation of the here and now to the search for prophetic truths beyond the limits of history" (181). In other words, they see *Cane* disregarding the oppressed history of Black Americans as it constructs ahistorical, universal truths to reveal a hidden world beyond the limits of human comprehension. Foley maintains *Cane* exhibits "a tendency to naturalize and dehistoricize social phenomena" (183). She further suggests that *Cane's* idealization of rural labor produces inaccurate and ahistorical representations of the Southern Black experience, noting that "low wages, layoffs, and debt peonage are invisible" in Toomer's text (Foley 183). Foley contends, therefore, that *Cane* obscures or represses many facets of post-Civil War agricultural labor practices in the American South, including discrimination, institutional racism, prejudice, and violence. Foley's argument ultimately demonstrates the critical tendency to distinguish the novel's treatment of Black oppression and discrimination from its idealistic treatment of Southern agrarian culture.

Up to now, many scholars have interpreted *Cane's* evocations of nature's mystical and transcendental quality as functions of a romantic pastoral tradition. Furthermore, they have determined that the novel's natural imagery

appears in an oppositional relationship to the socio-historical realities of Black oppression, pain, and discrimination. The power of nature-as-metaphor in Toomer's novel, however, derives precisely from its ability to evoke this oppressive, traumatic past while simultaneously signifying the possibility of spiritual liberation and redemption. In other words, the novel's thematic and figural contents stage the conflict between repression and liberation in rural Black life. The symbolic value of nature in the novel and nature's relations with the novel's characters figure a dialectic tension between spiritual liberation and socio-historical oppression. This tension emerges with particular force in the novel's depiction of farm labor and the lasting presence of the Southern plantation structure, in which characters constantly engage with the land as a divine force of spiritual liberation while simultaneously participating in work directly tied to their own social, economic, and material disenfranchisement.

Toomer represents a relationship between the natural world and the divine, imbuing the Southern landscape with a sacred, spiritual quality. Ramsey notes that nature and, in particular, the image of the cane stalk serve as the novel's "central metaphoric site, where the concretely physical plane intersects with and aspires to the mysteriously eternal" (77). Toomer locates nature as a source of divine mercy and redemption, a token of a spiritual world apart from the human realm of language and social convention. For example, in "Becky," Toomer contrasts the prospect of divine redemption through the natural, non-human realm with Becky's experiences of exclusion from both white and Black communities. The narrator notes that, after Becky's first son was born, "the white folks said they'd have no more to do with her. And black folks, they too joined hands to cast her out . . . The pines whispered to Jesus" (5). The narrator's frequent apostrophe to the pines seems a prayer for mercy for Becky and her children that has been unavailable to them in their communities. In contrast to their social displacement, the story identifies the grove of pine trees as a harbinger of spiritual mercy that transcends bigotry.

In "Fern," Toomer further elaborates this relationship between the natural world and the divine. Fern's connection to the Georgia landscape marks her as a Christ-like figure, a point of convergence between the physical and the supernatural. According to the narrator, Fern's eyes appear as though "they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that

nothing was to be denied" (14). For the story's male characters, Fern is a source of unfathomable mercy and acceptance, a human mediator between the physical world and the divine. Her appearance as a human source of divine absolution, in whose presence men "seem to lose their selfishness," occurs primarily through her relationship to the Georgia landscape (16). For example, the narrator observes that "[h]er eyes, if it were sunset, rested idly where the sun, molten and glorious, was pouring down between the fringe of pines," and "[l]ike her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes" (15). Additionally, after meeting with Fern in the cane field, the narrator notes that "[h]er eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in" (17). The narrator's simile symbolically unites the image of the molten sun blending into the line of pine trees on the horizon with the presence of God. In this moment, the supernatural becomes visible in a triangle of God, the skyline, and Fern's eyes. By characterizing Fern as a figure of divine mercy and depicting the horizon as the primary locus of communion between Fern and the supernatural, Toomer solidifies the association of the Southern landscape with the mystic and invisible.

Cane constructs a symbolic association between the supernatural and the physical landscape of the American South. As it does so, however, the novel foregrounds the natural landscape as the primary site of Black oppression, consistently offering images of slavery and the Southern plantation system in its vignettes. For example, Kabnis experiences the natural world as pervasively antagonistic, noting, after his encounter with Hanby's hen, that "even the poultry is hostile" (82). After briefly entertaining the notion that "the earth [is] my mother," he derisively rejects this possibility: "Bastardy; me. A bastard son has got a right to curse its maker" (83). In these moments, Kabnis evinces an acute sense of alienation from the natural world. Despite his sense of detachment from the land, though, Kabnis inevitably yields to the physical and spiritual beauty of the Georgia landscape. As the section's stage directions indicate: "Kabnis is about to shake his fists skyward" but "the night's beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. . . . He quivers. Tears mist his eyes" (82). Moments later he wonders that "things are so immediate in Georgia" and that "[t]here must be many dead things moving in silence. They come here to touch me. I swear I feel their fingers" (84). Additionally, Kabnis hopes to become, like Fern, a kind of channel for this divine force, proclaiming, "how my lips would sing for it, my songs being

the lips of its soul" (81). Even as Kabnis asserts his separation from the natural world, he senses the inexorable force of nature's beauty and feels a persistent urge to articulate it.

While expressing the spiritual force of the Georgia landscape, Toomer subtly identifies the South's history of slavery, racism, and oppression as the primary source of Kabnis's alienation from the land. While Kabnis is in his quarters, the stage directions note that "a powdery faded red dust sprays down on him. Dust of slave-fields, dried, scattered" (81). The disturbance caused by the red dust immediately redoubles the hostility between Kabnis and his natural surroundings. The novel also explicitly associates this dust with plantation land, signifying the history of Southern slavery. It subtly reminds Kabnis that "you're in th land of cotton—hell of a land," as Halsey says (87). In this way, the land Kabnis encounters positions contemporaneous Southern society in relation to its historical past, evoking the trauma of slavery and oppression embedded in the history of the Southern landscape. The Kabnis section thus stages the crisis of signification that attends images of nature throughout *Cane*, depicting the title character's struggle to reconcile the South's physical beauty and its spiritual significance with his experience of alienation from both history and culture. With these contradictory elements in play, Kabnis's disembodied fingers feel around him, synecdochally linked to the spirits of departed slaves, rather than currents of supernatural forces. Ultimately, the memories of oppression, subjugation, and enslavement connected with the land exist paradoxically within the divine, transcendent landscape to which Kabnis feels drawn.

In *Cane*, Toomer figures the Southern landscape as a channel for divine or supernatural forces while simultaneously associating the land with the South's history of Black oppression. His representation of agrarian labor in the contemporary South combines these thematic strains into a paradoxical unity. For example, in "Cotton Song," agrarian labor functions as a means for engaging with the divine or supernatural element in nature, yet it simultaneously relies on images and emotions tied to the South's history of Black oppression:

Cotton bales are the fleecy way
Weary sinner's bare feet trod,
Softly, softly to the throne of God,
"We ain't agwine t wait until th Judgement Day!" (9)

Here the speaker refuses to wait until the earth's final day to see God's presence revealed. Rather, the speaker exhibits an urgent desire to experience this revelation in the immediate, physical plane of human existence. For the speaker, the cotton harvest becomes a means of engaging the spiritual world through the senses. Interactions with the physical products of the land link the speaker metonymically to nature's divine and supernatural qualities. In this way, "Cotton Song" upholds the symbolic association between nature and the divine, while marking agricultural labor as a means for achieving spiritual liberation on the earthly plane.

Whereas "Cotton Song" shows agricultural labor as a means for engaging the spiritual world through the natural world, "Blood Burning Moon" implicates such labor as an apparatus of Black oppression in the South, demonstrating the lasting presence of the Southern plantation in Black American cultural memory. The section associates the mob's horrific violence against Tom with the legacy of Black oppression that accompanies the South's agricultural economy. As the mob lynches Tom, their yells sound like "a hundred mobs yelling" as a "ghost of a yell slipped through the flames and out the great door of the factory" (34-35). The mob's clamor mingles with sounds of past lynchings, connecting the moment of Tom's death to a deeper legacy of racial violence. Tom's lone cry of pain passes through the factory, a relic of the Antebellum cotton industry, binding this act of violence to the Southern cotton factory and the social institutions surrounding it. Tom's death also implicates the period's cane harvesting practices in the South's long legacy of institutional oppression, economic exploitation, and racist violence. The agricultural labor through which the speaker in "Cotton Song" engages the divine here operates as part of the South's institutional oppression of Black Americans.

In "Song of the Son," the speaker maintains that "[t]hough late, O soil, it is not too late yet / To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone" (12). The speaker does not wish to abnegate the burden of history rooted in the soil. Rather, the speaker calls for the land to give voice to the "song-lit race of slaves" so these voices might mingle with the "the velvet pine-smoke air to-night" (12). In this way, the text demonstrates an acute consciousness of Black American socio-historical oppression, refusing to relegate slave songs to the past or to distinguish them from the sacred pines and soil of Southern land. Nature's symbolism in *Cane* likewise reflects on the dialectical tension between liberation and repression in Black life, demonstrating

how the rural laborer's interaction with nature functions as a channel for communion with an unseen world, while simultaneously reinforcing the conditions of these workers' oppression. These activities acquire another layer of tension, as efforts at spiritual liberation are necessarily tied to practices that subjugate, control, and alter the sacred Southern landscape. Ultimately, the images to which Toomer returns most frequently—the cane stalk and the cotton plant—become implicit, but lasting tokens of nature's conflicted and paradoxical place in *Cane*.

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Boundaries and Biopolitics: The Construction of Bare Life in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

Marissa Martin

Set in an alternate version of England during the late 1990s, Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 science fiction novel, *Never Let Me Go*, considers the ethical implications of producing human clones with the intent to harvest their vital organs for human transplant. Scholars previously have approached this novel by linking biopolitical theory to Ishiguro's use of Othering, drawing from Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. While critics have addressed this relationship, they have not applied border theory alongside biopolitical theory and Otherness to better understand the condition of clones. Previous readings have not addressed the use of bordering as a way to conceptualize the struggle between human and inhuman. Border theorist Thomas Nail proposes that societies are developed through bordering, asserting that borders are formed through "a process of social division" (1). This framework includes four crucial elements for considering bordering: "the border is in between," "the border is in motion," "the border is a process of circulation," and "the border is not reducible to space" (Nail 2, 5, 7, 9). These conceptual components all speak to the exploration of social and physical divisions between human and inhuman in *Never Let Me Go*. These divisions reduce the clones to bare life and strip from them any sovereignty. The theoretical framework established by Agamben, in combination with Nail's border theory, offer a fresh understanding of "bare life" resulting from border creation.

Kathy's narration of her time at Hailsham signifies the long-instilled belief systems ingrained into the clones' sense of being, directing how they understand and fulfill their predestined purpose. Their caretakers, called "guardians," skillfully redirect the clones' curiosity about their purpose. Kathy remembers information was "timed very carefully and deliberately for everything they told us, so we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information" (82). The guardians carefully craft their statements about the clones' future to exude positivity, noting that their futures fulfill a great purpose. This inability to identify with themselves completely inhibits the clones from reaching any sense of self-actualization. Wen Guo asserts that "Hailsham is where students are never taught basic living skills except for being 'cultivated,'" while gradually being prepared to undergo their donations (2). As Guo suggests, Hailsham operates as an institution that fulfills one part of a process: rearing these children to play their role as possessions of the state. Although Hailsham attempts to create a more humane space for the clones, it fails to reject the sovereign authority's position and thus perpetuate the donation process.

Nail explains that borders are "not static; they constantly shift based on variables that establish or amend them" (8). *Never Let Me Go* reveals this element of bordering by showcasing Hailsham and their mission to "humanize" the clones—to change both the treatment and perception of clones. While their mission fails to change anything, their efforts illustrate a border in motion. This border lies in the perception surrounding the clones' origin. While the guardians seek to create a different narrative—to shift the border between human and inhuman—they fail because humans show no desire to reject their ingrained beliefs. As Nail contends: "Without regular intervention . . . borders decay and are forgotten, taken over by others, weakened, and so on" (6). *Never Let Me Go* establishes borders through the clones' upbringing, which suspends them from human society.

Kathy recollects how as children they felt a difference between Hailsham students and their guardians, even "from the people outside," yet they "hadn't understood" that difference (36). She later recounts similar feelings of knowing—"though not in any deep sense"—of their differences from others and the realization that "a long way down the line, there would be donations waiting for [them]" (69). Agamben's comments on the "taboo" in relation to *homo sacer* illustrate this separation from human society. He writes on the ambiguity surrounding *homo sacer*, noting the term lies

between “holy” and “taboo” (48–49). This conceptualization of Othering illuminates the taboo aspect of cloning: the clones are the entities that must be separated from society. The clones, though, also possess a holiness, since they are necessary for human vitality, yet this holiness fails to bring the clones any reverence. Rather than sanctify the clones, the humans dehumanize them as a way to distance themselves from the possibility of being replaced by a superior being.

Nail’s exploration of the border as “in between” applies conceptually to the clone experience: they exist in a state between human and inhuman. This border is maintained through social, psychological, and physical separation developed during the clones’ childhood. Their separation derives from the sovereign state, but also is ingrained in the minds of each person within the state. The clones are reared for a single purpose—donating vital organs—yet they display emotions and other human qualities. As Nail claims, “on one side the border touches (and is thus part of) one state, and on the other side the border touches (and is thus part of) the other. But the border is not only its sides that touch the two states; it is also a third thing: the thing in between the two sides that touch the states” (4). The clones touch the border of inhumanness in the sense that they are genetically modified and separated from human beings during their childhood. They also, however, touch the human border, because they express emotions like compassion, love, and fear. Given this duality, clones exist as the “third thing” lying “between the two sides.” They continuously approach and re-approach the border, even though they are redirected elsewhere by their eventual deaths, preventing them from ever crossing the border. Despite this redirection, the clones—as Kathy’s narration indicates—question their role, attempting to escape redirection, though their attempts are fruitless.

As Kathy matures, she wonders about her purpose in society. While they do not express it outwardly, each clone possesses some desire to understand their future organ donation and what will become of them. Near the end of the clones’ time at Hailsham, the guardians reveal the extent of the clones’ purpose:

You’ve been told, but none of you really understand. . . . None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. . . . You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created

to do. . . . you were brought into this world for a purpose, and your future, all of them, have been decided. (81)

This message invokes the students' impending death and eliminates any hope for the future. Agamben claims *homo sacer* has an existence "reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (103). Like *homo sacer*, the clones can be killed, since their life has no meaning apart from the usefulness of their organs. The death resulting from their donations creates no sense of transcendence, nor meaning for the clones or for society. Their purpose is singular: reducing mortality for humans. Hailsham itself figures as a territory outside the realm of political life, insisting on the clones' suspension from the rules of law. This space prohibits its students from obtaining any sense of identity. Robbed of citizenship, the students epitomize bare life, unable to become anything more than inhuman creatures.

At age sixteen, the clones travel to a new location called "the Cottage." This new space allows the students to deviate from their traditional upbringing and begin learning to assimilate into an environment outside of Hailsham. This transition from schooling to the Cottage—then to becoming "carers"—signals the automated process by which clones are prevented from straying from their designated purpose. While their time at the Cottage allows them to retain some freedom—they can roam around and engage with other individuals like themselves—they are still imprisoned by their role as organ donors. Guo argues that, despite their artificial freedom, the clones remain passive, "demonstrat[ing] their duty not for themselves, but for human beings" (5). Throughout their time at the Cottage, the clones never deviate from their fated purpose. Their status as individuals stripped to only bare life remains. They may struggle for autonomy, but they remain prisoners of their future.

Never Let Me Go concludes with Kathy recounting her time as a carer. She notes that while being a carer begins "positively enough," there is a constant ache that comes from being "so close to the pain and the worry" (207). She reveals, for clones who undergo the donation process, the toll that comes with becoming a carer. Despite this bleak description, Kathy continues her work and becomes her childhood friend, Ruth's carer. Kathy travels to Ruth's recovery center to offer assistance before her final donation. During her visit, Kathy comments on Ruth's complacency, and Ruth

grimly remarks, "I was pretty much ready [for donations] when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (227). The juxtaposition of the donations feeling "right" with the skeptical "supposed to" illustrates a jarring disconnect between the clones' purpose and the sense of doubt they feel. The clones live systematic, mechanistic lives that move them from one institutionalized setting to the next. They never gain a sense of who they are outside this scripted purpose, leaving them no path to a life separate from their role as donors.

As Ruth nears her final donation, she asks Kathy to bring their friend Tommy along on a farewell excursion. There Ruth mentions Tommy's and Kathy's compatibility, suggesting they fight for a deferral. This deferral process—whereby clone couples in love may be eligible to defer their organ donations—is one of the recurrent myths among the Hailsham students and becomes a growing source of curiosity in Kathy's later years. The deferment offers a break from the clones' systematic life. This deferral, as Roberto del Valle Alcalá argues, acts as a holiday during which the clones' lives "would not be part of the servile assemblage" (55). This chance to exist outside of clone servitude brings a glimmer of hope to both Kathy and Tommy, leading them to seek the truth about deferrals. As they secretly plan, doubt shrouds their mind. Speaking about the possibility of a deferral, Tommy asks: "What do we do exactly? See what I mean, Kath? Where do we go?" (244). Both characters want to escape the lives chosen for them, yet they cannot fathom anything outside the purpose they have been assigned. While this deferral fails to integrate the clones into a society from which they have been excluded, it offers them a chance to exist—at least for a limited time—for themselves.

Near the novel's conclusion, Kathy finally locates two guardians from her time at Hailsham, bringing Tommy with her to question them about deferrals. Their hope is quashed by the bleak reality Madame Marie-Claude and Miss Lucy present as they debunk the deferral myth. After hearing about Kathy's pursuit of a deferral, Miss Lucy remarks "poor creatures. What did we do to you? With all our schemes and plans?" (254). Referring to Kathy and Tommy as "poor creatures" demonstrates the clones' Otherness, but also the guardians' inability to understand the clones' experience and their fate. This scene illustrates Nail's third aspect of the border: it is a "process of circulation." Nail contends this circulation is not controlled by one entity, group, or person: "The power of the border to allow in and

out is profoundly overdetermined by a host of social forces. . . . The techniques of border circulation only have the strength that society gives them" (10). The social forces powering the border between human and inhuman include the institutional environments in which the clones are raised, the guardians at Hailsham, the state's sovereign power, and the everyday humans in their society. The institutions raising the clones manage where they go, how they interact, and when they are permitted to leave for their next destination.

These institutions perpetuate Otherness even through the language used to describe the clones' donation process. The novel uses common words like "donor," "veteran," and "deferral process" to detach the humans from the inhumane reality the clones face. This language, as Gyuris Kata points out, inhibits any meaningful interaction between humans and clones: "Language could be the only means of communication but it is precisely what prevents the occurrence of real and meaningful interaction between the two parties" (415). The words serve as management tools that maintain the border between human and inhuman. This border is closely monitored to prevent any bond between humans and clones, which allows the widespread social acceptance of the clones' treatment to remain. And this acceptance, in turn, forecloses on any erosion of the border, so the clones continue to die for humans.

The clones are excluded from any protection, so they are reduced to bare life. As Agamben notes, "every society—even the most modern—decides who its 'sacred men' will be. . . . Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (139–40). The theoretical notions developed by Agamben and Nail here coincide. Each society determines what borders to accept or refuse. The humans in this novel decide clones are the "sacred men." This logical distinction surrounding the clones' donations serve as flimsy justification for the destruction of those deemed not deserving to live. Collective awareness of the clones' life cycle precludes the clones from establishing any sense of humanity or hope for rescue, so "life ceases to be politically relevant, becomes only 'sacred life,' and can as such be eliminated without punishment" (Agamben 139). Although this border is preserved throughout the novel, the clones still attempt to cross it by seeking deferrals to escape the process that tethers them to inhumanity.

The final moments of Ishiguro's novel illustrate the clones' inability to

create a life for themselves outside of donations. As the final plank in his framework, Nail proposes that “the border is not reducible to space.” In other words, borders cannot be explained by a single physical space or geographical unit: “Society is not individuals ceaselessly moving on their own away from one another, but occurs when their motions reach a certain limit and return back on themselves in villages, cities, states, and so on” (Nail 11). The clones never move beyond the society created for them, whether it be at Hailsham, the Cottage, or the recovery centers. Following Gayatri Spivak, Francis Xavier Ng’atigwa notes “the creation of borders between those who are insiders and those who are outsiders does not occur accidentally but is intended and fueled by established social laws, principles, and practices which mark boundaries between a group and other social groups” (233). The enforcement of borders by “social laws” that distinguish insiders and outsiders promotes Othering. Both clones and humans belong to different societies; neither “ceaselessly moving on their own.” Instead, the clones and humans maintain their separate societies by consistently returning back on themselves. There is no possibility for crossing this border in either direction.

Never Let Me Go presents the clone experience through Kathy’s narrative, showcasing the clones’ reduction to bare life and Otherness through the creation of a border between human and inhuman. Tying this division to Nail’s theory of borders offers a better understanding of the clones’ dehumanization. The development of these border processes reduces the clones to bare life, indicating why no clones attempt to rebel against the system, and why no human truly advocates for their release. Each of the novel’s main characters represent the mistreated, inhuman underclass, those who are predestined to sustain privileged human life. Ultimately, *Never Let Me Go* depicts a biopolitical society created by borders that maintain the status quo. As the world becomes increasingly reliant on scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and medical breakthroughs, society must proceed with caution, lest we be swept away by exclusionary practices that diminish humanity as Madame Marie-Claude notes at the novel’s end: “I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sickness. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go” (272).

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“Beautiful and Golden”: Sodapop’s Polarizing Maternalism in S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*

Cailan Owens

S. E. Hinton’s classic coming-of-age novel *The Outsiders* (1967) revolves around a group of seven boys trying to find their place when society rejects them. Kids living on the poor side of 1960s Tulsa, the greasers form tight bonds, accepting each other when no one else does. Most of the boys have absent parents or are orphaned, so they create a family of their own grounded in brotherly love. As the novel progresses, Ponyboy, the story’s protagonist and narrator, comes of age, struggling to find a fellow greaser who shares his sensitive nature. Soofia Khan and Patricia Wachholz argue that “masculinity and manhood are traditionally defined by one’s toughness, individuality, strength, and emotional reserve,” a set of characteristics seen clearly in Ponyboy’s community (66). Like many characters in all-boy coming-of-age novels, sensitive Ponyboy feels lost in such an androcentric world, and needs guidance rooted in maternal sensitivity. Khan and Wachholz further contend Ponyboy’s masculinity “is signified by his acquisition of the gender constructions of a man—hard, competitive, and able to use his strength to attain respect and power” and he “must flee from any feminine characteristics” (67). I argue, however, that Ponyboy’s second-oldest brother, Sodapop—the gang’s representation of maternalism—becomes Ponyboy’s healthiest guide. With his maternal instincts and striking sensitivity, Sodapop proves to be a healthy stand-in parent for Ponyboy, while the eldest and manliest brother, Darry, fails to provide Ponyboy with the

love he needs. As a result, though Ponyboy has a supportive brotherhood, Sodapop's maternal qualities reveal that femininity is still necessary in the greasers' all-male world.

Stand-in parents assume the role of parent even though they have no biological or legal claim to that title. Children, though, do not have to be orphans to have stand-in parents. A non-parent can fulfill the role of a parent, taking responsibility and providing the child with an escape from their real parents. Ponyboy notes that, when his parents were alive, they acted as stand-in parents for most of the gang. For instance, Ponyboy's mother would talk to Dallas, "[making] him grin in spite of himself . . . and [keeping] him from getting into a lot of trouble" (48). Dallas tries to hide his emotions, yet his conversations with Mrs. Curtis reveal his pain and need for love. *The Outsiders* is filled with stand-in parents, but Darry Curtis is the primary figure to fill this role. Michelle Ann Abate notes Darry, "not content with being the protective, responsible, and supportive older brother for his siblings . . . also serves this function for the other members of the greasers" (52). Clare E. Caldwell similarly argues that Hinton inserts "Darry (the oldest brother) in the place where their father, and indeed mother, should have been—a surrogate parent who is compelled to forgo any dream of betterment in sacrifice for his orphaned siblings" (114). Darry serves as the principal paternal stand-in parent for both his younger brothers and for the gang.

The primary reason Sodapop emerges as the most beneficial stand-in parent for Ponyboy is that—like his mother—he possesses a vast reservoir of sensitivity, seen clearly in his crying and through his willingness to comfort Ponyboy both physically and emotionally. Abate claims "*The Outsiders* features boys who possess a nonthreatening, effeminate form of masculinity," and Sodapop is no exception (55). He cries often: at the funeral; when he loses his horse, Mickey Mouse; and when Ponyboy is in Windrixville. Ponyboy often uses the word "bawl" to describe Sodapop's crying, suggesting he is willing to express his emotions fully. Very early in the novel, Ponyboy states that Sodapop "understands everybody" (8). Ponyboy describes Sodapop as having a "finely drawn, sensitive face" and "lively, dancing, recklessly laughing eyes that can be gentle and sympathetic" (8). When Ponyboy gets jumped, Sodapop's first priority is to comfort him, holding him and saying "easy, Ponyboy. They ain't gonna hurt you no more" (8). Darry, on the other hand, scolds Ponyboy for walking alone, telling

him, "you don't ever think . . . do you ever use your head for common sense? . . . You should have carried a blade" (12). "Soda[pop] . . . takes up for [Pony]," telling Darry it was not Pony's fault the Socs beat him up (12). Sodapop does not, though, express his sensitivity only toward Ponyboy; he is often the one who explains Darry's true intentions. Sodapop knows how both Darry and Ponyboy feel, and he acts as mediator, communicating effectively and resolving everyone's concerns.

Ponyboy is drawn to Sodapop's affection because Sodapop eagerly sympathizes with him. Sodapop never scolds Ponyboy and, while some may claim a stand-in parent who refuses to punish offers limited benefit, Ponyboy seems a relatively good kid who does not need much correction—his behavior certainly does not warrant Darry's overcorrection. Rather than try to be an authority figure, Sodapop seeks to understand Ponyboy, a goal he easily accomplishes. As narrator, Ponyboy explains that he lied about not being cold, yet Sodapop, drowsy with sleep, "threw one arm across [Pony's] neck," once more showing Ponyboy how loved he is (15). Not only does this moment show that Sodapop understands Ponyboy on a deep level, but the context of the scene demonstrates great sensitivity. Abate notes that the brothers "do not simply sleep in the same bed, but snuggle together at night," suggesting Sodapop is willing to give Ponyboy the physical and emotional support he requires (55). Sodapop wants to ensure that Ponyboy feels safe after being jumped. He again sleeps with Ponyboy after Johnny's death, knowing that his friend needs the company to rest without fear—he needs someone by his side.

Sodapop is not only sensitive, he is also an excellent role model for Ponyboy. Unlike most of the greasers, Sodapop "never touches a drop" of alcohol, and he rarely smokes (8). He maintains a healthy, loving relationship with Sandy despite being so "movie-star . . . handsome" (8). And he works diligently to provide for his family. While the other greasers have selfish qualities, Sodapop rarely thinks of himself, so all his efforts benefit others. Though some may find Sodapop's status as a high-school dropout less than admirable, he drops out for Ponyboy's benefit, and encourages him to continue school, since he is intelligent. Sodapop knows he is not intellectually gifted, so by dropping out of school, he selflessly puts his brothers before him, doing what would benefit the family. He tells Ponyboy, "I'm going to marry Sandy . . . I might wait till you get out of school, though. So I can help Darry with the bills and stuff" (15). Sodapop delays his own

dreams to provide for his family. In addition, Sodapop regularly acts as the middleman between Ponyboy and Darry, maintaining familial peace. According to Dan Shi, however, "Ponyboy does not realize what Soda[pop] feels [like as] a middleman. He takes it for granted that Soda[pop] does not have any problems [or] frustrations" (670). Even though Sodapop's emotions explode toward the novel's conclusion, his feelings emerge mainly from frustration that his brothers cannot get along.

Sodapop's mannerisms reveal him as a maternal stand-in parent: he looks and acts like his mother. Ponyboy reflects that both of his brothers share features with their parents, but most importantly, Ponyboy uses his sacred word, "golden," to describe both his mother and Sodapop. When first introducing Sodapop, Ponyboy says that his hair is "dark gold," and "in the summer the sun bleaches it to a shining wheat-gold" (8). According to Ponyboy, the other greasers have plain hair colors—dark-brown, rust, jet-black—but he reserves the word "gold" for Sodapop, associating him with the sun. Similarly, when Ponyboy dreams of his mother while at the lot, he says "I remember my mother . . . beautiful and golden like Soda" (94). References to gold and the sun have a deep connection to Ponyboy's sacred space, the source of his sensitivity. By describing Sodapop as golden, Ponyboy marks him as his sunset, the personification of his sacred space.

Caldwell argues that "Ponyboy's ability to evoke pathos . . . *feels* feminine. . . . His touching description of older brother Sodapop is typical of the novel's ability to conjure familial tenderness" in such a brutal and masculine world (94). Sodapop is Ponyboy's outlet for sensitivity, providing him with an escape from his hyper-masculine surroundings. Like his mother, Sodapop allows Ponyboy and others to express their vulnerabilities without judgment. Sodapop also preserves one thing his mom always did: bake chocolate cake. Both Darry and Sodapop make chocolate cake—a staple their mother always kept in the icebox—but it is Sodapop who "always makes sure there's some in the icebox every night and if there isn't he cooks one up real quick" (80). Something as small as chocolate cake helps sustain their mother's memory and provides comfort for all three brothers.

Whereas Sodapop regularly displays his sensitivity, Darry has trouble expressing emotions due to his highly stressful life. Abate asserts that while "Darry is exceedingly smart . . . his primary role and even main identity in *The Outsiders* is as an older brother, both literally and figuratively" (52). Darry's struggle to provide for his family produces high expectations and

impatience, making him a flawed stand-in parent for Ponyboy, someone who needs to be handled gently. Darry is logical and practical—"he uses his head" according to Ponyboy—so he does not give into his dreams like Ponyboy and Sodapop (7). Ponyboy describes Darry, saying "he's got eyes that are like two pieces of pale blue-green ice. They've got a determined set to them, like the rest of him. He looks older than twenty—tough, cool, and smart. . . . He doesn't understand anything that is not plain hard fact" (7). Ponyboy's tone when describing Darry is rigid and logical; he uses simple, direct words to describe Darry, while he uses softer, more creative words for Sodapop. Most importantly, however, Darry's lack of sensitivity prevents him from handling conflict effectively. After Ponyboy falls asleep in the lot, Darry's worry turns to rage. When Ponyboy tries to explain he fell asleep accidentally, "Darry wheeled around and slapped [him] so hard that it knocked [him] against the door" (40).

Darry, unlike Sodapop, actively avoids physical comfort during emotional situations, exhibiting a lack of sensitivity. When the gang first finds Ponyboy after he has been jumped, Darry "jammed his fists in his pockets," then asked if Ponyboy was hurt badly (7). In this moment Ponyboy needs the physical attention Sodapop provides, but by placing his hands in his pockets, Darry shows he is unwilling to love Ponyboy in that manner. Darry is not nearly as sensitive as Sodapop or Ponyboy: at his parents' funeral, Darry did not cry, but "only stood there, his fists in his pockets" (75). When the three Curtis brothers reunite, Sodapop and Ponyboy embrace enthusiastically, but once more Darry's "fists were jammed in his pockets," even though "tears were running down his cheeks" (75). Touched by Darry's crying, Ponyboy hugs him around the waist, but Darry only rubs his head, refusing to hug him back. Shi notes that, in this scene, Darry "has the 'same helpless and pleading look' . . . as he does [at] the funeral of their parents. . . . All of a sudden, Ponyboy realizes that his brother does care about him" (670). Darry obviously loves Ponyboy, yet his lack of sensitivity makes it difficult for him to express his love, so he merely jams his fists in his pockets.

Darry resents missing out on life, placing extra pressure on Ponyboy to meet Darry's expectations, which in turn strains their relationship. Ponyboy concludes that, aside from money, "the only reason Darry couldn't be a Soc was us . . . Darry was too smart to be a greaser . . . And I was kind of sorry" (96). This scene foreshadows the moment Darry approaches Paul Holden—a

Soc and an old friend—at the rumble. Ponyboy says Paul “was looking at Darry with an expression I couldn’t quite place, but disliked. Contempt? Pity? Hate? All three? Why? Because Darry was standing there representing all of us. . . . Darry had a right to be jealous; he was ashamed to be on our side” (108). As Shi argues, Darry “is deprived of his college education though he is smart . . . because of his family obligation . . . taking good care of his brothers and making . . . ends meet” (670). For this reason, Shi explains, Darry has “high hopes for Ponyboy whom he believes will never fail to live up to his expectation, which is beyond Ponyboy’s understanding” (670). Darry can never go to college nor continue with football, so he abandons his dreams and focuses on his work, expecting the same from Ponyboy so that he and Sodapop will not have to endure the shame Darry feels. He has the pressure of the entire family upon his shoulders, which forces him to take life very seriously, something Ponyboy adamantly resents.

In addition, while Mrs. Curtis was “wise and firm, like Darry,” Darry’s firmness is much harsher than his mother’s (94). Darry frequently excuses Sodapop, but he demands perfection from Ponyboy, who reflects that “if I brought home B’s, [Darry] wanted A’s, and if I got A’s, he wanted to make sure they stayed A’s” (12). As a result, Ponyboy feels he can never please Darry, a view not even Sodapop can dispel, though he tries, saying “when Darry hollers at you . . . he don’t mean nothin’. He’s just got more worries than somebody his age ought to. . . . He’s really proud of you ‘cause you’re so brainy. It’s just because you’re the baby—I mean, he loves you a lot” (15). Shi claims “Ponyboy does not understand why [Darry] hollers at him, which causes misunderstanding between [the] siblings. . . . He regards [Darry] with his own way of thinking, failing to understand him from [Darry’s] point of view” (670). Shi clarifies what Ponyboy does not understand: Darry’s “stern attitude towards him and requirement of him are other kinds of deep love, care and affection” (670). Darry sees Ponyboy’s potential, but instead of encouraging him or expressing pride, he converts his pride into the pressure he places on Ponyboy.

While Darry may be Ponyboy’s legal guardian, Sodapop is clearly the better stand-in parent, due to his sensitive, maternal disposition. Ponyboy’s world is full of masculinity—the pressure to be a man—which dissuades him from expressing the spectrum of emotions he feels. Instead of crumbling under the pressure like other characters, Sodapop sustains Ponyboy’s sensitive nature, allowing him to come of age without the brutal realities of

masculinity overwhelming him. Sodapop expresses his emotions in a distinctly maternal manner, directly combatting Darry's masculine, hardened, and logical outlook on life—a life in which his hands are always shoved into his pockets. While Ponyboy easily loses himself among the tough greasers, Sodapop allows him to express his feelings properly. Sodapop provides him with a stand-in parent who is not strictly tough, but who cries and embraces sensitivity. Sodapop's consideration and genuine care for others show that he loves everyone and receives that love in return, suggesting it is Sodapop's maternal qualities that make him so dearly loved. Sodapop is willing to entertain Ponyboy's dreams, while encouraging him to seek new and greater opportunities; his ultimate goal is to make sure everyone is happy, and for everything to be beautiful and golden.

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“Joy that so throbs in each throbbing vein”:
Christina Rossetti’s Re-Writing of the
Nightingale in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*

Mary Emmerling

In the poems “Dream-Land,” “Another Spring,” “Song [When I am dead my dearest],” and “Twilight Calm”—from her volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862)—Christina Rossetti constructs a multifaceted depiction of the nightingale to simultaneously reflect and challenge Romantic poets’ use of the nightingale to reject or silence women. The nightingale, a literary image made most popular during the Romantic era by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, often carried strong gendered connotations, touting the male poet as the triumphant troubadour and the woman as the silent muse. In this paper, I argue Rossetti uses the traditional image of the nightingale to confront directly the male-dominated tradition that establishes men as creators and relegates women to the role of silent, dependent muses.

Rossetti deploys various depictions of the nightingale in the four poems I analyze in this paper, and I use an intra-textual framework to study the thematic connections amongst them to elucidate the significance of these links and to reveal a deep layer of commentary that does not emerge by reading Rossetti’s poems individually. This type of intra-textual reading does not expect the volume to present a coherent plot, nor entirely consistent perspectives; rather, it depends on both connections and inconsistencies within the poetic arrangement to construct a more complex understanding of how Rossetti’s specific cultural context influences her work as she reflects,

contradicts, and comments on that culture. Intra-textuality emphasizes the internal connections—the conversations among Rossetti's poems—and reveals Rossetti's varied, echoing portrayal of the nightingale. Through this echoic figuring, Rossetti destabilizes traditional gendered depictions of the nightingale and offers an alternative that explores the potential for women to defy social mores and shed culturally imposed expectations of dependency.

Three major Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats—employ the nightingale prominently in their poetry, influencing the motif's significance in later literary traditions. Elizabeth Fay claims the nightingale has been consistently tangled in artistic discussions of the female voice: "[I]t is in the nineteenth century that the female voice the nightingale represents both takes on a new threat and is newly threatened" (214). Fay describes the development of the nightingale trope throughout the Romantic Era into the Victorian Era, tracing "the 'conversation,' but not direct influence, of poems that mythicize and dis-comprehend the female poetic voice, and of poems that respond to the call of that uncomprehended but engulfed voice" (213–14). She begins with Coleridge's "Lewti, or the Circassian Love-Chaunt" (1798)—a work that evolved from an unfinished Wordsworth poem—to demonstrate the masculine domination of the "troubadour convention," in which "the male poet sings because he is inspired by the beauty of his mistress whom he desires both aesthetically and sexually" (Fay 214). This tradition of the male poet gazing at the female form is often concentrated in images of the nightingale, the bird often representing the woman herself.

Fay continues her assessment of Romantic uses of the nightingale, discussing Coleridge's "To the Nightingale" (1796) and "The Nightingale" (1798). In "To the Nightingale," Coleridge apostrophizes the nightingale, yet "invokes the mistress without ever talking to her" (Fay 216). In this way, Coleridge participates in the troubadourian convention by writing the female voice, yet only speaks about her, disallowing her independent responses. In "The Nightingale," however, Coleridge disrupts the traditional nightingale image: "Tis the merry Nightingale / That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates / With fast thick warble in his delicious notes" (43–45). About these lines, Fay points out that "the bird . . . is not sad but

joyous, not slow but quick, not female but male" (216). By writing the bird as a joyous male, Coleridge rejects the female voice even further.

Fay argues these portrayals of the nightingale shift when Keats takes up the nightingale trope some twenty years later in "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819). Keats's nightingale evolves—and in some ways contradicts—Coleridge's, as the poem deploys "the troubadourian monologic convention" and turns to the "mythic, single, and female" nightingale (Fay 218, 217). Though Keats reclaims the traditional image of the nightingale, contrasting with Coleridge's portrayals, he only uses the feminine nightingale as a contrast to his poetry's masculine nature. As Fay claims: "In his nightingale ode, a poem which effectually addresses itself and not the bird or a lady, Keats sings not of a mistress who will sweeten his melancholy but of his melancholy itself" (218). By representing his nightingale in such a way, Keats propagates the masculine poetic tradition. Rossetti, in a similar way, taps into the canonical history of the nightingale as context for her modified use of the image.

Considering the nightingale's literary history and Rossetti's familiarity with—and appreciation for—Romantic literature, it is unsurprising Rossetti chooses this trope as foundation for her commentary on poetic representations of women. She especially loved the work of Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge, reading Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" when she was a young teenager, and writing a sonnet in praise of Keats when she was eighteen (D'Amico 11). Diane D'Amico claims that, while Rossetti responded frequently in her writing to the Romantic predecessors she so deeply respected, her use of "the nightingale's song is, perhaps, the most obvious Romantic echo" in her poetry (11). Along with her analysis of Rossetti's nightingale in this poem, D'Amico discusses the gender dynamics of women authors interacting with tropes and traditions established by men, suggesting Rossetti relies heavily on Christianity to carve space in a tradition that allows little room for her. This dynamic was not created by the Romantics, of course, but is a much older tradition. By confronting the Romantics role in this tradition, however, Rossetti also confronts the gender bias that influenced Romanticism, "a tradition that tells her as a woman she is to inspire poetry not to create it" (D'Amico 9).

Rossetti develops and occasionally contradicts Keats through her depictions of the nightingale in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, ultimately giving the nightingale a new voice in the canon. Three of Rossetti's poems in

particular—"Dream-Land," "Another Spring," and "Song [When I am dead my dearest]"—include the image of a nightingale singing her song as dusk falls, but singing sadly and painfully, for she always sings alone. In "Dream-Land," Rossetti writes about a woman who dies and enters the dream-land of heaven, but must pass through twilight first: "She left the rosy morn, / She left the fields of corn, / For twilight cold and lorn" (9–11). Here, not only does Rossetti emphasize her reiteration of the Keatsian nightingale by echoing his lines about the despondent Ruth standing "amid the alien corn," she also connects the cold twilight to danger for young maidens (Keats 67). The speaker's next direct mention of the nightingale continues to show twilight as a threat to women:

Thro' sleep, as thro' a veil,
She sees the sky look pale,
And hears the nightingale,
That sadly sings. (13–16)

Though no clear reason for the nightingale singing sadly appears in this stanza, the connection between the bird and other threats to the woman's safety make it an intriguing medium for communicating the plight of the solitary Victorian woman.

In "Another Spring," Rossetti makes it much clearer the nightingale is sad because it is alone:

If I might see another Spring,
I'd listen to the daylight birds
That build their nests and pair and sing,
Nor wait for mateless nightingale. (9–12)

In this stanza, the speaker scoffs at the nightingale because it is mateless, choosing not to waste time listening to a lonely bird. The poem signals the connections between female sexuality and the passage of the seasons in Rossetti's poetry, suggesting any hope for the speaker to enjoy "another" spring precludes being alone. Waiting for another spring requires a partner, because most of Rossetti's mateless women expire with the cold weather. So, the nightingale represents not only the mateless woman, but also serves as a warning to the woman hoping for a sexual spring.

Later in this group of poems, "Song [When I am dead my dearest]" again connects the evening to the solitary nightingale, though this time the nightingale is sad and lonely, but also in pain:

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain. (9–12)

The nightingale's physical pain while singing its solitary song emphasizes the consequences—now, not merely social—of being a woman who has not fulfilled the cultural duties of marriage and motherhood. Elizabeth Barrett Browning similarly marks this poetic nightingale's painful quality in her poem "Bianca Among the Nightingales," published the same year as Rossetti's volume. In Barrett Browning's poem, the main character, Bianca, witnesses her husband violently silence another woman, then hears the event echo in the nightingale's songs, which eventually drives her to madness. This tale of love and madness centralizes the nightingales as provocateurs, their sounds being "not soothing song, neither joyful nor melancholy, but the harsh racket of falsehood" (Fay 222). Fay claims Rossetti recognized Barrett Browning's efforts to reverse troubadourian, masculine tradition, but disagreed with her methods. While Barrett Browning wrote about love instead of loss, Rossetti makes her nightingale polyvalent and, as Fay claims, more political: "Rossetti's apprehension [was] that Barrett Browning has incorrectly reversed the troubadour tradition . . . that love is interpersonal and therefore political, and that poetry is about both" (223). Responding to Barrett Browning, Rossetti's nightingale represents not just the female voice, nor simple love or loss; rather her figure of the bird breaks with tradition and contains multiple meanings. Rossetti's poetic songbird represents both the mirror of the woman and the woman herself; a reflection of the establishment and a radical challenge to it. Her politics, religion, and poetry are inseparable, and an intra-textual reading of the nightingales in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* reveals a complex undercurrent of commentary.

This intra-textual reading becomes especially important when examining "Twilight Calm," since—to use Dolores Rosenblum's term—the "echoic" iterations of the nightingale in "Dream-Land," "Another Spring," and "Song

[When I am dead my dearest]" emphasize Rossetti's deviation from the depictions in "Twilight Calm" (2). In this poem, Rossetti presents both light and dark images—natural and unnatural—to complicate her other representations of the nightingale and to introduce her subversive response to both the masculine literary tradition and Victorian cultural norms. Initially, the poem appears an ode to the fading light of day, yet each stanza's end incorporates darker language and images, suggesting a more subversive commentary. The poem's first stanza presents a forest as the sun begins to set:

Oh pleasant eventide!
 Clouds on the western side
 Grow grey and greyer hiding the warm sun:
 The bees and birds, their happy labours done,
 Seek their close nests and bide. (1–5)

This stanza paints a calm sunset—"pleasant eventide"—where birds and bees trade daily labors for sleep. In the volume's other poems, however, twilight is a time of danger. Young women who loiter at this time of day end up in situations beyond their control, accelerating beauty's decline and corrupting their purity. Though twilight initially appears "pleasant" in this stanza, Rossetti still describes it as cold and grey, and, given its appearance throughout the volume, twilight may not be as "pleasant" as it seems.

The following stanzas, which describe animal life, replicate this initial pattern: positive beginning with a subversively negative ending. Brad Sullivan discusses these contradictions in "Twilight Calm," claiming Rossetti's word choice "reveals a 'subtext,' a threatening undercurrent" that "works to develop a remarkable tension which opposes and complicates the central idea of 'calm'" (231–32). Sullivan identifies the same pattern—positive, then negative—which creates a foreboding atmosphere:

The gnats whirl in the air,
 The evening gnats; and there
 The owl opes broad his eyes and wings to sail
 For prey; the bat wakes; and the shell-less snail
 Comes forth, clammy and bare. (26–30)

Repeating the pattern, this stanza describes animals emerging once the

sun begins to set; the end of the stanza, though, becomes sinister. The owl and the bat begin to hunt for prey and the snail emerges without its shell, becoming more like a slug and leaving itself defenseless against predators. Rossetti introduces a sense of vulnerability immediately before the stanzas that proclaim the nightingale's strength, inverting its earlier representation:

Hark! that's the nightingale,
Telling the selfsame tale
Her song told when this ancient earth was young:
So echoes answered when her song was sung
In the first wooded vale.

We call it love and pain
The passion of her strain;
And yet we little understand or know:
Why should it not be rather joy that so
Throbs in each throbbing vein? (31-40)

Describing this nightingale as an ancient creature joyfully singing its song just after emphasizing the helplessness of the surrounding nature destabilizes Rossetti's previous representations of the nightingale. In the first three nightingale poems, the lonely nightingale is just as, if not more, vulnerable than the surrounding nature. Here, however, the single nightingale emerges superior, strong, able to sing about things other than love or pain, even though it has no partner—it might be joyful despite not having a mate. In "Twilight Calm," the nightingale deviates from its earlier role, and Rossetti's subversion of the masculine tradition does more than simply invert a bird's portrayals. As D'Amico notes: "She did not have to imagine herself a male poet's muse or the voice of mother nature; she could be a heavenly singer, answering the earthly nightingale's 'old complaining tale'" (13). No longer does Rossetti want us to pity the bird; rather she invites us to consider the potential independence of its solitude, and, perhaps, even the power in its solo voice. Ultimately, Rossetti's curation and manipulation of such a traditional image challenges a masculine poetic tradition, insists on the potential independence of single women, and suggests the power in their subaltern voices.

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Orientalism and the Construction of Victorian Identity in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Series

Amber Gaudet

Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, appeared in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in 1887. At the height of the Victorian era, the tale of a clever English detective facing off against strange maladies and dangerous foes—often products of Eastern exoticism—was well-received in the rapidly expanding British Empire. With increasing territory came increasing exposure to new cultures, however, creating anxieties in imperialist England about the invasive values of foreign holdings. Without English imperialism, Holmes's adventures might not have been so popular: Doyle both played off of and was a product of Victorian anxieties about cultural invasion, reinforcing the use of Otherism to validate British culture and its models of self-perceived progress and civility.

Victorian beliefs about the superiority of British civilization are widely known. English citizens' confidence that they were the smartest, most civilized, most advanced race of people was necessary to allay guilt over the cruelties of colonization, which many Brits viewed as the nation's responsibility: "The often brutal effects of colonial domination were rationalized by a pseudo-science purporting to demonstrate the inferiority of dark-skinned peoples and by a keenly felt, much-encouraged sense of racial and cultural superiority over other peoples" (Black et al. 510). The "white man's burden," as Rudyard Kipling famously called it, excused any mistreatment of colonized people and justified the decimation of "inferior"

cultures. The English regarded it as their unique responsibility to tame as many “savages” as possible by expanding the British Empire. The rise of the novel itself—particularly genre fiction—was also a product of England’s expanding empire during the Victorian era, making Holmes’s popularity possible. Increases in technology popularized train travel, including to distant lands, such as India:

So important was the advent of railway travel to the development of English daily life, railway stations even became essential to the book trade and the spread of leisure reading; from the 1850s onward, book stalls catering to thousands of daily commuters began to stock their shelves with newspapers, magazines, and cheap, popular fiction, which became known as “railway literature.” (Black et al. 525)

Without these long journeys, it’s likely neither the novel’s popularity, nor Doyle’s popularity, would have risen as quickly as they did during the Victorian era.

The popularity of novels and travel narratives—particularly toward the end of the nineteenth century—also emerged, in part, from Britain’s obsession with the exotic Other. Though support in England for imperialism grew during the period, it did so at a rate reversely correlated to the strength of the Empire, whose power on the world stage was beginning to slip:

The imperial romances of some authors were a symptom of the anxieties surrounding Britain’s increasingly tenuous grip on its empire. Whereas early and mid-century Victorian fiction tended to imagine the Empire as a fairly static, unknown space to which characters can be exiled in the interests of narrative closure, late-century fiction often represented the Empire in darker, Gothic terms. (Black et al. 514)

While in previous decades the British were self-assured about their role as guardians of cultural and social refinement, the changing socio-political landscape and evolving views on race relations threatened Britain’s position as the world’s greatest power.

The influence of imperialism in Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes tales,

however, was significant even within the Victorian period. Doyle achieved immense popularity in the last two decades of Victoria's reign, allowing him to quit work as a doctor and write full-time. Doyle wrote many short stories and three book-length works during this period: *The Sign of Four* (1890), *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894). These final decades of the nineteenth century were also the height of British imperialism: "In England, popular support for the Empire reached its zenith in the 1880s and 1890s as Britain accelerated the pace of its drive to increase its imperial acquisitions to compete with other European powers and with the United States" (Black et al. 512). As imperialism intensified, so too did the need for reassurance of Britain's place in the world and its responsibility to cultures then viewed as "less-developed"—a reassurance readers no doubt found in Sherlock Holmes.

As telling as the Orientalism in the Holmes tales during the Victorian era is, the absence of similar tropes in the works he produced after 1901 is more revealing. Using anthropological themes, Doyle reinforced popular ideas of hereditary or racial superiority in the *fin de siècle*, a unique set of social concerns prevalent during the end of the Victorian era and its rapid imperialization (McNabb 728). In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson references Drebber's "baboon-like countenance" of "the most malignant type," reflecting atavistic philosophies popularized by anthropologist Francis Galton (qtd. in McNabb 734). Galton's theory on inheritance posited that abnormal traits, such as being remarkably tall or short, would regress to average after several generations (McNabb 735). Doyle readily applied Galton's theories to criminality, propagating the notion that criminal deviancy was a result of inherent, hereditary traits prevalent among purportedly exotic Others.

For instance, Doyle often associated illicit drug use with the East. In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes's work on the case of Mary Morstan and the Indian thieves reveals Holmes's drug use:

In disapproving of the drugs Holmes uses, Watson speaks within the context of ongoing medical debates about opium, morphine, and cocaine, all seen as narcotics and popularly, if wrongly, associated with "opium eating." Both the late-Victorian physician and the general public perceived such addicting drugs as contaminations emanating

from alien and primitive lands. . . . Watson's disapproval simply furthers the mythology that identified cocaine and morphine as a threat to all things British, rational and moral. (Frank 58)

In this and other scenes, Doyle associates English corruption with the influence of exotic lands, linking the foreign to the treacherously tempting in ways that reinforce English perceptions of other races as primitive and amoral.

Doyle similarly draws connections between contemporaneous understandings of the invasive and the exotic to reinforce such prejudices. He uses maladies as metaphors for English anxieties about how contact with foreign, non-white nations might change British society for the worse, likening "barbarism" to something contagious:

Mrs. Hudson first describes Holmes's illness as a typical contagion he "brought . . . back with him" from an unhealthy part of town. . . . When Watson visits Holmes's sickroom he finds the tool Culverton Smith intended to use to infect Holmes—an ivory box concealing a spring like "a viper's tooth" . . . and the disease becomes both a poison and a weapon, transmitted by this device identified with Africa (ivory) and Asia (home of the "Indian swamp adder," the other "viper" that figures prominently in the Holmes canon). (Harris 448)

Not only does Doyle use diseases and poisons supposedly of foreign origin to associate the exotic with the unclean, he also uses them as metaphor for the cultural invasion he feared. By doing so, Doyle constructs Holmes as a moral and rational being. Through Holmes—a pop culture hero of the era—Doyle demonstrates that, although Eastern influence is invasive and contagious, it is also containable, given the detective's unique set of logic, intellect, and worldliness (Harris 448). Drawing from the English's view of themselves as intellectually superior to foreign Others, Doyle's metaphors and the quintessentially English Sherlock-Holmes-as-savior were particularly effective for easing the anxieties Doyle himself perpetuated.

Doyle's depictions of Holmes rely heavily on his interest in anthropology and his views on increased exposure to foreign cultures resulting

from England's expanding empire: "Doyle believed that national difference should be abandoned in favor of racial unity and that England and America should become one nation. . . . He was one of many avid supporters of a movement that clamored for Anglo-American reunion and the federation of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Thomas). Doyle's belief that whites were a superior race even prompted him to advocate for the renunciation of British citizenship and immigration to the U.S. if doing so unified Anglo-Saxons (Thomas). He justified this belief through his interest in emerging anthropological and ethnographical theories that claimed race was linked to ability, intelligence, and character. In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle employs his interest in Indian ethnography—which "set . . . racial, caste, and tribal types in authoritative taxonomies [via] the Indian census"—in his descriptions of the Andaman Islanders (McBratney 153). The novel describes these exotic Others in some detail:

They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small. So intractable and fierce are they, that all the efforts of the British officials have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast. (69–70)

In this passage, and many others like it in the Holmes narratives, Doyle deploy images of the Victorian white savior and the corrupt foreigner to advance his views on white supremacy.

Doyle's use of the foreigner-as-invader motif is equally apparent in his telling descriptions of England. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle describes London—England's bustling capital and the hub of imperial progress—as a place being overrun by outside waste. As Kate Thomas argues:

Doyle . . . establishes both London and Watson as imperial bodies "under siege." Watson's metaphor is certainly one of invasion: the capital is a "pool" into which contaminated colonial waterways flow and introduce sepsis. And Watson's own body has also been invaded:

a Jezail bullet has pierced the soldier-surgeon's shoulder, leaving him with a shattered bone, a grazed artery, and, most damagingly, "shaken nerves."

By painting London as a town "under siege," Doyle expounds his belief that nationhood is based less on geographic boundaries and more on race and values. Doyle thus positions white Westerners as the elite ruling class of the Victorian world who are threatened by their distant, yet invasive subjects.

Doyle is certainly no outlier in late Victorian England. Scholars—perhaps most famously Edward Said—demonstrate how British thinkers juxtaposed the customs of foreign cultures against the supposed moral rectitude of Victorian society. These conceptions of morality are, of course, closely tied to Christianity: "Orientalism [relies] on Christianity to establish the image of an immoral East, and Christianity [uses] Orientalism to supply it with the need to moralize the world . . . for [Orientalist] cultural discourse to function, the prejudicial image of an irreligious and barbaric other—the Orient—is essential to the affirmation of the virtuous and civilized Victorian cultural identity." (Yue 1). Holmes, the white savior, can champion Anglo-Saxon, Victorian culture only by defeating the corrupted Other—he would have been less pacifying to readers who shared Doyle's anxieties about Britain's expanding empire had he been battling home-grown enemies.

Holmes's English villains were predictably associated with or corrupted by the East. In Doyle's 1892 "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," the antagonist, Dr. Roylott, works in India as a doctor, marrying Helen Stoner's mother there. After returning to England, Roylott maintains ties with the barbaric East, terrorizing his good English neighbors with exotic beasts: "He has a passion also for Indian animals, which are sent over to him by a correspondent, and he has at this moment a cheetah and a baboon, which wander freely over his grounds, and are feared by the villagers almost as much as their master" (217). The murder weapon itself is an Indian swamp adder, able to kill its victims within seconds of biting them. So too is Roylott's white morality sullied by his association with "gypsies"—Roma—an ethnic group that "originated in the Punjab region of northern India as a nomadic people and entered Europe between the eighth and tenth

centuries C.E.” (“Roma”). Contrasted with the cultural purity of one of England’s richest and noblest families, Roylott appears clearly a product of the corruption allegiance with non-white races brings.

Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series is a unique product of the Victorian era with a direct relationship to Britain’s expanding empire. Like many Victorians, Doyle was anxious about the perceived ill effects of exposure to other—in his eyes, lesser—cultures. By associating non-white foreigners with crime, illicit drug use, and contagion, Doyle stokes Victorian fears. The Holmes tales reflects Doyle’s allegiance to the idealized fantasy of an Anglo-Saxon nation, which he believed was necessary to combat the increasing erosion of white Western culture. By feeding Victorian anxieties and advancing his political and ethnographic beliefs, Doyle figures Holmes as a white savior, juxtaposed against the failings—both moral and intellectual—of his savage adversaries. In this way, Doyle is complicit in—and evidence of—the Orientalism Victorians used to validate their identities; he situates his detectives narratives in the atmosphere of fear and the lingering possibility of continuing imperial expansion that defined the Victorian era.

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“Folks like me on the job from 9 to 5”:
Marxism and Feminism in Dolly
Parton’s *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs*

Emma Turner

As a genre, country music has functioned historically as a vehicle for negotiating the lives of working-class subjects. There is an ongoing conversation in popular culture about the commentary on the working class and women’s agency in Dolly Parton’s *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* (1980). Based on this album, many—from contemporary music critics to internet meme creators—call Parton a “woke Marxist” or “Comrade Dolly Parton.” Parton’s purported Marxism is rooted in her musical career and how her work has resonated with generations of working-class Americans who see themselves in her lyrics. More specifically, the lyrics on *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* replicate the divide between, on one hand, the upper and middle classes, and on the other, the Southern American lower-class. Three songs on the album—“9 to 5,” “The House of the Rising Sun,” and “Sing for the Common Man”—reflect on U.S. working-class conditions. Parton layers this class-based social commentary with gender politics. Although most critics approach Parton’s music focusing on either class or gender, I argue the intersection of the two is crucial for understanding her work’s resonance with the American working class. Not only does *9 to 5 and Odd Jobs* reveal Marxist, class-conscious values, but as an album situated within a genre dominated by men for generations, it offers a new perspective on the struggles—and marginalization—of women workers.

Country music has traditionally been invested in the ideal of the

American dream, often demonstrating how the dream has affected those pursuing it. Nadine Hubbs asserts that country music has emphasized "human, moral value trump[ing] economic value, so working people come out on top" (57). Hubbs writes of the cultural constructions surrounding the American dream and the power dynamics between social classes, arguing that "the pivotal assumption behind conservative dismissals of class resentment is that American society is a meritocracy granting citizens equal opportunity to pursue wealth, power, and happiness: those who lack the gumption, intelligence, or willingness to take risks or do the hard work that success requires have only themselves to blame" (58). As a genre, country music questions the mythos of equal opportunity by lyrically representing working-class subjects. Hubbs provides several different examples of country songs that include class commentary. For instance, Johnny Cash's "Oney," in which a worker fantasizes about revenge against "an autocratic, overbearing foreman" for whom he has worked for twenty-nine years (Hubbs 56). Cash—a country music icon—addresses the conflict between laborer and supervisor, elucidating class disparities and the working-class response to them. Similarly, Hubbs claims Garth Brooks's "Friends in Low Places" narrates a "high-spirited revenge that resonates on class-status levels beyond the particular situation" (57). Brooks's song suggests it is more valuable "to get high on whiskey and beer with low-placed friends than to succeed in belonging among the champagne-sipping fancy people" (Hubbs 57). Parallel class dynamics appear in both Brooks's and Cash's songs. Labor defines the working class, while the upper class is notable for the absence of labor. Brooks's "low places" are spaces of labor, denigrated by the upper class, but, for workers, essential for building a better life within their own class or achieving upward social mobility. Working-class labor signifies the struggle to achieve the American dream.

The working-class concerns so frequently central to country music belong to a much larger philosophical conversation rooted in Karl Marx's theory of class relations and labor. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he challenges nineteenth-century class dynamics and the treatment of workers. According to Marx and co-author Friedrich Engels, modern society is divided into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (10). The division of society into these two classes produces—amongst other effects—workers' alienation: they

no longer work to fulfill their own needs, but instead only for exchange value. Marx and Engels write that capitalism in industrialized society “has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade” (12). According to the two, working-class subjects are used for their labor; they are exploited to produce a product that benefits the owners of the means of production rather than the proletariat. The creation of machinery to aid in labor has increased product output, but also has constrained workers within their positions. Workers are commodified for their labor, alienated from their product, and alienated from other workers. Ultimately, working-class people are only viewed in terms of use-value, so more workers are produced to sustain the changing landscape of labor and capital. Subjects in the vulnerable position of laborer are grouped together by their role as workers, but this placement creates a collective identity among them—an identity through which they recognize themselves as members of the working-class.

Working-class identity finds expression in multiple cultural forms, including country music. In “Sing for the Common Man,” Parton connects the struggles of the working-class American South to music designed to represent the region, expanding on the division between the contemporaneous bourgeoisie and proletariat. The song focuses on the exploitation of the working class by the upper class: “You know the working man / He builds what others plan / So, everyone of us should sing his story.” Here, Parton calls for celebrating the history of workers among their own class, rather than allowing the bourgeoisie to write proletarian history. She expands upon this theme by providing a brief history of the working subject:

Day after day
He keeps working away
In offices, factories, and farms
Year after year
He sheds tear after tear
He will provide, he will survive.

Parton represents a working class subject to ceaseless labor. Much like Marx and Engels, she flags rising industrialization’s contribution to the insatiable demand for work. She characterizes the labor as something done

for exchange value, as the worker's tears show how little he enjoys the work. The worker's determination to maintain stable living and working conditions comes from necessity. The song notes, "He paid for the song with the sweat of his brow": the worker's history, therefore, includes his ability to perform labor, to provide his own means of survival, and to purchase his own lyrical history. Note, however, the song's male subject, a deviation from other of Parton's works. She is concerned about the plight of working-class American men, but she is more interested in expressing the anguish of working women.

Parton's songs appear to reference Marxist themes, but I argue they also create an inseparable bond between the subject's gender and her vulnerability as a member of the working class. Leigh Edwards argues Parton offers a "feminist critique of visual stereotypes of women and inequitable treatment of them in the business sphere" (125). She claims Parton's feminist rhetoric challenges the "exploitative labor conditions" to which women are subject and that, in its original context, *9 to 5* "[promoted] a feminist effort to gain workplace reform" (Edward 124, 131).

Much feminist theory focuses on how women have historically been defined as Other, thus justifying their subjugated place in patriarchal society. For example, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the subject is always defined as male, with women denied full subjectivity as "the Other": "One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be" (xix). Women inhabit a lesser place and are denied full existence. Much like Parton celebrates working-class history in "Sing for the Common Man," de Beauvoir explains that women's history cannot be celebrated because it has been stripped away, denied at every turn—a result of being cast as fundamentally Other. Furthermore, de Beauvoir argues, "women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat" (xxv). Here, de Beauvoir lays the groundwork for the intersection of Marxism and feminism. Women face formidable barriers for organizing movements against patriarchy, because they often lack unifying factors beyond their sex. Women thus are regularly marginalized within the proletariat without regard for the complex intersectionality of their gendered identity. These additional burdens exacerbate

women's place as Other—both within patriarchy and within Marxist, class-conscious political movements.

Often described as one of her most substantial class analyses, Parton's hit song "9 to 5" describes the life of a worker who "tumble[s] outta bed" to join the "folks like [themselves] on the job from 9 to 5." "9 to 5" is the title song on what critics have called a "labor concept album" (Edwards 123). It details the woes of a laboring subject, describing work as "service and devotion." Gesturing toward the commodification of labor, the song speaks of workers as "just a step on the boss-man's ladder"—the work is performed in service to the owner of the means of production. Additionally, the system in place reinforces the privilege of the powerful: "It's a rich man's game no matter what they call it / And you spend your life puttin' / money in his wallet." Here, Parton addresses the alienation of labor, emphasizing how proletarian work only helps the bourgeoisie maintain their control over the means of production. The song continues: "They just use your mind and you never get the credit / It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it." The workers' alienation is created by the bourgeoisie controlling their work and its products. The "exploitative labor conditions" specific to women are found in the song's opening, which includes the sound of a typewriter as a percussion instrument, gesturing toward the secretarial industry, an historically gendered occupation (Edwards 124). The source of these exploitative conditions is gendered through the song's use of "man" and "his," signaling the gendered workplace inequities during the time Parton is writing—an environment where women frequently were placed in subordinate positions.

"The House of the Rising Sun"—a traditional folk song Parton recasts by placing it in the context of this album—provides further commentary on the intersection of class and gender, addressing capitalist exploitation and its relationship to prostitution. The song ties monetary gain to the "ruin[ing] of many a good girl" by acts that are heavily implied, but not explicitly detailed. The "ruin" Parton references is a product of spiritual defeat and the theft of women's right to earned capital, no matter how they earn money. Women are alienated from the product of their labor: capital. In the song's lyrics, it appears clear that a fair economy is no guarantee for young women:

My father he was a gambler
Mother died when I was young

And I've worked since then
to please the men
at the house of the rising sun.

In these lines, Parton associates the song's female speaker with prostitution, so the commodity produced by her work is the laborer herself: she offers herself as the product. Women's vulnerability within the working-class places them at a disadvantage, as gender and class combine to create formidable barriers in a society that privileges the bourgeoisie and patriarchy. This traditional folk ballad demonstrates the discriminatory forces of gender and class affecting the livelihood of working-class women.

"9 to 5," "The House of the Rising Sun," and "Sing for the Common Man" are indicative of a larger conversation taking place in U.S. culture about class under capitalism, a conversation that also demands focus on gender. The intersections of class and gender appear throughout Parton's works and, more broadly, the country music genre. Her commentaries on class and gender are inseparable and carry a particular significance within country music's tradition of representing working-class subjects. The genre has the ability to elucidate the intersections of oppressive struggles through storytelling. Parton adds a critical perspective to country music by creating an image of the working-class subject—in all its diversity—with whom working-class listeners can identify.

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Navigating a Posthuman World in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Laura Rice

David Foster Wallace's 1,079-page *Infinite Jest* is known for its complexity: the novel's fragmented narrative structure, nearly 100 pages of footnotes, and intricate storylines are just a few of the reasons. In a 1993 interview, however, Wallace summed up the text in just a few words: "really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" (McCaffery 26). *Infinite Jest* takes place in a dystopian world—including the mutative region of waste known as the Great Concavity—populated by nonhuman entities who ravage humanity. Its depictions of human characters' navigating this world illustrate the fallibility of anthropocentric thinking by confronting human-centered power hierarchies that enact strict borders between human and nonhuman entities, and by representing nonhumans as less powerful than humans. A posthuman ecocritical analysis of the novel illuminates the importance of humans cultivating posthuman fluidity that allows them to continuously reconceptualize what it means to be human. The novel's setting—Enfield, Massachusetts—establishes *Infinite Jest*'s setting as a near-future representation of the Anthropocene, an ecocritical concept central to the novel's presentation of humanity's struggles in a posthuman setting.

Setting the novel in Enfield foregrounds the environmental impacts resulting from humans' sense of themselves as central, and situates the

text in the Anthropocene. Zahi Zalloua defines anthropocentrism as “a set of beliefs that place the human subject at the center of reflection and concern” (310). This ideology has peaked in the Anthropocene: the current period of history, in which human actions have become the most decisive influence on the environment. As Timothy Clark notes, “the major irony of the Anthropocene is that . . . it manifests itself to us primarily through the natural becoming, as it were, dangerously out of bounds, in extreme or unprecedented weather events, ecosystems being simplified, die-back, or collapse” (*Cambridge Introduction* 79). Humanity’s inclination both to position ourselves at the center of reflection and to underestimate objects, allows objects to find power in the Anthropocene. Posthumanism builds upon ecocritical theory, emphasizing the blurred borders that follow in the wake of power granted to nonhuman entities during this era.

The depictions of interactions between human and nonhuman entities in *Infinite Jest* elucidate the importance of posthuman existence in the Anthropocene. According to Pramod Nayar, critical posthumanism “unravels the discursive, institutional and material structures and processes that have presented the human as unique and bounded” (29). Posthuman texts “emphasize the blurring” borders, which make “isolating the ‘human’ from . . . another form of life impossible” (Nayar 2). Posthumanism’s relationship with ecocriticism highlights the increasing intertwinement of human and nonhuman life forms developing from the subjectival power given to nonhuman objects in the Anthropocene. In posthumanist theory, “subjects” refers to entities typically regarded as performing actions; “objects” refers to those that typically receive subjects’ actions. Traditional anthropocentric thought asserts the power of the human subject, thus relegating nonhuman forms to the role of objects—tools for humans to use. In posthuman fictional worlds, boundaries like those traditionally created between the human and nonhuman—and thus between subjects and objects—entangle until the boundaries cease to be apparent. A speech given by Lyle—a weight-room guru at *Infinite Jest*’s Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA)—is one of the novel’s most overt confrontations between human/nonhuman and subject/object divisions.

Lyle serves as a sort of wellspring of wisdom at ETA, with the young athletes enrolled in the school’s rigorous program turning to him for

enlightenment in times of confusion. In one of *Infinite Jest*'s pivotal moments, Ortho Stice—among ETA's top tennis prospects—complains to Lyle that he goes to sleep with his bed on one side of his room and wakes to find it moved to the other. Stice at first believes his teammates must be tricking him, then later turns to theories of telekinesis and somnambulism. In response to Stice's predicament, Lyle says, "Do not underestimate objects. . . . Do not leave objects out of account" (395). Lyle continues, telling Stice of a man he once knew, who earned a living going to public places and betting people he could stand on any chair and lift the chair off the ground. Soon after the man's arrival, "the idle bus-depot or DMV-waiting-area or hospital-lobby crowd [would be] dumbstruck. They [would] gaze up at a man who [was] standing 100% on top of a chair he [had] grabbed the back of and raised several m. off the ground" (395). After performing his trick, "the man [would jump] back down to the floor . . . leaving behind a dumbfounded crowd still staring up at an object he had not underestimated" (395).

The last section of Lyle's speech exposes the novel's thematic crux. Ortho's viewpoint exemplifies the human-centered perspective to which many of the novel's characters subscribe: he believes only humans can undertake actions (e.g., somnambulism and telekinesis) that are powerful enough to move his bed. In response to his anthropocentric thinking, Lyle asserts the importance of believing objects (i.e., nonhuman entities) are capable of powerful action, rather than being solely manipulable by humans. This pivotal defense of nonhuman power reframes the novel's narratives as stories that show objects bartering for respect from their human counterparts. Herein lies the core meaning of Lyle's speech to Ortho: although nonhuman entities traditionally have been deemed less powerful than humans—because of anthropocentric power structures—humanity's disinclination to relinquish our perceived subjecthood paradoxically erodes the dichotomy between the human subject and the nonhuman object. *Infinite Jest*'s Great Concavity continues the overt consideration of anthropocentric thinking's fallibility and of the Anthropocene's subverted power discrepancies between human and nonhuman beings.

The Great Concavity—a hazardous waste dump, which covers part of the northeast U.S. and southeast Canada—is conceived by Johnny Gentle, the U.S. President in the novel's near-future setting. The Great Concavity results from Americans' disregard for their environment: "a dark time

when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins and sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted" (382). Founded on Gentle's philosophy of "experialism," the massive region of waste exemplifies Americans' efforts to "send from [themselves] what [they] hope will not return" (176). Experialism—a word unique to *Infinite Jest*—references humanity's reluctance to contend with the calamitous effects anthropocentrism has upon nature and culture. This attempt to reassert human superiority meets swift resistance from the nonhuman presences it attempts to manipulate. As the U.S. sustains its late-capitalist dystopian, hyper-consumptive society by hurling its waste into the Great Concavity, Québec finds that "western Québécois kids [are] the size of Volkswagens shlumping around with no skulls . . . with cloracne and tremors and olfactory hallucinations" (1017n110). Although Gentle and his fellow Americans seem to operate with an "out of sight, out of mind" philosophy when they create the Great Concavity, the repercussions cannot be ignored: childhood deformities that lead to Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents, a Quebecois Separatist group of wheelchair assassins determined to avenge their compatriots and stifle American experialism. Gentle pawns off the Great Concavity onto Canada, thinking Americans might avoid the consequences of their actions, but it answers back, showing the novel's humans that objects have the same power to ravage humans that humans have to harm the nonhuman world. Humans become extensions of the Great Concavity's monstrous posthuman existence: Québécois children's terrible deformities breed Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents, while both serve as examples of the effects human-bred mutation has upon nature and culture. As the interactions between the Great Concavity and humans show, the traditional subject-object relationship shifts greatly in the post-human Anthropocene. Ultimately, the novel's dyadic pairings subvert traditional Western dualistic thinking, which accepts as clearly defined the distinction between the pairing's parts. Hal Incandenza's tragic narrative further illustrates the catastrophic effects of Western, anthropocentric thought.

Hal's story indicates an anthropocentric worldview may paradoxically entrap the human subject through its subjecthood. Hal appears the "perfect" teenager, with an A++ grade point average and a talent for tennis, yet "Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny" (313). Hal smokes marijuana to cope with his

hollowness, though he is really more attached to the secrecy of getting high than the high itself. Although he believes the drug's psychoactive effects are harmful, he sees marijuana as an escape—he imagines himself to control the object. Once Hal quits smoking marijuana altogether, though, he realizes its power: “It occurred to [Hal] that without some one-hitters to be able to look forward to smoking alone [he] was waking up every day feeling as though there was nothing in the day to anticipate . . . the implied question, then, would be whether the Bob Hope had somehow become not just the high point of the day but its actual meaning” (853). Hal's decision to name marijuana “Bob Hope” (a late American comedian) emphasizes his ability to view the drug's power only in human terms. He begins to realize objects' potential power when he considers the “implied question” about his marijuana use. He quickly reverts back to anthropocentric thinking by calling the substance “Bob Hope,” suggesting he can conceptualize its power solely by equating it to a human form. While Hal seems on the verge of blurring the power hierarchy's borders by momentarily considering an object's power, he subtly reinforces the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human, agency and lack of agency by humanizing his marijuana. Hal's narrative ends with a tragedy that reflects his treatment of nonhuman entities throughout the novel.

At the end of *Infinite Jest's* timeline, we see the full implications of Hal's inability to perceive objects' agency when he loses his own ability to communicate with the outside world. When Hal attempts to communicate, he is perceived as “having a seizure . . . somehow choking [or to be] psychotically out of control” (14). As the protagonist representing anthropocentric views that privilege the human subject, Hal eventually falls victim to Enfield's dystopia as his “thoughts and desires . . . are not intelligible in themselves but only as the epiphenomenal sign of entrapment” (Clark, “Nature, Post Nature” 81). Hal becomes completely trapped inside his own mind, a human no longer able to assert his own subjecthood. He retreats into himself and cannot learn to interact with a posthuman world, so he is reduced to the objecthood he once imposed on his surroundings. Hal's narrative arc shows that refusing to displace ourselves as subjects leaves us unable to communicate. In contrast, Don Gately eventually gains subjecthood because he coexists with—and demonstrates respect for—nonhuman entities.

While Gately and Hal both rely upon substances at some point in their lives, Gately's addiction is more than a recreational habit: it is a fully realized relationship with the substance. Gately's use of Demerol places him "in a cage . . . in the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around" (347). Hal could not consider marijuana's power without thinking of it in human terms, but Gately's understanding of addiction as an inanimate cage shows Demerol's power. After attending Narcotics Anonymous, Gately finds "he was, in a way, Free. It was the first time he'd been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten" (468). Though the novel does not make explicit what breaks Gately out of his mental cage, he ceases attempting to conceptualize objects in human hierarchical terms, which allows him to see them as powerful even if their power exceeds his understanding. Several moments in the novel imply Gately's coexistence with nonhuman entities, reinforcing the importance for humans to blur borders that create schisms between nonhuman and human beings in the Anthropocene.

Gately functions as Hal's antithesis and as an imperfect extension of posthumanism. Gately is an "embattled identity," which Nayar defines as "the result of some individuals and their bodies not fitting the established (hegemonic) *norms of the prevalent age/culture*" (102). For instance, Gately finds himself in the hospital after being shot while defending Lenz, an Ennet House resident. Before then, he kept the House and residents in order, and thus was respected—seen as a subject, an agential human—by the residents. Confined to his hospital bed, unable to speak because of a tube in his throat, "everybody seems to view him as a sympathetic ear . . . more like a wooden carving or statue of an ear. An empty confessional booth" (831). Here the novel figures Gately as an "impaired" body, as he has been "rendered [object] rather than [subject]" . . . a screen onto which all anxieties and fears of the community are projected" (Nayar 104). Rather than a human subject capable of action, Gately is described as an imitation of a body part and as a confessional booth, both inanimate objects.

Rendering Gately as an object continues throughout the novel, most noticeably when he runs errands for Ennet House: "Gately now simply blows through Inman . . . the Aventura's ten-cylinder backwash raising an odd little tornado of discarded ad-leaflets and glassine bags and . . . general crud . . . which whirls in his exhaust, the tornado of waste does, moving behind him" (479). He is again displaced from the role of subject as he

blends with the discarded objects whirling around him. The text presents both Gately and the trash being manipulated by the wind. By positioning him in front of the “tornado of waste”—operating a vehicle that allows waste to follow behind him—Gately simultaneously emerges as both an agential posthuman identity and someone who welcomes engagement with nonhuman beings. While Hal loses his ability to communicate, Gately seems to recover from his infection and to retain his previous quality of life. The characters’ disparate fates highlight the importance of respecting nonhuman entities: whereas Hal is unable to see the importance of objects, Gately’s identity as a former substance user, an embattled identity, and an impaired object evinces a fluidity that blurs the distinction between subject and object, emphasizing the similarity between and intertwinement of humans and nonhumans.

Given its engagement with anthropocentrism and agency, *Infinite Jest* is clearly a novel preoccupied with the interactions between humans and nonhumans. As the novel’s characters navigate the dystopia that reflects our own present, they wrestle with their ability to navigate a world filled with harmful nonhuman forms of their own making. The novel thus asks timely questions: how do we deal with the harm we inflict upon the nonhuman world around us? What does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene? Hal Incandenza’s tragic end can be attributed largely to his inability to relinquish subjecthood, so he erects borders between himself and the world around him. Gately both resembles and shows reverence for nonhuman forms, and thus prospers. A posthuman ecocritical analysis reveals the novel’s dire warning about the fate awaiting those who refuse to relinquish our own subjective centrality. As we try to navigate our anthropocentric world, *Infinite Jest* urges us to reevaluate our surroundings and to dissolve the internal and external borders that prevent us from engaging with those—both human and nonhuman—around us.

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The (Un)Reality of Race in Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth"

Lydia Burgess

Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" (1898) questions the significance of skin color for determining identity. In this short story, characters base racial identity on the perceptions of relative lightness or darkness. Discrimination relies on appearance rather than genealogy, yet nevertheless significantly affects those identified as belonging to minority groups. This discrimination—not skin color itself—causes the disparity between dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals. By creating this gap, discrimination reinforces the fiction of racial difference, creating a harmful feedback loop that increases racial inequality. Chesnutt exposes the artifice of appearance-based racial distinctions, but also reveals their undeniable impact. In this way, "The Wife of His Youth" juxtaposes perception and reality to challenge racism without discounting its effects.

In "The Wife of His Youth," the narrator introduces racial prejudice via the Blue Vein Society. After some general remarks about this "little society of colored persons," the narrator recites non-members' negative beliefs about the group (488). The narrator allows outsiders to characterize the group, an approach that resembles racial stereotyping. This parallel even involves name-calling: non-members refer to members of the society as "Blue Veins," a derogatory term (488). An "envious outsider"—not a member—labels the group the "Blue Vein Society," and the story does not provide the group's "longer and more pretentious name" (488). The name

reflects the belief that “no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins” (488). By using this negative label for the group, the story directly associates the Blue Vein Society with racism. Light skin, however, was not the only “alleged prerequisite for Blue Vein membership;” outsiders also believed that potential members had to be free born, a stipulation that explicitly links contemporaneous racism to slavery (489). According to outsiders, the Blue Veins want to distance themselves from the formerly enslaved as well as the dark-skinned. Functioning much like racial stereotypes, these allegations shape the story’s image of the Blue Vein Society. Even though the narrator later admits “there were no such tests of eligibility,” the damage has been done (489). The narrator only corrects these misconceptions after first flagging the Blue Vein Society’s purported discrimination.

Legitimizing these negative stereotypes, most Blue Veins are light-skinned and free born. The narrator notes that the members “were, generally speaking, more white than black,” and “while there was really no [free birth] requirement, it is doubtless true that very few of the members would have been unable to meet it if there had been” (488, 489). Therefore, while the Blue Vein Society may not practice *de jure* segregation, they do practice *de facto* segregation through other membership requirements. Justifying this *de facto* segregation, the Blue Veins “declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership” (489). Their logic appears sound: since racial discrimination relies on appearance, light-skinned people suffer less prejudice; and since free-born people did not endure slavery, they have more opportunities. Consequently, requirements unrelated to skin color and slavery still effectively disadvantage people with dark skin and those previously enslaved. Regardless of the official membership requirements, the Blue Veins prefer members with lighter complexions and limited ties to slavery.

The Blue Vein Society’s discrimination, however, must be considered within the period’s context of racism. As Joe Sarnowski claims, “in essence, the Blue Veins simply practice what the dominant society preaches: that skin color matters, and the lighter the better” (321). There is nothing

unique about the Blue Vein Society's views. In fact, the predominantly light-skinned Blue Veins are not exempt from their own racism. For instance, Mr. Ryder presents two paths for biracial individuals: "absorption by the white race" or "extinction in the black" (490). By subscribing to cultural biases that promote the former and denigrate the latter, the Blue Veins trap themselves between desirable whiteness and despised Blackness. Their hope for social advancement depends on becoming progressively more white and less Black. Mr. Ryder and the Blue Veins thus reinforce a racial hierarchy that values lighter skin over darker skin.

The upward mobility implied by this hierarchy has an inherent flaw: it is not reciprocal. Only half of any couple can practice this belief. For every person that marries someone with lighter skin, another person marries someone with darker skin. If everyone adheres to this belief, then no marriages occur. Yet, in "The Wife of His Youth," Mr. Ryder intends to marry Molly Dixon. In accordance with the racial hierarchy, he expects this marriage "to further the upward process of absorption he had been wishing and waiting for" (490). However, by the same logic, Molly Dixon should refuse her darker-skinned suitor, who would threaten her with "extinction in the black" (490). Despite this paradox, Mr. Ryder and the narrator seem certain Molly Dixon will accept his proposal. If she accepts Mr. Ryder's beliefs about the fate of biracial individuals, however, she should not marry him.

To circumvent this dissonance, Chesnutt's characters create a loophole: they pretend to belong to the dominant racial category. The Blue Veins long to be identified as more white than Black. Intending to avoid discrimination, they instead "accentuate the artificiality of race by perpetuating a system of conscious deception and denial" (Tunc 677). In other words, they feign whiteness in pursuit of progress and inadvertently expose the illusion of race. This illusion—which "attempts to erase blackness(es) through white performance"—proves "destructive," "perpetuat[ing] both internal/external racism and artificial racial categories into which one 'should' pass" (Tunc 689–90). Multiracial individuals who wish to be perceived as white subscribe to the fiction of race, and by endorsing the racial hierarchy, they validate their supposed inferiority. The Blue Veins deny their multiracial backgrounds to avoid discrimination, instead effectually increasing racism by devaluing themselves.

The supporting logic of this racial hierarchy also confuses correlation

with causation. Mr. Ryder and the Blue Veins assume that skin color “determine[s] the economic prospects and social position of the individual” (Chakkalakal 169). Although there may be a correlation between skin color and socioeconomic status, specific skin colors do not cause prosperity. People of various races can be found at all levels of affluence, suggesting “the problem with conflating race and class” (Chakkalakal 162). Discrimination, not skin color, typically causes social and economic disadvantages. In “The Wife of His Youth,” race and class do seem to coincide: the lighter-skinned Molly Dixon enjoys more wealth and status than the darker-skinned ‘Liza Jane. The story, though, interrogates the universality of this relationship through Mr. Ryder’s dilemma.

Failing to acknowledge the flaws in the racial hierarchy, Mr. Ryder initially emphasizes race (and all of its effects)—rather than love—when choosing a spouse. Although Tanfer Emin Tunc asserts that ‘Liza Jane “is in every way, shape, and form the complete opposite of Molly Dixon,” the two women more starkly contrast with Mr. Ryder (680). The story compares each woman to Mr. Ryder, rather than to each other, placing him in the middle of their two extremes. Relative to Mr. Ryder, Molly Dixon is “much younger,” “whiter,” and “better educated,” while ‘Liza Jane is “older,” “black[er],” and a former slave (490, 495). Mr. Ryder’s position “between the upper and nether millstone” complicates his decision (490). If both women were darker (or both lighter) than Mr. Ryder, his dilemma would no longer be contingent on race. Either way, the women would offer the same fate: “absorption by the white race” if they were lighter or “extinction in the black” if they were darker (490). Mr. Ryder’s racial considerations, therefore, create the tension.

Some of Chesnutt’s other works demonstrate how similar racial considerations cause tension in interracial marriages. In his “Future American” essays, Chesnutt “mak[es] marriage a simple matter of adding a certain number of ‘Negroes’ to an equal number of ‘whites’” in order to create a “singular, superior American race,” thus “reveall[ing] the absurdity of making marriage a matter of race, rather than mutual desire and love” (Chakkalakal 164). Because of Chesnutt’s focus on race, some scholars read Mr. Ryder’s marital dilemma as an allegorical representation of double consciousness. Of all the differences between Molly Dixon and ‘Liza Jane, Chesnutt stresses race the most, particularly within the context of the Blue Vein Society. Beyond being “very black,” ‘Liza Jane “looked like a bit of the

old plantation life" (491). The narrator links her skin color to slavery and "summon[s]" her like a ghost (491–92). In addition to the history of slavery, 'Liza Jane manifests her husband's past. According to Wendy Ryden, Mr. Ryder "is haunted not just by his obligations to 'Liza Jane but by the spectral presence of the past self, Sam Taylor" (41). Mr. Ryder must reconcile his past and present selves, which are distinct from his racial identities. The choice to acknowledge 'Liza Jane, then, involves not only her and Molly Dixon, but also Sam Taylor.

The differences between Sam Taylor and Mr. Ryder become evident during the latter's conversation with 'Liza Jane, and they eclipse race. When Mr. Ryder points out that Sam Taylor is not legally bound to her by their slave marriage, 'Liza Jane asserts that Sam "wouldn' marry no yuther 'ooman 'tel he foun' out 'bout me" (493). Unlike his past self, Mr. Ryder has already "made up his mind" to "ask [Molly Dixon] to be his wife" (490). His love for 'Liza Jane is neither as faithful as she claims nor as long-lasting as hers for him. Sam Taylor differs from Mr. Ryder not only in fidelity, but also in work ethic. Sam Taylor "nebber would work 'less'n he had ter," but Mr. Ryder "worked himself up to the position of stationery clerk, having charge of the distribution of the office supplies for the whole company" (493, 489). It is baffling that these disparate personas belong to a single character. In his not-so-hypothetical account, Mr. Ryder confirms that he "had in the course of all these years grown to be as different from the ignorant boy who ran away from fear of slavery as the day is from the night" (495). He reinvented himself, even changing his name. Affirming his drastic change, 'Liza Jane—who insists that she would recognize Sam Taylor "'mong's' a hund'ed men,"—gives no indication that she knows Mr. Ryder (493). Mr. Ryder has no reason to fear exposure and no motivation to acknowledge the former self he worked so hard to hide.

If he acknowledges 'Liza Jane, Mr. Ryder must admit his former identity, but he does not have to accept his previous marriage. The couple has been estranged for twenty-five years, and 'Liza Jane finds her former husband unrecognizable. Additionally, the story never fully substantiates their supposed former happiness and offers little hope for their future. Tess Chakkalakal asserts that the "legalization of slave marriages after the war encouraged the newly freed to preserve relationships formed in slavery, making marriage at least as much a matter of racial affiliation as it was of personal choice—or, to put it more plainly, of love" (173). Having initially

escaped this obligation, Mr. Ryder has no reason to bind himself to his past. Sam Taylor and 'Liza Jane did not legalize their relationship; he took the opportunity to move onward and—in his own eyes—upward. Having escaped his slave wife, why would he commit to an elderly stranger? As Mr. Ryder says, their marriage “doesn’t count” (493). He has no (legal) obligation to 'Liza Jane.

Despite being free from legal obligation, Mr. Ryder chooses to acknowledge 'Liza Jane. Incompatible with the racial hierarchy, Mr. Ryder's decision considers Molly Dixon and 'Liza Jane's other qualities. The narrator describes Molly Dixon as “very good looking and not over twenty-five” (490). Although an attractive quality, her youth becomes problematic because Mr. Ryder is “old enough to have been her father” (490). In fact, Molly Dixon has not even been alive as long as 'Liza Jane has been searching for her husband (493). Despite Molly Dixon's youth and looks, 'Liza Jane surpasses her in “fidelity and devotion” (495). Youth and beauty do not last, but 'Liza Jane's loyalty to her husband has survived twenty-five years. Through her devotion, 'Liza Jane “becomes the superior character in the eyes of Ryder and his peers—and likely in the eyes of most readers as well” (Sarnowski 333). Unlike the other characters, 'Liza Jane is not a Blue Vein; their racism does not taint her. Focusing on love and commitment rather than race and wealth, Mr. Ryder's decision to acknowledge 'Liza Jane becomes less surprising. Although she does not measure up to the “pragmatic, publicly-perceived requirements of the society,” she does represent their “ideal, publicly-declared requirements” by exhibiting strong character (Sarnowski 326). Her worthiness stems from her integrity and loyalty. Outsiders would probably expect Mr. Ryder to reject her. If he wishes to live up to his claims to “have no race prejudice” and strive for progress with charity and without malice, though, he must acknowledge this faithful woman (490).

According to the narrator, though, the Blue Veins do not always actualize their ideals, and this framing makes the ending unexpected. Mr. Ryder, however, is not surprised. When Molly Dixon and the Blue Veins declare that “he should have acknowledged her,” Mr. Ryder thanks them for this expected answer (496). Sarnowski explains that “the Blue Veins' collective ideals . . . are his as well” (324). Mr. Ryder is a Blue Vein because he subscribes to their ideology, so the other Blue Veins can be expected to come to the same conclusion he does. Moreover, apart from racism, the only ideal Mr. Ryder's acknowledgment opposes is “[s]elf-preservation” (490).

This surface-level contradiction can be resolved, though, by recognizing Mr. Ryder's other self: Sam Taylor. By acknowledging 'Liza Jane, Mr. Ryder acts against the interests of his present self, but reclaims his past self. He chooses to preserve both his identities.

Read in purely racial terms, "The Wife of His Youth" presents a perplexing plot in which the protagonist fails in his pursuit of progress. The story at times questions Mr. Ryder's decision, seeming to accept the belief that light skin is preferable to dark skin. The complexity of the story's characters, however, reveals the difference between perception and truth. Mr. Ryder has been unfaithful to 'Liza Jane and himself. If outward progress satisfied Mr. Ryder, he would not have admitted to this setback. He chooses to acknowledge 'Liza Jane because she offers more than her dark skin. Her perseverance and fidelity inspire the Blue Veins to defy how outsiders perceive them. Conscious of the reality of racial discrimination and aware of the difficulties to come, they, like Mr. Ryder, nevertheless choose to acknowledge 'Liza Jane and, simultaneously, themselves.

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Natural Spaces and the Development of Women in Jane Austen's *Emma*

Laura Creekmore

In eighteenth-century England, the landscape and gender ideology began to change drastically. With the introduction of the Linnaean system, biologists increasingly relied on “a sex-centered system for observing and taxonomizing botanical nature” that treated plants as living, sexual objects (Lynch 691). At the same time, botany became a popular undertaking—a soft science seen as suitable for women. The sexualization of plants and the growing interest of women in botany coincide with what Deidre Shauna Lynch calls “a venerable set of poetic commonplaces about girls” that describe them in botanical terms (691). The link between women and plants evolved even further as landscaping during the late-eighteenth century developed into an art form considered a worthy masculine pursuit (Baridon 25). Women were figured as “delicate plants” subject to men’s cultivation. In this context, Jane Austen wrote and published *Emma*. In this essay, I argue that Austen’s heroine—Emma Woodhouse—is positioned in natural spaces that show her to be an independent individual, rather than a delicate object to be cultivated by men. The novel’s depictions of Emma—who appears in the outdoors and is associated with the outdoors—reveal her as a woman with agency in both indoor and outdoor spaces.

In England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gentlemen were considered connoisseurs of the land. John Barrell explains that this ability marked a gentleman’s authority: “a correct taste, here especially

for landscape and landscape art, was used in this period as a means of legitimating political authority” (81). I argue this ability further marks social authority as it transforms evaluative rhetoric men use to describe women. Gentlemen were expected to observe, appreciate, and evaluate the land with both a utilitarian and aesthetic eye. Michel Baridon describes how the English landscape evolved—during the second half of the eighteenth century—into an art form through the influence of Lancelot “Capability” Brown: “the cultural historian cannot fail to notice the long filiation which links an artist who worked for the gentry and the nobility of Georgian England and a landscape gardener” (25). This link is further evinced by popular nobles and gentry beginning to record their observations of the landscape in great detail, marking its transition into an upper-class pursuit. Baridon notes that “Horace Walpole had acquired international fame as a Gothic revivalist and as the first historian of the garden as a new and essential art form” (28).

Walpole describes the English landscape developing into an art form and demonstrates his own ability to observe its beauty. He begins his essay on gardening by outlining its history using classic masculine descriptions: “Alcinous’s garden was planted by the poet, enriched by him with the fairy gift of eternal summer. . . . As he has bestowed on the same happy prince a palace with brazen walls and columns of silver, he certainly intended that the garden should be proportionably magnificent” (8). Here, Walpole connects gardening’s history to the benevolent, powerful Greek king, Alcinous, thus marking gardening as an historically masculine activity. He also compares the gardener to the poet and situates the garden as an extension of the King’s palace. At the time, poetry was considered a high-brow masculine pursuit, while fiction—especially gothic fiction written by women—was considered frivolous and feminine. Of course, Austen was well aware of this correlation as evidenced by meta-discussion in *Northanger Abbey* that defends the heroine’s enjoyment of novels over poetry:

Yes, novels; for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding. . . . And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior,

with a paper from the *Spectator*, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens—there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist. (36)

By equating the gardener to the classical king's poet, Walpole perpetuates the masculine exclusivity of landscape gardening. Walpole's conscious, studied descriptions of the natural world exemplify the proper expectations for how the gentry should interact with their environment.

As women became associated with delicate greenhouse plants, the rhetoric employed for evaluating the landscape's ideal complexion parallels rhetoric used to evaluate women's beauty. In language similar to the way gentlemen of the time describe land, Frank and Emma evaluate Jane Fairfax's complexion in *Emma*:

Miss Fairfax is naturally so pale, as almost always to give the appearance of ill health.—A most deplorable want of complexion. . . . he must confess, that to him nothing could make amends for the want of the fine glow of health. Where features were indifferent, a fine complexion gave beauty to them all; and where they were good, the effect was—fortunately he need not attempt to describe what the effect was. (138)

Just as men would discuss landscape, they emphasize both the importance of good coloring and of color variance. Frank Churchill despises women who have a single complexion—paleness—whereas a healthy glow produces varied coloring that highlights the features of a woman's face. He echoes how gentlemen might describe the multiple shades of green in the shrubbery.

Mr. Woodhouse illustrates the connection between feminine beauty and the natural world when he reminds Jane Fairfax that “young ladies should take care of themselves.—Young ladies are delicate plants. They should take care of their health and their complexion” (203). Interestingly, Mr. Woodhouse is the one who calls all women delicate plants. Placing these words in his mouth may raise the question of how widely held such stereotypes were at the time, because Mr. Woodhouse is a paranoid, satirical character, prone to misguided statements. Other characters, however—like the elegant and intelligent Mrs. Weston—agree with him in this instance and support

Woodhouse's gentle lecture. This scene signals that Emma must contend with the period's stereotype of women as delicate plants, but also ironically comments on the topic by giving the idea the voice of an idiot. Ultimately, the novel challenges these notions, showing Emma as a character who can evaluate women, landscape, and men with the purportedly masculine taste of the era.

In *Emma*, areas traditionally reserved for men are claimed by the protagonist. The novel rarely depicts Emma observing—or showing any concern about—her own appearance. Unlike the period's women who were compulsively concerned with their outfits, jewelry, and hair, Emma seems not to care for this type of superficial beauty, even though the narrator and other characters describe her as elegant and beautiful. In only one instance does the novel depict Emma fixing her appearance: “the hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think” (95). Though Emma's maid fixes her hair, the tone and lack of detail suggest this act is more of a chore to be rushed through than an important part of Emma's day. It shows Emma expressing no major concern with her own superficial appearance. Instead, she concerns herself more with observing others. She democratically observes the superficial qualities of both the men and women around her. The novel's ballroom scene approaches directly this inversion of the male gaze. Upon entering the ball, Emma says to Mr. Knightley, “there is always a look of consciousness or bustle when people come in a way which they know to be beneath them. You think you carry it off very well, I dare say, but with you it is a sort of bravado, an air of affected unconcern; I always observe it whenever I meet you under those circumstances” (148). Emma evaluates Mr. Knightley's appearance and teasingly deems him worthy of walking her into the ball. The novel here connects both men and women to plants and suggests women can evaluate both sexes just as acutely as men can.

Emma, when entering Donwell Abbey, displays a refined command of observation: “It was so long since Emma had been at the Abbey . . . eager to refresh and correct her memory with . . . more exact understanding of a house and grounds. . . . She felt all the honest pride and complacency . . . as she viewed. . . . its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream” (247). Douglas Murray interprets Emma's observations as a sign of snobbery, claiming “Emma perceives this rural scene as a prospect laid out before her for her pleasure” (960). The ways in

which Emma observes the landscape of Donwell Abbey confirm Murray's argument as Emma employs the rhetorical style a gentleman of the time would use to evaluate the landscape. Emma's detailed observations and the emotions she expresses about the land's beauty could easily come from Walpole's descriptions of the English landscape. Both describe the ideal landscape as aesthetically pleasing and functionally efficient. Emma employs these evaluative criteria as she notices the beauty of the meadow and stream, yet she also notices the landscape's functionality: the building is situated low in the valley so it is sheltered by the land. Emma here is shown to have the same perceptions that would be prized in gentlemen of the time. The scene does not simply highlight Emma's snobbery; rather it suggests women can operate in the natural world as connoisseurs of the land, just like the men.

The name of Emma's home, Hartfield, draws the first comparison between developing love and the outdoors, as the name combines a symbol of love with the outdoors: a heart in a field. The novel also contains an element of sexual freedom for women outdoors that begins with the Box Hill scene and continues in the proposal scene. Box Hill was a real English location with a lewd reputation. Austen evokes this reputation to imply that women can feel sexual freedom outdoors. In the Box Hill scene, Emma flirts extensively with Frank Churchill, indicating she feels sexual freedom in this outdoor space—she has not behaved this openly flirtatious in any other scene, despite already deciding she has no romantic feelings for Churchill. This scene thus depicts Emma as simply enjoying the sexual freedom Box Hill provides. Toward the end of the novel, Mr. Knightley's proposal scene correlates sexual freedom with the outdoors yet again: "The weather continued much the same all the following morning; and the same loneliness, and the same melancholy, seemed to reign at Hartfield—but in the afternoon it cleared. . . . She longed for the serenity [her sensory experience of the surroundings] might gradually introduce [and] she lost no time in hurrying into the shrubbery" (291–92). This passage, like the novel itself, begins with Emma's loneliness and ends with her finding its cure. She finds her cure from loneliness in being surrounded by nature rather than people. The outdoors helps Emma learn to be alone without being lonely.

Many scholars have argued that Emma is more masculine than feminine. George Justice explains such readings stem from Emma's depiction as a

“a powerful character who shapes the world around her, from managing people like her father, Mrs. Weston, and Harriet Smith, to controlling the household” (xix). Claudia Johnson refers to Emma as a “surrogate husband” to Miss Taylor, “claiming submission as marital privilege;” points out that Emma asks Mr. Knightley to dance, an act reserved for men at the time; and argues the novel “diminish[es] the authority of male sentimentality [by] reimmasculating men and women alike with a high sense of national purpose” (196, 191). Extending Johnson’s claims, I contend that Emma’s masculinity contradicts the period’s popular connection of women to greenhouse plants.

Austen challenges the notion that women are like greenhouse plants by characterizing Emma as a different type of plant. Emma’s similarities to flowers do not conform to the popular linkage of women and flowers during the period, but instead reveal the era’s gender anxieties. Ann Shteir explains that “Linnaean botany expresses [an] obsession with sex and gender difference” (17). According to Shteir, Linnaeus’s “highly naturalized and gendered theory about male/female difference in plant reproduction can . . . be read as illustrating a larger moment of reaction to cultural fears about blurred distinctions in sex and gender, and to gender ambiguity and shifting sex roles” (17). Lynch elaborates, noting the Linnaean botanical system refused to recognize that “many plants carry their reproductive organs, their stamens and pistils, within a single flower structure. And yet this evidence for a third, hermaphroditic sex, counted for nothing with the botanists, who folded the possibilities for hermaphroditic autofertilization smoothly back into stories of heterosexual conjugality” (698). Emma’s masculine gaze and attributes combine with her feminine qualities to parallel the hermaphroditic flower botanists feared and thus avoided. Not only does Emma possess both masculine and feminine traits, but the novel subtly suggests she—like plants that use hermaphroditic autofertilization—is autoerotic.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that Marianne Dashwood’s sexuality is neither fully homosexual nor heterosexual, but most clearly autoerotic. Exploring the coded autoeroticism in *Sense and Sensibility*, Sedgwick draws from Samuel Tissot’s work on female onanism, concluding that “Marianne Dashwood, though highly intelligent, exhibits the classic consciousness-symptoms noted by . . . Tissot in 1758, including ‘the impairment of memory and the senses,’ ‘inability to confine the attention,’ and ‘an air

of distraction, embarrassment and stupidity” (827). I argue that Emma similarly identifies as autoerotic. She has an experience like Marianne Dashwood’s after she realizes both she and Harriet have feelings for Mr. Knightley:

She was bewildered amidst the confusion of all that had rushed on her within the last few hours. Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be matter of humiliation to her.—How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!—The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!—she sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery—in every place, every posture. (284)

The description of Emma and the paragraph’s form suggest she is unable to control her attention as she walks about with an air of distraction and embarrassment. This scene recalls Sedwick’s description of Marianna as “the masturbating girl,” Emma’s “every posture” echoing the image of Marianna unable to keep her seat, which Sedgwick reads as evidence of her autoerotic behavior (828). Autoeroticism is a character trait of an independent woman which further characterizes Emma as self-sufficient. This autoerotic reading of the scene confirms that the outdoors offer women freedom to explore their sexuality as Emma tries “every posture” in her bedroom and, surprisingly, “in the shrubbery” (284). This passage thus not only shows Emma’s independent nature, it also connects her to the type of plant ignored by the Linnaean botanical system and, in turn, contradicts popular conceptions of women as delicate plants.

Austen places her growing girls outdoors so that they can develop into mature, sexual beings who contradict the belief that girls are too delicate to handle the outdoors. She also characterizes Emma as a hermaphroditic, autoerotic plant to challenge the ideology that identifies women as delicate, greenhouse plants. In the period, men were thought of as the gardeners who cultivate and protect greenhouse plants. An autoerotic, hermaphroditic Emma—a plant that need not be sheltered or cultivated by men—offers a profound challenge to the era’s imagination of women as delicate plants who must be subject to the cultivation of the gardeners—the men—who keep them sheltered inside.

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“A Two-Story White House”: Spatialized Narratives in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*

Xavier Xin

The full title of Harriet Wilson’s 1859 autobiographical narrative—*Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There*—locates Frado, the protagonist, in a “two-story white house” (1). Literally, the phrase refers to the Bellmont residence: a white house with a first and second floor. The alternative meaning of “story,” however, suggests the residence also houses (at least) two narratives, while the allusion to the White House transfigures the Bellmont home into a symbol of the nation (Foreman and Pitts 87). The first double meaning—“story”—simultaneously references the white house’s physical spaces and the dual narratives within its walls, suggesting a connection between the two. Spatial analysis reveals the white house indeed tells two stories through its rooms, pathways, and exterior. The first, dominant narrative shows Frado’s oppression through her physical marginalization by Mrs. Bellmont. The marginal spaces and private rooms to which Frado is confined, however, offer a concurrent narrative of resistance that not only empowers Frado to challenge the Bellmont matriarch’s authority, but also grants her access to the ultimate Christian space: heaven. This narrative duality—in light of the second double meaning that deploys the white house as representative of the U.S.—further serves as a defiant metaphor for Black struggle against white oppression.

Frado’s spatial marginalization in the white house—beginning the

moment the Bellmonts realize a child has been abandoned—underlies the narrative of oppression. Bent on exploiting the child as free labor, Mrs. Bellmont assigns her accommodation in “the L chamber” (16). The marginality of the space to which the ruthless mistress relegates Frado becomes evident when Jack, the family’s youngest son, leads Frado to her shabby bedroom:

They [ascend] the stairs without any light, passing through nicely furnished rooms, which [are] a source of great amazement to the child. He open[s] the door which connect[s] with her room by a dark, unfinished passageway. “Don’t bump your head,” say[s] Jack, and step[s] before to open the door leading into her apartment,—an unfinished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to the floor, so that the bed [can] stand only in the middle of the room. A small half window furnish[es] light and air. Jack return[s] to the sitting room with the remark that the child would soon outgrow those quarters. (16–17)

The location of Frado’s quarters at the end of the corridor, adjacent to a roof that “slant[s] nearly to the floor,” places “the L chamber” at the periphery of the white house. The door and the “dark, unfinished passageway” leading into the chamber produce a twofold segregation between Frado’s bedroom and the rest of the Bellmont house. Beyond such physical marginality, the bedroom’s peripheral status also manifests through its various inadequacies: the ceilings are low (“Don’t bump your head,” Jack warns), the area is small (Frado “would soon outgrow those quarters”), and the room is “unfinished,” with “a small half window” that is likely to provide only limited light and air. A stark contrast to the “nicely furnished rooms” where the Bellmonts live, this practically abandoned part of the house presents a multifold marginality with its location, isolation, and deficiencies. As the first concrete act of prejudice Frado suffers in the Bellmont household, such marginalization marks the child as inferior, insignificant, thereby establishing the narrative of oppression that comes to define her life in the white house.

As Frado stays with the Bellmonts, her marginality extends to her day-time activities. The very morning after her arrival, the Bellmonts have breakfast in the dining room, yet Frado is “told to eat, standing, by the

kitchen table" (17). During the family's "tea hour," she has to wait "behind her mistress' chair" (26). James, an elder son, once brings Frado into the sitting room, but "before they [can] be seated," Mrs. Bellmont commands him to "take that nigger out of [her] sight," effectively expelling the child from the symbolic center of family interaction (28). Despite her purported status as "a permanent member of the family," in all these moments, the spaces to which Mrs. Bellmont permits Frado access are segregated, distanced from the rest of her "family members" (18). The narrative of oppression thus continues as the Bellmont matriarch circumscribes Frado's sphere of existence within the white house.

Despite being cruelly marginalized, Frado ironically becomes central to the household's functioning. Only a year into her time with the Bellmonts, Frado's labor has made her "quite indispensable" (18). In response to James's promise to bring the child away with him, Aunt Abby says frankly, "I don't know what your mother would do without her" (42). Just as Mr. Bellmont's sister predicts, when Frado reaches the end of her virtual enslavement in the white house, feeling "she [can] not well spare one who could so well adapt herself to all departments—man, boy, housekeeper, domestic, etc.," Mrs. Bellmont, "beg[s]" a neighbor to persuade Frado to stay (64). The Bellmonts' coercion of Frado into household management—typically occurring in marginal locations, such as the kitchen, behind a chair, the barn, or the field—paradoxically makes them completely dependent on her. The centrality Frado claims from the margins enables her to construct a second narrative in the white house. On the surface, the multiple roles imposed upon Frado—"man, boy, housekeeper, domestic, etc."—strip away her gender and age, indicating Mrs. Bellmont's unassailable, unscrupulous authority. Frado, however, by "so well adapt[ing] herself" to these roles, makes Mrs. Bellmont "beg" for her continued labor, inverting the power dynamic between the mistress and the servant. In other words, by transforming roles that testify to her oppression into identities of self-empowerment, the servant decenters the mistress from her position of absolute authority. As "the only moving power in the house," Frado asserts her authority from the margins, producing a narrative of resistance that honors her labor and her significance to the Bellmont household (35).

This second narrative culminates the moment Frado takes full advantage of her centrality to directly subvert Mrs. Bellmont's authority:

[Frado is] sent for wood, and not returning as soon as Mrs. B. calculate[s], [the mistress] follow[s] her, and, snatching from the pile a stick, raise[s] it over her.

“Stop!” shout[s] Frado, “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you”; and throwing down what she . . . gathered, stand[s] like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.

By this unexpected demonstration, her mistress, in amazement, drop[s] her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement. Frado walk[s] towards the house, her mistress following with the wood she herself was sent after. She did not know, before, that she [has] a power to ward off assaults. Her triumph in seeing her enter the door with *her* burden, repa[ys] her for much of her former suffering. (58–59)

By shouting “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you,” Frado threatens Mrs. Bellmont’s strike with the prospect of her own strike. The child’s defiance demonstrates shrewd awareness of her importance to the Bellmonts. Here, Frado not only declares her centrality from the literal margins of the family residence, she also capitalizes on her centrality to demand better treatment from the Bellmont matriarch. Her protest reverses the hierarchy between the two: in this climax, the servant leads the way to the white house, with her mistress trailing behind, carrying “the wood [the former] was sent after.” Frado’s protest partly compensates for her past pain and ensures she will suffer less in the future. Her triumph, in “repa[ying] her for much of her former suffering,” brings retrospective justice. It has also leads to “fewer whippings” and inspires Frado to “assert her rights when they [are] trampled on” (59–60). The larger implications of Frado’s defiance diminish the first story of a child’s oppression.

Away from the common areas in the Bellmont house, the private rooms Frado has access to advance her narrative of resistance. During James’s illness, Mrs. Bellmont finds Aunt Abby’s frequent visits to her son “very offensive” (51). Upon hearing Abby approach the upstairs sickroom, the mistress “slip[s] out” of her room, “hold[s] the latch of the door . . . to the upper entry,” and lies to Abby: “James does not want to see you, or anyone else” (51). Mrs. Bellmont’s plot is thwarted when Frado, “watching beside” James one day, “tell[s] him all” when he enquires about Abby’s prolonged absence (52). The privacy of James’s sickroom makes it a safe

space where Frado can reveal the true story of Abby's absence without fear of being interrupted by Mrs. Bellmont. By eventually restoring Aunt Abby's ability to visit James, Frado's "tale-bearing"—as Mrs. Bellmont later exasperatedly calls it—carries a powerful, truthful narrative that debunks her mistress's false tale and undoes the matriarch's spatial authority in the house's common areas (52).

Even more meaningfully, the white house's private spaces enable Frado to access Christianity, a religion with profound spatial implications that constitute her most powerful resistance. Despite Mrs. Bellmont's aversion to her learning the Bible, Frado studies the text "carefully," and "as often as an opportunity present[s], which [is] when entirely secluded in her own apartment, or by Aunt Abby's side" (48). As she "cast[s] off the fetters" and "rise[s] to the communion of saints," the house's private spaces become sites of power where Frado defies Mrs. Bellmont's efforts to deny her religion (48). The significance of such resistance becomes clear in light of Mrs. Bellmont's protest to her husband about Frado's church attendance: "who ever thought of having a nigger go [to church], except to drive others there? Why, according to you and James, we should very soon have her in the parlor, as smart as our own girls. . . . If you should go on as you would like, it would not be six months before she would be leaving me; and that won't do" (49–50). In sentimental fiction, "the middle-class parlor" has "particular significance as the heart of the home" and "symbolize[s] safety and domestic civilization" (Foreman and Pitts 99). Mrs. Bellmont's retort marks Frado's spiritual ascent as a radically rebellious act, as it endows Frado with spatial mobility that might elevate her from the margins, take her across racial and class barriers, and place her firmly at "the heart of the [middle-class] home." Eventually, Christianity will empower Frado to struggle free from her virtual enslavement in the white house and pursue a life of freedom. By the novel's conclusion, Frado remains unable to access the parlor, and she waits until adulthood to leave the Bellmont family, but such things do not diminish the radical possibilities Frado's religious learning establishes. The gross power imbalance between Mrs. Bellmont and Frado suggests the latter's resistance celebrates its potentialities and symbolisms, despite its concrete outcomes. Such a reading offers the fullest understanding of Frado's agency.

Dismissing Frado's religious learning and privileging her restrained mobility in the world of the living risks neglecting an even more important

place in the narrative: heaven. Characters in the novel regularly describe the space of Christian afterlife in vivid detail, cementing its reality to and desirability for Frado. Most significantly James—a devout Christian—speaks of heaven in his last words to his family:

“I feel prepared to go. I shall meet you in heaven . . . Teach Charlie the way to heaven; lead him up as you come” . . .

[James] labor[s] hard for breath some time, when he seem[s] to awake suddenly, and exclaim[s], “Hark! do you hear it!”

“Hear what, my son?” ask[s] the father.

“Their call. Look, look, at the shining ones! Oh, let me go and be at rest!”

As if waiting for this petition, the Angel of Death sever[s] the golden thread, and he [is] in heaven. (54)

James’s final instruction to his wife that she should teach their son “the way to heaven” and “lead him up as [she] come[s]” reifies heaven as a place with an actual location and a specific path that connects to this world. His visceral deathbed reactions, as he both hears and sees the Angel of Death—whose representation again actualizes heaven—endow the angel with a physicality that further validates the existence of a “celestial city” (57). As the narrator concludes—“and he [is] in heaven”—James’s emotional embrace of the afterlife leaves little doubt about the reality of this ultimate Christian space.

James’s assurance (“I feel prepared to go”) and eagerness (“Oh, let me go and be at rest!”)—rather than fear or regret—confirm heaven as a desirable place. Indeed, if we accept—as the novel does—that one’s eventual entrance into heaven testifies to their piety, then what James and Aunt Abby believe about the ultimate Christian space must be accurate: it is a place that promises “an immortality of happiness,” no “sickness or sorrow,” and welcomes “all, young or old, white or black, bond or free” (38, 53, 47). Heaven looms as the final utopia that guarantees eternal joy. Crucially it is both accessible and desirable to Frado. By promising her the ultimate mobility to enjoy the Christian afterlife, her religious journey in the private rooms of the white house constitutes her most powerful resistance against Mrs. Bellmont’s oppression.

This resistance culminates in Frado's spiritual triumph in the novel's final paragraph:

Do you ask the destiny of those connected with [Frado's] *early* history? A few years only have elapsed since Mr. and Mrs. B. passed into another world. . . . Only a few months since, Aunt Abby entered heaven. Jack and his wife rest in heaven, disturbed by no intruders; and Susan and her child are yet with the living. Jane . . . has the early love of Henry still. . . . Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision. (72)

Aunt Abby, Jack, and his wife all rest in heaven, while Mr. and Mrs. Bellmont stay in "another world," suggesting the latter two are denied entrance to "the celestial city." The subtext is clear: despite all her spatial authority in the white house, Mrs. Bellmont—"she-devil"—fails to access the ultimate Christian space and is instead sent to languish in hell (14). On the other hand, the book's concluding sentence positions Frado as the biblical Joseph, "a spiritually powerful and unjustly enslaved reader of dreams who will eventually escape and prosper" (Foreman and Pitts 105). Joseph's trajectory portends Frado's: despite her unjust virtual enslavement, she too will prosper and eventually ascend to heaven. The narrative of resistance that sees Frado study the Bible in the margins sets her on a path that ultimately leads to the utopia of immortal happiness.

Of the two stories set in the white house, the second story, which celebrates Frado's resistance, prevails. On the surface, Mrs. Bellmont's oppression permeates the centers and margins, the common and private spaces in the white house. Frado, by taking full advantage of the spaces to which she is permitted access, not only subverts this oppression, but journeys to the ultimate Christian utopia. In light of the white house's symbolic reference to the U.S., narrative duality in the Bellmont's home becomes even more powerful with its national implications: while, on the surface, white enslavers and racists lead a dominant narrative of oppression against Black Americans, the latter not only spearhead proud resistance from their margins, but can work their way toward a heaven of immortal happiness. Their white oppressors, on the other hand, shall burn in hell.

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BACKMATTER

Contributors

Katie Brown graduated from Furman University with a degree in English in May 2020. When she declared a concentration in Creative Writing, she figured “this sounds like fun!” Little did she know her major would change the way she walked about the world, illuminating stories all around her and teaching her how to read people more keenly. She hopes to extend her love for stories and the people who shape them into a career in nonprofit.

Lydia Burgess is a junior at Charleston Southern University, formalizing her passion for teaching by majoring in English Education. A current tutor and future teacher, she hopes to show her students the value and beauty of English without belittling the beauty and value of other languages and dialects. As a hobby, she dabbles in Spanish, French, and Biblical Hebrew—hoping to approach fluency in those and add others to the list.

Laura Creekmore graduated with honors from the University of Mississippi. As an undergraduate, she majored in English with minors in Professional Writing and Environmental Studies. She will be continuing her education in Louisiana State University’s English doctoral program in the fall.

Via D’Agostino, originally from the wilderness of Western Massachusetts, is an MFA candidate in Fiction Writing at the University of New

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Taylor Drake is a recent graduate of Agnes Scott College in Decatur, GA, where she majored in English Literature and minored in Religious Studies. Alongside Sigma Tau Delta, she is also a member of Theta Alpha Kappa, a national honor society for students of religious studies and theology. Her creative writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Outrageous Fortune* and *Storm Cellar Quarterly*, where she won 2nd place in the 2020 Force Majeure Flash Contest. Her academic writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *LURe* and Agnes Scott College's undergraduate journal, *The Onyx Review*.

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Cornelius Fortune recently earned his MA in English Literature from Mercy College, and will pursue a PhD in American Cultural Studies this fall at Bowling Green State University. His work has appeared in *Yahoo News*, *Cinema Blend*, *The Advocate*, *The Novel & Short Story Writer's Market*, *Midwest Living*, and other venues. He currently teaches composition, poetry, and drama at Jackson College.

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Taylor Garrison received her BA in History from Muhlenberg College in May 2020. She was awarded a 2020 Seminar for Undergraduate Poets fellowship from Bucknell University's Stadler Poetry Center. Taylor's poetry has appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *Not Very Quiet*, *Snapdragon Journal*, and elsewhere. While at Muhlenberg, Taylor served as an editor of the *Muhlenberg Academic Review* run by the Gamma Iota Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She intends to pursue a PhD in American History with a focus on the antebellum period.

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Caroline Huff graduated from SUNY Brockport in December 2020 with a degree in Childhood Inclusive Education and Creative Writing. She is now continuing her path toward becoming an elementary school teacher. This is her first publication and she is grateful for the honor.

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Isabel Parham is a senior English Studies major and Sociology minor at Ball State University. She is a member of the Ball State Honors College and is entering her second year as an Honors College Undergraduate Fellow. Her work has been published in the *Digital Literature Review*, and she has worked for two years as a copy editor for *Stance: An International Undergraduate Philosophy Journal*.

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Sofia Rabaté is a senior at the University of Pennsylvania, majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her other interests include translation, Romance languages, and classical music. Outside of class, she is a cellist in the Penn Symphony Orchestra and an editor of the *Penn Review* literary magazine. Blending imagination and precision, she would be happy to pursue a career in either writing or editing.

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She plans eventually to attend graduate school in hopes of later becoming a literature professor.

Sarah Robbins is a writer originally from Oklahoma. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Carte Blanche*, *Thin Air*, *Pretty Cool Poetry Thing*, and other venues. She spends her free time sewing and watching reruns of *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*. Follow her on Twitter (@/saa-raahkate) or Instagram (@/tri_sarahtops).

Madison Rodak is a recent graduate of Ursinus College, where she received a BA in English with minors in Creative Writing and Media and Communications Studies. While at Ursinus, she tutored at the Center for Writing and Speaking and served as the features editor for the student newspaper, *The Grizzly*. Her poems have also been published in Ursinus's literary magazine, *The Lantern*.

Ezra Rodriguez is a senior at Concordia University Texas, majoring in English with a concentration in Writing. His work focuses on the interplay of the personal discovery of LGBTQ+ identity and the sense of self in heteronormative surroundings. Outside of his term papers, he writes for his school's digital literature website and works with elementary-aged students as added support for and reinforcement of their classroom learning.

Emma Slaven is a senior at Charleston Southern University, majoring in English (with an emphasis on writing) and minoring in Journalism. Throughout her college career thus far, she has become a tutor in the writing center and a member of Sigma Tau Delta; published an article in her school's online news source, *The Buccaneer Beacon*; and published her poetry in her school's literary magazine, *Sefer*. Emma would like to thank every English teacher she's had the pleasure of knowing, who taught her that writing matters—and that it's okay to waste a year on nursing school as long as you find your way back.

Susana Spradling is a 2020 graduate of Pennsylvania State University's Altoona campus, where she majored in Integrative Arts with a concentration in Creative Writing. She served as Treasurer for the Penn State Altoona Sigma Tau Delta chapter from 2018–2020. For her senior project,

she completed her first chapbook *up at the dirt, down at the stars*, which will be “virtually-launched” pending website completion. She has recently moved from her hometown, Altoona, to Pittsburgh in pursuit of a graduate degree in Poetry. For the summer, Susana wants to take a mental break from academia and explore little corners of the city with her two dogs in search of good coffee, shady parks, and something to write about.

Cadence Summers recently graduated cum laude from Dixie State University with a degree in Professional and Technical Writing. She plans to pursue a Master’s in Library Science. Originally from Salt Lake City, she has traveled extensively with her family in her own and the other western states. She has one self-published book of poetry, and has published poetry, photography, and non-fiction in journals such as the *Southern Quill* and *Juste Milieu*. She loves to read, discuss books and philosophy with anyone, and loves especially to spend time in nature, whether hiking in the mountains or just spending time in her own garden.

Gabriela Szczepankiewicz is a senior at Old Dominion University (ODU), majoring in Creative Writing. Originally intending to study STEM, she switched to English to pursue her more creative aspirations. She won an honorable mention in the undergraduate section of the ODU Poetry Prize Competition for 2018–2019 and 2019–2020. Recently, she received her first publication in *Blue Marble Review*. In her spare time, she likes to read and has taken up reviewing books online in an effort to pursue her dream career in publishing and copyediting.

Raegan Thomas is a graduate from High Point University, located in High Point, NC. She received her BA in English Literature with minors in Religion and Creative Writing. When she isn’t teaching or juggling her other jobs, Raegan writes poetry and manages her faith-based blog www.mmsoulsearch.com. Her work can also be found in *Apogee*, *Triad Journal*, and High Point University’s *Innovation*.

Emma Turner received her BA in English and Women’s and Gender Studies from Lindsey Wilson College in May 2020. During her undergraduate career, she was actively involved in the campus humanities culture as editor-in-chief of both the college’s literary journal and its humanities

research journal. Her works were published in these volumes as well. Currently, Emma is an English MA student at the University of Louisville.

Kieron Walquist is a graduate of Lincoln University of Missouri and an MFA candidate at Washington University in St. Louis. He won 1st place in original fiction at the 2019 Sigma Tau Delta Convention, received the 2019 Cecil A. Blue Award and the 2018 Holman-Teabeau Blue Award from his alma mater, and has been nominated for *Best New Poets 2020*. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Cider Press Review*, *Fewer Than 500*, *fresh.ink*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, and elsewhere.

Katelyn Ward recently earned a BA in English from the University of Texas at Tyler. She is currently working as a freelance editor online through UpWork. Developmental editing is something she thoroughly enjoys doing, and she wishes someone had told her it was an option before she tried to become an accountant. By the end of this year, she will have earned a copyediting certificate from Writer's Digest University. Her dream is to one day work as a full-time children's literature editor.

Jiawen "Xavier" Xin recently graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Macalester College, majoring in English Literature. At Macalester, he was the recipient of the Gateway Prize for Excellence in Writing and the Harry Scherman Award for Literary Analysis. His paper was also selected to be presented at the Associated Colleges of the Twin Cities English Major Conference. His honors thesis examines the literary mechanics of nineteenth-century evolutionary science writing, with a particular focus on *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* by Robert Chambers. He hopes to pursue a PhD in English in the future, with an interest in critical race, queer, and post-colonial theory.

Judges

Judges for Writing Awards

Kevin Brown is a professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry—*Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock, 2014); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the 2013 Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two chapbooks: *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2011). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State UP, 2012). He received his MFA from Murray State University.

Shannin Schroeder is a professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches world literature, composition, and creative writing, and directs the Writing Center. Her publications include the monograph *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas* and a solicited chapter on the development of Magical Realism in North America (forthcoming in a Cambridge UP series). She has presented on flag culture, superheroes, dystopias, graphic novels, and writing center theory. Her most recent creative writing delves into the young adult novel.

Jurors

Peyton Austin is a recent graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles with a BA in English Literature and a concentration in Creative Writing. Her poetry and non-fiction have previously been published in *Westwind*, of which she was also the 2019–2020 senior fiction editor. She is still recovering from completing her creative senior thesis.

Rebecca Bechtold is an associate professor of English at Wichita State University, where she serves as the department's graduate coordinator. Her research focuses on the role of sound and music in early American literary culture.

Michael Behrens is an associate professor of English at Emporia State University, where he teaches courses in British literature and literary studies. His research focuses on early modern women and religion.

Alana King received a BA in English from Texas State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Memphis. She is currently working toward a PhD in Literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her research interests include American literature and history, the literature and history of marginalized and underrepresented populations, film studies, and war and genocide studies.

Balbina Yang is a senior at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she studies English Literature and Art History. She is an officer of her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter, as well as an editor-in-chief of her campus's creative arts journal, *Stylus*. In her free time, she enjoys swimming and watching cooking shows.

About Sigma Tau Delta

Since its inception in 1924, Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society has modeled its mission to confer distinction for high achievement, promote interest in English language and literature, foster exemplary character and fellowship, and exhibit high standards of academic excellence.

In 1972, Sigma Tau Delta was accepted as a member of the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS). Currently the Society has grown to include over 920 chapters with more than 1,000 Faculty Advisors; approximately 8,500 members are inducted annually.

Sigma Tau Delta has continued to flourish and expand, branching out in 1996 to found Sigma Kappa Delta for the growing two-year college system, and in 2004 it established the National English Honor Society for high school students and faculty. It is now the second largest honor society in the ACHS.

Through hard and dedicated work, Sigma Tau Delta has built upon the strong foundation of its founder Judson Q. Owen, whose initial foresight shaped the Society; two subsequent executive secretaries/directors—E. Nelson James and William C. Johnson—added their own visions to the Society, and many other individuals further shaped the vital, growing organization we are today.

Sigma Tau Delta's Journals

The Sigma Tau Delta journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of undergraduate and graduate active chapter members of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society.

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle was founded in 1931 as a quarterly publication highlighting the best creative writing of the Society's members. At the fall 1998 meeting of the Board of Directors, *The Rectangle* went to a once-a-year publication schedule, providing a more professional look and permitting the inclusion of more student writing in each issue.

Sigma Tau Delta Review was added as a societal journal in 2007 and publishes critical essays on literature, essays on rhetoric and composition, and essays devoted to pedagogical issues.

Annual Submissions

The best writing is chosen for publication from hundreds of submissions. Not only do these refereed journals go to chapters worldwide, but they also honor the best writing in each category, with five awards totaling \$2,500. As of 2016, the Sigma Tau Delta journals are catalogued with the Library of Congress. There is also an annual reading at the international convention by any of the published writers in attendance.

All active undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their work to *Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. Chapter Advisors, faculty members, alumni (including members of the Alumni Epsilon Chapter), and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

Submissions for the 2022 journals are due between April 12 and May 10, 2021.



SIGMA TAU DELTA

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