

SIGMA TAU DELTA JOURNALS  
INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

SIGMA TAU DELTA  
RECTANGLE

*Journal of Creative Writing*

VOLUME 99, 2024



SIGMA TAU DELTA  
REVIEW  
*Journal of Critical Writing*

VOLUME 21, 2024

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2023–24 WRITING AWARDS  
FOR SIGMA TAU DELTA *REVIEW*  
AND SIGMA TAU DELTA *RECTANGLE*

*Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award*

Ian Hearn: “Nothingness, Depravity, and the Necessity for  
Christian Charity: Tragedy and Hope in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*”

*Eleanor B. North Poetry Award*

Alexandra Gonzales: “A Road in Pennsylvania after  
‘A Supermarket in California’ by Allen Ginsberg”

*E. Nelson James Poetry Award*

Eunice Tan: “Malayan Chorus, Our Voices Arise,  
Our Harmonies Become the Melodies of Song-Story”

*Herbert Hughes Short Story Award*

Mary Brown: “Why I Should Have Never Left: A Story in One Sentence”

*Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award*

Erika Girard: “Ms. Monkey Bread”



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## *Content Warning*

Manuscripts included in this publication may address topics (such as death, assault, and sexuality) that could cause duress in readers; to prevent unnecessary duress, we offer this warning and acknowledge the humanity of both our authors and our readers. We appreciate the writers' transparency in addressing sensitive topics.



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RECTANGLE

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# POETRY

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## In Another Universe

---

DeAni Blake-Britton

We hold hands on the way to the store and we don't give  
silence the chance to estrange us. We talk about your job—

about the little boy who tried to pay for a TombStone pizza with a torn, wet  
dollar bill, three quarters, and Tootsie Roll wrappers;

about the woman stealing tampons;  
about the shelves empty of toilet paper and rice.

In another universe, you want to renovate the backyard. You want a stone  
path  
leading to a small pond filled with koi fish and a tomato garden.

You ask me what I want and, with as much power as a ten-year-old can  
muster,  
I scream my answer over the busted muffler of a passing car:

*chocolate ice cream.*

In another universe, everything I say matters.

In another universe, we fly the kites shoved away on the top shelf of the  
hallway closet,

and you are mostly gentle.

In another universe, you love to be my mom.

In another universe, we're laughing about the boy I kissed in the park  
and you're only half scolding me. There are no bruises or tears at the end  
of the night.

In another universe, you grab an orange from the checkered  
fruit bowl and dissect it into halves:

a half for you; a half for me.

Clean of all its stringy parts.

In another universe, citrus spurts in the air and we are comfortable enough  
to lick the pale-yellow juice from our hands before it reaches our forearms.

In another universe, you never fail—and I never lack—  
and when you pass away, I grieve you as everything I needed you to be.

## Divorce Court

---

Mitchell Bruce

Sleeping on the floor makes me humble. Your hunger protest is performative. The leopards are caged. The pipe under the floor is leaking—not water but sewage. It smells terrible. In a temple of fertile aspirations, the foundations crack silently, eluding inspiration. Form follows finance. And Love, we're crumbling.

## The Tan Armchair

---

Jessica Daniliuk

Diving into the macaroons  
With coconut-crusting fingertips.  
Eighty years gently placed in each line.  
Permanent blue-collar callouses caked on the palms.

You always sit in that old chair,  
Grabbing the lever, reclining back,  
Statuesque in your natural habitat.  
A shell abandoned by a hermit crab,  
A chrysalis after the beautiful transformation.

Your mind is low tide under the boardwalk.  
Glistening between the rocks, rippling under stomping feet.  
Can you still imagine the ocean breeze?  
What about overcoming all of those impossible feats?  
Successfully grabbing the toys with the metal claw,  
Savagely devouring a funnel cake in ten seconds,  
Making a young girl laugh.

---

Lost in the folds of that tan armchair,  
Time ticking away,  
Macaroons left on the shelf.

# Beginning to Hate You Was the Beginning of Wisdom

---

Nori Dawson

“I have said too much, yet give me this—” (Limón 42).  
I am more than the jeans on the floor  
or the cheap leftover shampoo I used  
in the shower that you shared with your ex.

I am worth flowers on the table  
after a long day of work,  
instead of the usual fighting I was met with.

The happiness candle burns in the corner of my room  
as I sit and listen to your favorite song.  
I’m sorry you broke my heart.

After I cut my hair,  
I stopped wanting you.  
I keep quiet and let you live your life.

---

*Work Cited*

Limón, Ada. "Hardworking Agreement with a Wednesday." *Sharks in the Rivers*, Milkweed Editions, pp. 41-42, [www.scribd.com/read/497958411/Sharks-in-the-Rivers#](http://www.scribd.com/read/497958411/Sharks-in-the-Rivers#).

## Swan Song

---

Kira M. Dewey

Perching in the wings,  
she stands poised *en pointe*;  
the thorns pin her hair back—  
knives smaller than talons,  
lips glistening  
like bloodstains.

Skirting spotlights,  
she flees fluorescence,  
bound in black spandex,  
half-shrouded  
in ghostly ebony tulle,  
fabric whispering kisses  
against nude tights.

The beam searches, hungry  
following frantic *chassés*,  
smirking at *chaînés*,  
hunting the flightless bird  
with scars marring her wings.



---

Her soul trembles  
and lifts its voice in shaky song,  
learning to dance on  
broken legs;  
she leaps—now perfectly poised  
above theater pews.

## Dream Loop

Christopher Mark Doney

Sleep  
Escaping me  
Well past the midnight hour  
My eyes lightly closed  
I lay in bed listening  
Listening to the far-off thunder  
Gently roll in my direction  
The rain will be here soon  
Thoughts  
Dancing like raindrops in my head  
They will not rest  
Hour after hour  
Insomnia fades into exhaustion  
Beginning to doze off  
Trying to find deep sleep  
That's when it attacks  
Out of fear  
Cannot move  
Except for my eyes  
Paralysis  
Auras of purple phosphenes

Cloud the murky darkness  
Caught between a dream and wakefulness  
Fear bristles against my clammy white skin  
Within my bones  
I know what is coming  
The nebulous black shadow  
Hovering over me  
Lowering on top of me  
Talking in a gravelly voice  
Pushing its terror into me  
Penetrating me  
I feel it  
A raw edge of fear  
Cutting through my brain  
My lungs are pressed flat like sheets of rolled iron  
Cannot inhale  
Cannot take air, breathe  
Mouth is shut tight  
Tighter than the sewn lips of a shrunken head  
My tongue is a frozen spike  
Useless  
Suffocation begins to grip me  
The voice gets louder  
Growling through viscous ether  
The thick water  
Pushing into my ears  
I struggle to listen  
Struggle to understand  
Motionless struggle  
I feel  
Powerless to resist  
The piercing of my sanity  
The shadowy black hand  
Against my sealed lips  
My heart is racing faster and faster

Will it take my life?  
Will it take my life?  
My eyes roll back in my head  
Bright white flashes through my window  
A clap of thunder shakes the house  
Heavy rain begins to fall  
Sheets whip against the window  
The thing, the entity, vanishes!  
Brain cramped  
Hand lifted  
Lungs gasping for the cold  
Moist air  
Deep breaths  
Recovering  
Can move again  
My body quivers  
Fingers bend  
Oxygen  
Flashes of purple phosphenes remain  
A cruel reminder  
This was not a dream  
This is not the first time  
The visitor of the night  
Sought me out  
Violated me  
I am a regular on his circuit  
Too afraid to sleep  
Too afraid to die  
Insomnia is my nightly bread  
Why is this curse upon me?  
Explained away as night paralysis  
A scientific explanation  
No reconciliation  
Doesn't work  
Doesn't make sense  
Others have seen this thing too  
Experienced the same

What is the reality?  
The Truth?  
Prince of Peace  
Where is my peace?  
Phosphenes pulsate purple hues  
Each day and night  
I dread  
Conditioned to fear  
Trafficked each night  
I lay my head down to sleep  
In the midnight hour  
It again seeks me out  
Finds me afraid and waiting  
Vulnerable  
Paralyzed  
Auras of purple phosphenes  
Cloud the murky darkness  
Caught between a dream and wakefulness  
Fear bristles against my clammy white skin  
Within my bones  
I know what is coming  
The nebulous black shadow  
Hovering over me  
Lowering on top of me  
Talking in a deep gravelly voice  
Pushing its terror into me  
Penetrating me  
I feel it  
Take my liver  
Chained to a dream  
A reality  
Repeating each night  
Taking my wits  
My sanity  
My life

## Extraction

Tyler Edwards

the passenger seat acts  
as a makeshift medical table

a close friend  
basically blood  
holds a scalpel made of the starry night sky  
against my temple  
slicing along the dotted line  
I've drawn for them

it doesn't hurt  
but I fear it might later

I fear what lies underneath the skin  
more than the blade that peels it away

it comes off clean  
and they toss it gently to the side  
exposing my skull underneath

their eyes meet mine

desperate for guidance or direction  
and I do everything to reassure them  
despite my own uncertainties

“Keep going. Please.”

the chisel is positioned carefully along my skull  
and before I can regret it  
they sculpt the top of it away from my head  
exposing the gnarled mess inside

I can't see them  
but can only imagine them recoiling in shock  
disgust

instead  
they waste no time  
gingerly diving into the wrinkled pile of knots

without any sense of fear  
urgency or  
discomfort  
their fingers reach in  
pulling out a loose end  
the start of a conversation.

it stains their hands a violent red  
that will never fade away  
no matter how they try to cleanse themselves of it

their decision is permanent  
something they must accept for  
as long as they live

yet for some reason

their grip on the remark tightens  
and this time they reassure me with a warm smile.

a small yank and I unravel

they open the floodgates and I come apart in their hands  
gore spilling onto their lap and the car mat below

I'm repulsed at myself  
but they don't seem to mind  
continuing to gently pull  
at the lengthy strand of brain  
which only gets lengthier the longer they pull

for hours we sit together like that  
the thin filament growing

I know they will never reach the end

and I wonder if they will realize that too  
or continue to pull  
grasping at the never-ending thought  
until one of us reaches our destination

a fruitless game of tug of war with my brain as the rope

secretly I  
hope that one day  
after miles of thoughts are  
piled in the passenger seat of my car  
we'll discover it together  
the deepest recess of my mind

the edge of my subconscious  
where my head will be empty  
and I can finally stop thinking



so until then

“No matter how pointless it may seem,  
please keep pulling, and I’ll happily do the same for you.”

## recollection

Tyler Edwards

If I had a candle  
I would light it in memory of

ESCAPED BALLOONS  
shiny and forever rising  
floating to the whim of the wind  
due to another's negligence

FALLEN ICE CREAM  
melting into puddles  
forming sugary rivers and floods  
on the red-hot pavement

SHRUNKEN T-SHIRTS  
that weren't meant to be dried  
now two sizes too small  
and shriveled like paper

FORGOTTEN IMAGINARY FRIENDS  
buried deep in the subconscious

deceiving themselves and daydreaming  
about floors of lava

CARNIVAL GOLDFISH  
their scales flash colors  
reflected from the fireworks  
cramped among their brothers

GOODWILL TROPHIES  
once a proud memento  
tossed away for shelf space  
collecting cobwebs for \$2.99

POST-WASH POCKET PAPER  
it was a receipt  
or maybe a grocery list  
the words warp unreadably into a wad

SINGLE FLIP-FLOPS  
sitting in closet corners  
awaiting the day  
people will hop on one foot

GYM-RAFTER BASKETBALLS  
an insect caught in  
a tangled web of metal beams  
far too high to consider retrieving

If I had a candle  
I would light it in memory of

#### ALL THESE LOST THINGS

but my apartment has a rule against candles  
and I can't stand the scent of sandalwood.

## Ex Vivo

Sofia Escobar

- I. In a past life, my father was  
a renowned surgeon. He rested  
my body on a Westar 2001  
mechanic chair and counted  
me out of consciousness.

10.

*Good job.*

9.

8. *Keep counting.*

*You won't feel a thing.*

7.

6.

I was lucky to have been  
selected as his wait list grew  
longer by the day. He was  
saving me from the cancer  
that swelled inside of me.

A knife sliced a  
pocket into my  
abdomen.

One by one, six organs

were placed on a table

beside  
my body.

Carefully, he  
sunk his teeth into  
each one, chewing  
me from within. He

savored me, and  
it was sickening.

Bits of myself lingered in  
the gaps in his teeth. A  
toothpick jabbed at his gums  
until the frayed end softly  
grasped my day-old wedge  
of flesh.

II. In a past life, my father was  
an endocannibal. His patients  
were his prey, and I was  
the only one in the

waiting room.

My organs were young  
and delicious. He feasted  
on me like the last supper,  
and washed me down with  
a cup of ayahuasca tea. He  
wiped his mouth with a  
napkin and placed my organs  
back inside me.

I was the sacrificial token for  
Amahuaca, and from my  
wisdom, he obtained  
his own.

III. In a past life, my father  
was a good man. It's now, the future.

All his past participles  
have expired, and I'm still  
his  
victim.

He's moved on  
and I'm still  
missing parts  
of me.

Today, my father became an organ donor. Today, I became a surgeon.

VI. In a past life, my father  
was forgiven. He choked  
on me like a child learning  
to swallow a pill for the  
first time.

I balled my fist over his  
abdomen and watched him  
spit me out. He cleaned me  
off the floor,  
and with a slight grin,  
I reassured him that  
*it's okay.*

Today, I cooked my father dinner. The garnish of balsamic glaze that drizzled along the curve of his plate caught his eye. He told me I'd created a beautiful dish. I told him *I learned from the best*.

---

Today, I became a cannibal. We  
dined on his leanest meat and I  
wiped my mouth with his doctorate.

## Like Father, Like Daughter

---

Sofia Escobar

An angry man lives inside of me and  
I am too kind to kick him out. The  
heat of his fury rises to my head, forming  
anvil clouds that flatten across my brain. I  
let him come home drunk and hurl the  
empty bottles,  
remote controller,  
and books off the coffee table.

The spilt *Cusqueña* stains my new  
white rug as I dab over it with a wet  
paper towel, soaking up the regret of  
his presence. He curses at me with the  
fury of his father, and the father of his  
father, turning red in the face, with a  
protruding vein from his temple that  
meanders to his forehead. Beads of  
his spit land on my lips, and they taste  
like the childhood he was robbed of.



After he crashes, I haul his body upstairs  
and cover him with a blanket. I brush my  
teeth in the bathroom and see his reflection  
when I look in the mirror. He's the curl in  
my hair and the shape of my eyes and the  
guttural tone in my voice when I speak.

I try to fumigate his home with the smoke from a  
drag, but I think he likes the way it smells too much.

I posted a

FOR SALE

sign on the front lawn today. Our home  
is made of his immigration to America  
at 11 years old, the fact that I will never  
understand—what it was like to be him as  
a child and wondering if we'd be neighborhood  
friends in Peru. I sympathize with a past version  
of him, and who am I to be the reason his inner  
child ends up cold and alone on the street?

# The Autonomy of Art

Sofia Escobar

- I. Language has an elasticity to it, sustaining the stretching and  
twisting of curious poets. Letters  
settle in the empty space  
between a rubber band and  
slingshot into future art. Who  
knows what poetry will be in  
2152;

I know it will still be engrossing.

Potential energy builds in the confined walls  
and waits patiently to become kinetic. Words  
sit in the loop and wait  
to be catapulted into a  
larger work. They snuggle  
into the idleness of lineation  
and begin the movement of  
craft.

- II. Poesie pieces itself together like a puzzle, with  
steganographic coding living in the curved

edges that match in the emptiness of one's  
 blanks<sup>1</sup> with the shape of a tab.<sup>2</sup>

STEG-a-NOG-ra-fee.

I am one with words. I've  
 coded the letters of a  
 and f  
 and s  
 and o  
 and i

with my aseptic autograph,  
 on the border of sense-making  
 and illusive.

I travel with letters and, as they  
 bend, I bend. I get cricks in my  
 neck and crack them with a slight  
 twist of my head, emitting endorphins  
 that twirl on my skin and leaves me feeling  
 light.

III. Art as autonomous. This is  
 all art needs to be: the ruler of  
 the self and of all things. I think  
 art dreams of being simplistic  
 when we require it to be  
 labyrinthine. Art wants to  
 breathe.

It  
 She  
 Of.

<sup>1</sup>. Name for puzzle pieces that are curved in, known as blanks (Puzzle Seek)

<sup>2</sup>. Name for puzzle pieces with the piece that fits into the blanks (Puzzle Seek)

Deixis and origo. Linguistics  
stands two feet tall yet towers  
over humanity. Language is a  
flower with roots that stretch to  
the Earth's core. Bathing in the  
sun has become its vocation. We  
should let it bask.

*Work Cited*

Puzzle Seek. "Jigsaw Puzzle Parts: Tab and Blank." [www.puzzleseek.com/post/jigsaw-puzzle-parts-tab-and-blank-2](http://www.puzzleseek.com/post/jigsaw-puzzle-parts-tab-and-blank-2).

## A Response to Kevin Cole's "Autistic Boy"

---

Noah Fischbach

The earth does not know him.  
You have shut off the stove;  
refused promise. His lips, curious for empathy,  
analyze back catalogs of conflated whispers.

Don't you hear how passionately he sings?  
Can't you see how eagerly he flies,  
hands flapping in tune with the beasts  
of the air?

He is dedicated to the mechanical  
underbelly of the earth, dutifully  
conversing in argot;  
clinging to sandpaper sky  
and riches of juice-box tang  
among ever-fruitful trees.

Young hands unsteady on your shoulders,  
he understands this macrocosm of  
livelihood—of well-lived days  
and skin-on-skin intimacy. Sky-lit eyes

behold a masterpiece beheld to only divine  
whispers of eternal mystery.

Skulllocked, he dreams  
of far-away worlds where normalcy reigns  
irrelevant and left-handed are integrated  
into the great melting pot  
served beside frozen chicken nuggets.

*Work Cited*

Cole, Kevin. "Autistic Boy." *Poetry Foundation*, Jul. 1986, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=36476](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=36476)

## Hummingbird on a Wire

---

Marisa Frisk

Sitting  
there  
on the  
porch wire was  
a small hummingbird  
looking in at me while I sat.

Reminded of my father's love by this small creature.

Quietly, for a few minutes  
I watched as he sat  
on the wire.  
With that  
he  
left.

Editorial Note: The poem is written as a Fibonacci sequence.

A Road in Pennsylvania  
after “A Supermarket in  
California” by Allen Ginsberg

---

Alexandra Gonzalez

I’m thinking of you on my drive, Alison Bechdel, for I passed two men on the sidewalk illuminated by the streetlamps with a sneaking suspicion they wouldn’t pass your test on reality television.

On my sleepy commute and yearning for caffeine, I drove through the Copper Cup, envisioning your comic strips!

What American-o’s and what word containers! Entire newsrooms in vehicles! Vans full of editors! Reporters in the espresso, paginators in the plastic cups!—And you, dear reader, how did you end up with the tea spilled?

I imagined you, Alison Bechdel, childfree, queer ole cartoonist, sharpening pencils behind farm equipment and sketching at stop signs.

I saw your speech-bubbling questions to each barista: Where are your beans from? How much peanuttty chopped salad? Are you my mother?

I swerved around the glossy lids and potholes following you, feeling followed in my rearview by the state trooper.

We inched through the used-to-be-bank lanes together with our books, sipping lavender lattes, stealing images for the road, and never passing cash through the window.

Which corner are we turning, Alison Bechdel? Google Maps will turn off my phone in half an hour. Which direction will your pencil point tonight?



(I grab your book from my bag and imagine us carpooling in the café drive-thru lane and feel nutty.)

Will we drive all night through straight streets? The churches cast shadows on shadows; the music is off in the bars; we'll both be tired.

Will we drift intoxicated with the idea of an America of love couples dancing in kitchens, coddling our love-trauma complex?

I wonder, dear mother, feminist, queer ole world-braver, how America treated you when Rubin walked veiled down the aisle, and you fought a tear and later stood watching your love license be tossed into the icy abyss of a courtroom in California?

Lebanon Valley, 2023

### *Work Cited*

Ginsberg, Allen. "A Supermarket in California." *Journal Foundation*. 1984, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47660/a-supermarket-in-california>.

## The Promise

Abigail “Nick” Greenburg

“Don’t do what I did,”  
my mother tells me laughing, her hand  
grazing the amber wedding photo,  
sepia-tone warm as my parents’ bedroom in the summer  
where we sit on worn green carpet and sort through books of moments  
trapped and preserved—chunks of ancient history,  
as far as I’m concerned.  
Here she is eternally:  
nineteen, fresh out of high school and into a bridal gown,  
she and my father smiling in front of the church.  
She smiles now, too, down at herself.  
“We were too young,” she says. “Wait until you’re done with school.”  
Me, I’m looking at the picture.  
Dust, disturbed by the slow-spinning ceiling-fan blades,  
floats for a moment in sunlight and settles unchanged.

From downstairs comes the scent of cooking chili,  
wafting through the vents—chili, I say,  
but truly the aroma’s mostly onion.  
Dad will never include more spice than suits his wife’s sensitive tongue.  
Head-tilt look:

expectant, she wants me to answer.

I shake myself out of the late afternoon's sleep-slow trance  
and give breezy assent.

What is there here of more consequence  
than the meal that awaits when we make our way  
to the kitchen, talk abandoned behind  
with the promise pressed between dusty album pages?

## She Buried His Name on a Tuesday

---

Alysa Joerger

She said I was so funny that I was gonna make her vomit—  
side-aching, red-faced, hyperventilating, feels-like-dying,  
crying while you laugh.

And one time, she did. All our friends—no, all her friends—  
sat around the table, eyeing us from behind their black cards,  
while she laughed 'til noodles spewed out of her mouth and nose.

But that was the only time: long before adulting  
was a thing—before we were cast out of high school—before we fell  
into real-home economics and politics.  
We bullshit through life like an essay due at 11:59 tonight. With exes

on my unmanicured hands, on my chapped lips, I dragged  
myself down the aisle then up the steps of our first house—  
that rotting-teeth-white Victorian. In the dark  
upstairs, I whispered to him—she buried his name—in ghostly breaths,

while I swung my feet. Downstairs, she did who-gives-a-damn what,  
maybe our roommate,  
maybe not. I escaped into the eyes on my phone screen—its light  
the only light on our bed, his familiar voice the only sound.

## Dear X

Alysa Joerger

Choose the right knife for the job—you'll hold it like this.  
Make sure the knife and your hands are clean before chopping.  
Guide the food carefully; watch your finger placement.

Mother never taught me a damn thing. I'd fixated on her face, filtering  
the yellow and purple out as I checked squashes and eggplants for marks  
of rotting. This was long before adulting, as you said, was a thing.

Sometime between kitchen traditions and said adulting, I met my perfect  
match,  
my perfect opponent. (I met you.) Silver dripped off your tongue in Gov/  
Econ  
debates, stars sparkled on your posterboard book reviews—and you knew

how to roll dough and handle a blade in Home Ec. You marked my  
manicured  
hands with Xs when we dug in the dirt, supposedly learning the  
real-world  
application of genetics via flower crossbreeding. We fought  
for valedictorian as if there was a difference between your 100 percent

and mine. Strawberry-lined smirks were a secret shared. Neither of us  
got valedictorian and, still crooked-capped, we fell into real-home  
economics

and politics. The dirt under our fingernails was covered by polished-off  
Cabernet. We'd wash our hands again and again, and I'd fixate on your  
face  
each time you took the blade to beets—or breasts. The musk of manicured

words filled the bedroom; with the lights out, I could still smell them. I  
chewed  
on every word, every period. I wondered, *Did I hold you right? Was my finger  
placement  
off?* I sliced myself on your tongue. I'd thought your soil was infertile  
because I couldn't

cultivate anything.

## when they say our protest is violence

---

Jaylin Lydell Jones

I ask  
*what is revolution?*

a master's sobs  
buried by the laughter  
of the slave

*do you think someone could ever be  
too hungry for freedom?*

the first full breath without fear of the lash  
long and unbroken like  
the chains of blood  
the holiest note of gospel

*if they stole your heart  
would you take it back  
or die?*

tell me how you protest,  
where you march and



how much of this blood  
in the street is yours

revolution is  
the correction of error  
the righting of wrong  
bending the arm of history  
toward justice  
till it breaks

stand with me  
over the shallow graves  
and ask them  
when the sun sets

no one

Jaylin Lydell Jones

*Me and God raised him—no one but me and God.*

hands clasped tight at bed's edge  
head bowed and eyes shut to see Him

again, she wishes this body safe  
begs to keep her black boy whole but  
there is no one here but us, Mama

even in this long dark, knees bent  
to nurse this Lord's Prayer on our lips

I know you pray only  
when you are afraid  
and why wouldn't you be

there is no one here but us,  
Mama, and your scars

aching, this brown skin a tapestry  
of sacrifice, ember-kissed

body humming grace  
*Our God got us, Baby.*  
how sweet we sound

alone, with no hope left  
for men who know everything,  
who leave their sons to die

there is no one  
here but us, Mama,  
so you must be  
God.

## Letter to My Karate Instructor from Cutler Bay, Florida

---

Khamille Labbé

You made me mature for my age.  
You taught me how to kick  
my worries and concerns on  
the trunk of a tree while you hoped  
both it and I would be bare. You taught me how  
to scream after every jab and strike, so if I  
cried out for help, it would sound  
like training began. You taught me how to jump  
over fences behind the neighborhood  
closest to my school, cutting  
the distance between us.  
I went to school down 87th Avenue.  
The buildings were painted with fresh shades  
for spring—dusty white *and ocean blue*.  
You finished my sentence before I could,  
and I found it thoughtful that you knew.  
It wasn't long until you were comfortable  
picking me up around the block  
or driving to my door in your silver Camry,  
blaring songs from your childhood. You thought  
it was cute that I knew those songs too. My 80s playlist

always put you in the mood. You even said  
if I weren't sixteen, I would be *the one*—  
that's when I had enough.  
And when I tried to quit karate, you threw me  
an early birthday party, invited some friends,  
bought us drinks and dinner,  
showing off your money, and it worked.  
You had me right where you wanted me.  
Saying "No" never seemed like an option. It's hard,  
coming from nothing. I took you  
and I took your money. I had to  
feed myself and my mother—told her  
you were a part-time job and she was proud.  
I could never let her know. Now every time  
I go out shopping, your oVertone-red  
hair dye haunts me down every aisle, a pop  
of color that marked your love. Red was never my shade,  
but you made it mine anyway.

## Goodbye

Nichole Pennington

She was telling me goodbye,  
and I was too young to know.  
If I knew, I might've cried  
when she said she had to go.

And I was too young to know  
she couldn't take me back.  
When she said she had to go,  
I owned nothing I could pack.

She couldn't take me back,  
so I went with someone else.  
I owned nothing I could pack,  
I didn't know how I felt.

So I went with someone else  
and learned how to fly.  
I didn't know how I felt  
when she told me goodbye.

## Fata Morgana

Kathleen Elizabeth Ryndak

If salted droplets love the spotless sky  
With warmed caresses 'round the freezing bay,  
I must not trust my hungry, lusting eyes,  
For they'll behold the sultry Morgan Fay.

But once I watch her sweetly dance and float,  
I find myself entranced by Fay's mirage  
And hurry toward her while she nears my boat,  
Extending eager hands to sabotage.

She sings for matelots, a siren song;  
The sound intoxicates my drunken ears.  
I taste it 'long my sickly, scurvied tongue,  
A tomb so deeply brined by Dutchman's tears.

Despite the tales, I fell for Morgan's tricks  
And sunk below the water's deepest six.

## Alphabet Soup

---

Zoe Talbot

My white boyfriend at the time says an Asian slur that I'm not even sure I  
can reclaim.

BabyImSorryItsJustSoNormalizedAndItsNotLikeISaidTheOtherC-  
WordOrNWordOrFWord

And all of a sudden I'm a B word who didn't forgive him,  
and all of a sudden I'm dramatic,  
and all of a sudden I'm nine years old and my bangs are crooked and some  
girl with braces asks me,

"I know you're not Chinese, so I'm not racist, but what are you?"  
which I can't even answer at 23 because I've never been to the Philippines,  
but I can't escape jokes about my eyes  
or my chest  
or my nose.

I am the whitest and tallest of all the kids in my great uncle's basement at  
Thanksgiving,  
still learning my numbers in Tagalog,  
and none of my classmates like the food at my eighth-grade graduation  
party.



I spend my life wondering if every other child has to grow into two people.  
Something tells me no one asks Katie's white dad if she was adopted.

My scuffed saddle shoes tap the linoleum.  
I have to ask my teacher what box I should fill on the entrance exam.  
She doesn't know, and if the person who is supposed to give me the  
information  
doesn't know, then how am I supposed to know?

Maybe I'll trust my best friend's sister, who,  
despite being in college  
and despite being white,  
told me the Philippines is neither a Pacific Island nor a part of Asia.

I wish I could tell that little girl  
*Mahal kita at lagi kitang mamahalin*  
"I love you and I always will."  
Because she's trying so hard to learn two alphabets  
while other kids are calling her A & B & C words.

## 10 Reasons I Kept My Name

---

Zoe Talbot

1. I like my initials.
2. My dad says that my name is gender neutral.
3. My first name means “Life” and my last name means “Death.” I love oxymorons.
4. “Zany Zoe” spent 23 years mastering “The Name Game” icebreaker.
5. I am not willing to listen to people stumble over it (like when I changed my pronouns).
6. My mom cried and told me that changing it would be betraying her.
7. Sometimes I wrestle with womanhood (even if I usually lose).
8. I do not know how to justify to the fourth grader dubbed “Flat Screen” that we would do anything to lose our chests. I do not know why I think I owe it to us to be the feminine individual I so hoped we would grow up to be.
9. I still think I was, at some point, a girl. I was raised a girl. I still experience misogyny. Zoe is still a part of that.
10. Who I was did not die. They just...shifted—not like a caterpillar to a butterfly, but more like a lizard who lost its tail. Most of it is still the same, but there is a new part to it. A stronger, more suitable part. A stronger, more suitable body.

## our love was so loud

---

Zoe Talbot

and that isn't a metaphor for how big  
or sweet

or "powerful"

our love was.

we were really, really, really loud when we wailed  
on your lawn in the middle of that Halloween party  
and on your staircase  
and behind the English building in broad daylight.

is it wrong to miss the worst I've ever felt?  
there is something so raw and real about being L O U D  
and how the world spins faster when you're lightheaded.

being red in face and hoarse in the throat  
means I was still fighting back then.

clawing my way up my own larynx  
is harder when I let your sweet nothings slip  
down my throat and into my stomach.

is it wrong to crave the worst I've ever felt?  
    when you told me that you were wrong,  
        that you didn't actually love me?

At least I knew  
we would always be loud.

Malayan Chorus, Our Voices Arise, Our  
Harmonies Become the Melodies of Song-  
Story: In Response to the Japanese Southern  
Expeditionary Army's Marching Song of WWII

---

Eunice Tan

Content warning: war crimes, sexual assault, violence, and death

(Song is recorded per the source cited in the Works Cited list)

*"Our great Emperor has summoned us  
Our existence has glory, the sun rising  
The 100 million sending their praise"*

scroll down to the song's  
description on youtube it says

*"[We] had no choice but to take on  
a full-scale invasion of China."*

mighty imperial defenders  
no mention of  
malaya the philippines indonesia  
singapore brunei indochina  
east timor wiped from all their textbooks lost loves of  
the pacific

4.5 million civilians wiped out pierced  
shot strangled defaced haha look at that face!  
cut up hung on trees like meat at a hawker stall  
beheaded like the frond of a  
pineapple and skinned like lychee some burned  
black like the pandan leaves dark to a crisp on the  
otak-otak  
gone  
by the rising of the glorious sun  
defenders of the empire

*"The jubilation is so high  
it reaches, stabs, the heavens."*

stab the pound of flesh oh what a little  
octopus limbs flailing! once playing now  
flung in the air splaying up in the hot gust of  
wind then back  
down  
pierced  
bayonet right through  
its little heart's center

baby my baby come to mama

oh mama  
can't hear my cry  
no more

*"Soldiers, go forth! Subjugate them,  
you men of Japan:  
bodies that bloom like flowers  
because of your deep emotions."*

subjugate crowd us in a crate  
ship us away to comfort oh soothe the men burly  
real men who incarcerate us virgins pure fair untainted

subjugate that's what they do desecrate  
our privacy i must live outside my body great  
searing pain emotions bury them deep deep  
beneath my skin and lungs can't breathe help  
i am 14 i thought i was being escorted to a factory  
to make clothes for my family my dirty dying family  
here i am caged by three grey walls one barred door dirty  
men shouting outside banging "it's my turn! hurry up you  
hog you greedy pig she's mine now"  
to comfort  
oh comfort i am here to comfort and yet  
i don't know what that is oh to feel the warm  
comfort of my mother's arms the comfort  
of a woman's body curved body my body  
bruised broken flower petals black beaten  
now the rotten object of my hate

*"Someone is trying to obstruct  
our noble virtues of peace and justice."*

all i want is to hear a  
sorry  
my country got one warship but that  
doesn't do anything to fix the tear  
between my legs my brother shoved  
shot in the ditch my future all hope  
lost  
what is love but a  
sorry  
i will accept i can  
after all these years i  
can forgive  
but you say no sorry you  
erase my story  
our stories from your textbooks  
you hide  
coward

hide behind that damn song that  
great burning sun

*"Soldiers, go! Subjugate them, you  
men of Japan!  
Place the shining and honorable national flag ahead."*

flittering flapping in the air that bright  
white flag its red circle burns  
fire in the middle the color of  
my uncle's blood they  
filled his tummy with water then they  
jumped how they pounced how they  
jumped on him my  
sister's blood her left leg dangling out of the  
back of your tank swaying  
flittering flapping in the air  
keep your flag keep it  
yes you may be a new nation now with  
new leaders new people i don't hate you now  
but i hate your flag keep it  
out of my sight that wretched  
blood sun

*"The homeland that we are protecting,  
we will bring them no sorrow."*

"asia for asians" you said so  
you said you bring glory but all you have brought  
is sorrow my mama is painted in sorrow my  
baba tosses in the grave with sorrow "you  
dirty chinese" you said that too do you not  
remember you say you bring your home  
no sorrow well good for you does your mama smile  
easily knowing what you did to my mama what about  
your baba do they know i ask you  
do they know



*“Yamato Damashii—the Japanese spirit—is  
unbreakable.”*

break me break my bones thrash  
my house but i will hide my children in  
a fortified shelter under our battered  
floor boards because you will never  
ever get them  
you can break me but our spirit  
is a flame brighter than your sun  
consider that think on  
that one day when you won't pierce us  
for it i will say Malaya the Malayan spirit is  
unbreakable

the 4.5 million sending our stories of despair hope  
lost cries our existence is glory our voices rising  
our great Legacy has summoned us

### *Work Cited*

FBIV. “Japanese Southern Expeditionary Army Song.” *AltCensored*. <https://www.altcensored.com/watch?v=Uo6VcPkrC48>.

## Living Gray

Anne Williams

Never been to the family cookout  
Or got to know the twins Jada and Kiara  
Or got to know my aunties and uncles  
Or saw people that resembled my physique  
From the black skin to the wide forehead  
To the big nose to the curly brown hair  
Making it hella awkward at the funerals  
Especially when I cry for memories  
That are nonexistent in my head.

But it's also hella awkward at the luncheon  
Where I recognize Aunt Sarah and Uncle Ken  
And all the cousins I grew up playing dolls with  
Yet feel like a fat splinter in the middle of white skin  
Hurting to see blue eyes looking down at me oddly  
But at least they always recognize me 'cause  
I am the only black cousin at the Christmas parties  
Clinging to my father who is the only other  
Person of color at all the family events.

---

I love him for being a father to me growing up  
And being the realest man that I ever met  
The one who turned up to the pop king Prince  
Watched classic Spike Lee movies with me  
And introducing me to Blade and T'Challa  
Being my own black superman in a white world.  
Yet I secretly will always question him for not  
Taking me to the family cookouts and get-togethers or  
Properly teaching me what it means to be black.



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# CREATIVE NONFICTION

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## Feminine, Sous

Alexa Maria DiFrancesco

We stay in an attic apartment in someone else's home. Dallas and me. He is Dallas because we have been in a relationship for two years and because introducing him as my boyfriend would be casual and unconcerned. I write the name "Dallas," and you know him as Dallas. You and I are old friends.

Ours is the Mile High City for a conference. "Mile High" because its elevation is a mile above sea level, not because it has the lifestyle that encourages its visitors to share sex on an airplane. The city is tame—even the Olive Garden has a full bar—and we are Catholics. I stutter and wheeze at night because the air is too thin. We drove here.

On the trip, I read a book: *Vertigo*. Walsh knows to say enough but not give too much.

---

Walsh's narrator sits at an oyster restaurant overlooking the French sea. It is not written, but she is wearing a cream dress with thick, black polka dots and a wedding ring on her finger. She is alone, but does that matter? A man sits across from her; he is not her husband, but she could want him to be. She could convince herself that she wants him to be. She forgets him after the second date. Being a woman is a performance.

We see the couple that hosts us in the car. She looks like a very nice

woman, but would she agree that I am a very nice woman? We have just fought, Dallas and me. I cannot be with a man with no *appétit*; this, he knows. I will not accompany a man who considers leaving college for paid work. We cry, but crying is the wrong word. The clock is faulty; it is midnight now. We promise each other, "I love you." We will be comfortable by morning.

Must we go to Paris to know what oysters taste like?

---

There is a guide, and in it is a copy of the feelings of everyone who has ever stayed in our attic. I should feel those things too.

Someone has written a recommendation for a tattoo shop. I admire this reviewer for wanting permanent ink, for invariably remaining as she was on vacation, for returning home to her husband and youngsters, for tossing her youngest in the air and catching the child in her palms, and for pausing for the grass, not to fleetingly notice it but to observe it.

I am not permanent. I am passing, and this is why we travel, Dallas and me—not one without the other, despite our extra costs: to learn to count coins together, and to become good at change.

---

We stand in a truck shop near a shower stall that I have rented for sixteen dollars. I will be naked. Dallas has checked the valve for me—he always does—and the panel is peeling from the wall like a sticker. I wear my clothes, his sweater and stench, and no underwear. He wears his clothes, the uniform of an innately perverted watchdog whose partner newly broke a dry spell.

A woman walks by. Her voice is soft but in a passive way, not an exquisite way. I cannot hear what she asks, so I fall to the impression that her comment was made to be shared with someone else. Dallas requests that she repeat it. He is exquisite. She leaves after saying thank you.

Dallas tells me that she carried a gun: a magnum revolver. I did not see it.

---

I am in a stranger's home—not Dallas, just me. He gave his blessing to thieve the papers, the ones compound enough to belong to oysters and eating disorders and drowning mothers but simple enough to be about



birthday cake and department-store dresses and swimming. Paper is expensive, both as a parcel and postcard.

She can read me, the nice woman. She has written a card and wants the strangers in her home to leave her books so that the new strangers will have the chance to absorb them and then release them because they are only substantial in the interim. Did she account for selfish fucks, this woman—for self-serving women who will naturally think of all libraries as handpicked for them?

There is no stranger's home: I am the stranger in the home, mulling over whether to deprive another *chiienne* (female dog) of understanding. But I need to write, and I need to write this, or the feeling will die and the world will not benefit from another kind woman.

I want to tell her: *Do not let people take things from you because you wonder what it is like to give a gift.*

## To Grayson: A Letter in Blue

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Crystal Lea Dilling

You were barely over a month old.

It has been twelve hours since I learned about your death: twelve hours of taking phone calls and text messages and helping my sister, Tonya, keep her shit together while I worked to go about my day. Seven a.m. came too early and, instead of my usual morning alarm, I woke to the sound of a nuclear meltdown. It is not subtle, but if you had lived long enough to know Tonya, you would understand why I use it as her designated ringtone.

I knew something was wrong before I answered her call; Tonya and I do not have the greatest of relationships. She is my sister and I love her with all my heart, but our family history is wrought with abuse and lies. I broke away years ago in a desperate attempt to save myself, my sanity, and my daughter. By then, Tonya had her two children, Auston and Angel, but my relationships with them have been strained by time and the distance I have put between myself and my family.

Tonya was understandably frantic after I answered and asked what was wrong. I will not lie: I looked out my bedroom window at the grey-tinged morning and braced myself, imagining that my mother, Mona (your great grandma), or your dad, Auston, had passed away. To my sleep-addled mind, they seemed the most likely reasons that Tonya would call. It took five minutes of sobbing and yelling for Tonya to finally relay to me what had

happened—to tell me that you were gone and that she would call me again when she and our mother knew more and figured out what they might need me to do.

I heaved a sigh, told my husband what had happened, and then lay there, listening to the sounds of the world waking outside our bedroom window. I climbed out of bed, put on my favorite pajamas (the red flannel pants and the gray t-shirt that reads “But first, coffee”), and headed toward the kitchen to make a pot of said coffee. Tonya’s news called for a two-cup morning, at least and probably more, if I was honest with myself. After years of trying to separate myself from the family traumas, anything that forces me back into the fold sends me on a caffeine binge that helps me cope.

I had put my foot down, you see. All those years ago, when I told them I would not take the abuse anymore, I told them not to call me unless they had something positive to say or share. I did not want to hear from them until they could speak to me and not rip me to pieces before demanding that I give them money.

The chains of abuse weave through generations of our family, keeping us locked in a loop of pain that I thought would never end until I found the strength to do just that; to end it. I separated myself and laid boundaries that I needed to move toward the future. Our mother, Mona, tries to bridge the gaping chasm of our relationship; she started reaching out to me after a year of radio silence with stunted phone calls and text messages that usually revolve around how stressful it is to live with my sister, but Tonya not so much.

You are named after my father, Leroy. His name is blended into your middle name like a badge of honor, a remembrance of a man who, to the outside world, was all the kind and loving things a husband, father, and human are supposed to be. Your death even comes just three days after the anniversary of his passing. I am sure that little fact will cause Tonya and Auston plenty of extra grief as time goes on.

Five years later and his spirit still casts a shadow over the home he left for Tonya. My sister loved that man no matter what he did: hurting our mother, beating and raping her, molesting and abusing me, dragging us through the deepest depths of Hell and torment that a person could imagine. He masked himself in an air of kindness but, in reality. . . . Those

chains of abuse were locked around our throats just as tightly as they were the day he tried to strangle our mother to death.

I finished my coffee, and it was time for a shower. I still cannot believe that *this* was what it took for Tonya to bother reaching out to me. She has made contact before, do not get me wrong, but she has always gone through our mother. Her contact has always ended with the same outcome, though. I answer Mom's call, and Tonya is in the background, telling me she needs money. I say, "no" and then listen to Tonya fly into her usual rant, telling me what a cold-hearted bitch I am for not taking care of what she needs—what our father had promised her that he would do.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

I threw on clothes and prepared to go to school for the day.

Robert, my husband, has kept me grounded in the now. He knows the depths of the abuse and the scars that I still carry, so he has found little ways to keep me from sinking too far into my own shadows when family trauma rolls around. On those days, he ensures that a snack and a cold Pepsi await me when I return to the house.

People tend to laugh when I tell them that my choice of coping mechanisms came down to illicit drugs, alcohol, or sugar. I chose sugar. I am honestly amazed that I am not diabetic at this point in my life, but, hey, sugar is better than the other ways I could have chosen to deal with the global fuck-ton of abuse heaped upon me by my family.

No one on our father's side of the family would forgive me for speaking up and telling the truth. They said that I was lying, that mom was lying, and that, if it *was* happening, it had to be *our* fault and, oh, how well those mind games worked. Our mother still carries guilt that was never hers to carry, feeling like she failed us when she suffered just as much, if not more. At least I was young enough, I have told myself, not to understand that what he was doing was wrong and to find ways to help me survive as I grew up.

Tonya has never forgiven me for speaking against our father; she worshipped the ground he walked on, no matter what he did to our mother and to me.

She was spared his more...disturbing attention when we were kids because she did not fit his preferred "profile."

I am grateful that she did not go through the same things that I did, but it also meant that she could more easily deny everything he did to me.

I am sure that line of reasoning has made it easier for her to keep her

distance all these years, no matter how badly she needed the money she always, inevitably, asks me to give her.

My relationships with your daddy, Auston, and your aunt, Angel, also suffered when I finally forced myself to break that abusive chain. I have done better with your aunt because she is not one to blind herself to the truth. She did not seem to inherit the family trait that tells people to lie until the lies finally drown out reality in a wave of rose-colored bullshit so thick you cannot see. Your daddy got it, though, and try as I might, I could never connect with him the way I did your Aunt Angel.

I tried, though, baby boy. I promise you, I tried. When I saw that Tonya had married an abusive man, I fought and screamed, begged, and broke apart to try to end the cycles of abuse I saw unfolding around me. I could not protect myself as a child, so I tried to protect your daddy when I saw what was happening to him and to your aunt. In the end, the lies won out again, so I did the only thing I could do, sweet boy.

I broke the chain.

I walked away and took my girl, Heather, with me. I did everything I could to ensure that she could not be hurt the way I was and, in doing so, I separated us from everyone connected to the bloody chains of our past and to the abusive present that Tonya chose for all the usual, horrible reasons.



I did not get a chance to know you, Grayson. I may not have met you even if you had lived.

I did what I had to do to survive: to find happiness after years of abuse. But now, I am sitting here, twelve hours after learning about your death, and I cannot help but wonder what could have been.

I left my afternoon Creative Nonfiction class to walk along the park trail, letting the chilly air and early colors of autumn surround me as I slowly walked and wondered.

Perhaps, if things had been different and people were not “just people,” I could have met you.

Instead, I will sit here, staring into the dark-mode screen of my Omen gaming laptop, using this gaping sense of the unknown to guide my hands as I type these thoughts into a coherent form that, in all fucking honesty, I cannot bring myself to understand. I am feeling lost because I do not know which way to go from here. I do not want to get pulled back in because, no

matter how hard I try, connection only leads to them hurting me all over again. But this is a baby; this is a death that no one could have seen coming. So how is anyone in this situation supposed to think, feel, or act?

I do not know how to feel about your death, little Grayson.

We lost a life so new and fresh: innocence born among a sea of generational pain and darkness. I have been away from it all for so long that I feel more like a spectator than great-aunt Kiki.

Kiki is the name you would have been taught to call me, thanks to the fact that your grandma, Tonya, was too young to say my name when I was born—six years after she was.

My name is Crystal and had you lived, I would have been your great-aunt. I have purple hair and fingernails, and I am deeply sorry that this is how I learned of you. I found out that you lived in the same breath that I heard you died, and I do not know how to feel.

I will go to your memorial. I will be there, using every bit of my energy to keep your grandma and our mother from falling apart. I will stand there silently, just as I am sitting here now, and I will cry for you, for them, for every goddamned part of this whole wretched, heartbreaking situation.



I do not know how to feel, not about the situation or the grief-fueled anger I see unfolding in our family following your tragic death.

But I know how to feel for you, sweet Grayson—for a promising light and life, gone from this world too early. One month is all you had: a month that will last a lifetime in the hearts of all you left behind. Your father must live with the kind of pain that no parent should ever know.

My sister must watch as her son struggles with that pain, a pain that she has experienced and has never come to terms with. Our mother will struggle to emotionally support the people who have treated her as a fall-back option, as the one to pick up after them when my father died. And I will be right here, trying to navigate among them and wondering why they let themselves drown in the anger and hurt it caused, why they wrapped themselves in the chains of our past instead of working to break free and find happiness.

Perhaps, if they had, I could have known you.

## The History of Girlhood

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Megan Finan

I n my freshman year of high school, I took the standard, non-honors level of “World History.” My anxiety was at an all-time high; I think you noticed. You were popular, a hockey player, and you sat across the room from me and yelled about how pretty I was. Your hockey friends laughed and told me you had a crush on me. I knew everything was a lie because I was not dumb, just quiet, and I whispered for you to stop, as my face turned red from humiliation.

I know you liked the humiliation—how I could do nothing to stop you because you were just a boy with a crush who was pursuing a girl despite her disinterest and explicit rejections. You were just a boy who did not understand “no,” and I was just a girl whose whispered “stop” meant nothing to you.

The next year, I moved to the AP level to escape you. I took AP United States History and then AP Modern European History, where I was introduced to the French Revolution and Jean-Paul Marat.

Marat was a Jacobin politician who advocated for the guillotining of “*five or six hundred heads*” (“Jean-Paul Marat”). He named his victims in his popular newspaper, and the power of the pen was proven as he contributed to the bloody brutality of the Reign of Terror (“Jean-Paul Marat”). He wrote his deadly articles in the bathtub because his skin condition (“*potentially*

*gained from hiding in the sewer,”* I recounted to my mom with glee) required that submersion (Williams).

He had a notepad with him, I think—although now I wonder how he did not drop it into the bubbles and bloody the soap with his ink. I pictured him with a wig, then, but apparently, wigs fell out of fashion in France. Wigs were a sign of aristocracy, and aristocrats were beheaded (“The Rise and Fall”). Although now I wonder why I pictured that—surely the second he submerged his head below his chin, blew bubbles into the water, and giggled at the effect, the wig would have floated away like a hairy duck in bloody water.

Every powerful man from the nineteenth century must have had a wig when they abused and killed, per what I learned from AP United States History.

I wonder, sometimes, where Charlotte Corday hid the knife in her dress when she went to visit him (“Women in the French Revolution”). Did she stitch a pocket into her gigantic dress? Did she hold it under her puffed sleeve? Did she tuck it into her bodice the way I tuck my iPhone into my bra? Was she concerned about the blade falling, slicing her pinky toe like a miniature guillotine?

And when Marat saw her—only 25 years to his fifty (Williams; “Women in the French Revolution”)—was his first reaction to condescend? “*Who do you want to behead, Sweetheart? Because we cannot behead a man just because he did not propose, you know.*” Or was it to hope the bubbles and blood covered his erection?

“*I killed one man to save 100,000,*” she supposedly said in prison. She was in prison for four days before she was guillotined (Williams). We ask, “*Would you go back in time to kill Hitler?*” And then, we judge Charlotte Corday.

I should have had a normal idol in high school, but Charlotte Corday was mine. I said she was cool, but now, I think I liked her power. She should have been powerless: a person, a woman no less, whose government was absolute. But she was not powerless. He thought she was, but she was not.

I went through phases of female role models: third grade with Helen Keller, fifth grade with Susan B. Anthony and Phyllis Wheatley-Peters, middle school with Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt, and high school with Charlotte Corday. These women had power, and people listened to



them. If they did not listen, these women made them listen through pen or airplane or husband or knife.

I felt powerless early in my life; I lived to please my parents and my teachers, to be pat on the head, to be told I am good enough, and to receive validation for my existence. These women looked to no one for praise. They did what they wanted; fuck anyone who did not listen.

I think it is a rite of passage for a girl to yearn for power: to worship the witches slain, to call God a woman, to flip off their fathers.

Sometimes, Marat took the form of a hockey boy with dark curls in my version, grinning up at me as he told me he liked me—that I was pretty and smart—and I whispered for him to stop because he did not mean it; he just wanted me red like his bathwater.

When girls are powerless, they look to a woman with power and call the blood on her hands art.

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## Dolls

Sophia Friedmann

He wrapped his fingers tightly around my thigh. A few seconds passed and he put the glass of bourbon down. He began to scratch the lower half of my exposed back, and he put his lips to my ear, telling me it was time for us to go—just the two of us—to a different room.

I turned off the lights and he shut the door. He pushed me hard onto our friend's bed, grabbing my neck with his fingers; I could feel his nails digging, ripping into my skin. A crack in the ceiling caught my eye. I was surprised I could see it in the darkness. It was short yet thick, like a scar with a story I did not want to hear. I wondered if the ceiling could crumble at any second, or if anything would fall out of it and onto us. Glaring at the crack, I wished for the time to pass faster, as he lay on top of me. I heard him whisper in my ear, "You're such a good girl."

He moved my body the way he wanted, as if I were his toy—a doll. My eyes, full of nothing, looked back at him, and my fake, plastic legs lay still.

As he grabbed my neck, my head tilted toward the doorway. My best friend stood there, staring directly at the body on top of mine. The figure looked like my friend—same height, same build (tall and skinny); then it all turned blurry, dull. It felt like someone else was in the room, someone who knew what we were doing and saw what he was doing to me.

Within a matter of minutes, the encounter was over. He left me lying on the bed, soaking wet. My left hand was shaking, each finger moving one at

a time for no reason—I could not stop it. It was the third time this week that my hand developed this tremor. He got a singular tissue from another room for me, reminding me to hurry up because we left our friend waiting in the adjacent room. I looked up at him with such revulsion, but it was too dim for him to see, and I already knew he did not care about my frustration. I felt the cheeks of my face redden, and my vision begin to gloss over. As I tried to wipe what was left of him off my body with the tissue, I tripped over my clothes that he had thrown across the ground.

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A baby girl is brought into this world surrounded by love and hope. Friends and family say, “She is just the cutest little girl in the world.” People are infatuated by her chubby cheeks and the way you can see the only tooth she has gaping out of her mouth when she laughs. She is given pink teddy bears and adorable dresses, warm hugs, and books that say she can do anything she sets her mind to.

As a little girl, she is still shielded from what is soon to come. Older girls tell her that boys have cooties—you know, the dangerous and imaginary germ that infect all little boys. These same people share with her important insider information about the rhymes and rules of little boys: If he is mean to you, he likes you. But she is little: She does not know what those words mean, so she nods her head, blindly agreeing to these societal norms.

This little girl’s world contains promise; she still holds a chance for her own big dreams—when she has control, she is in love and in charge, she can say “no” to some things and “yes” to others, and she feels passion in everything that she does.

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In the first grade, a boy pushed me on the metal playground during recess. As I ran to my teacher to tell her what he had done, I remembered the advice that the older girls had given. My teacher would not care; that is not how the world works. So, I ran back to the boy and told him what the big girls told me: “You like me—that’s why you pushed me. You like me.” He pulled my hair, and then ran away laughing with his friends. I cried on a bench for the remainder of recess. A few girls came over and gave me

hug: “It’s okay, Rach. Boys have cooties anyway.” I already knew cooties did not exist.

The next day during lunch, the boy asked me to be his girlfriend. I was in the first grade and did not know what a *girlfriend* was. I said, “yes,” and the cutest boy in our grade became my boyfriend—for about seven days. That week, I was regularly pushed on the playground, with maybe a hug or two. As a little girl, I did not know that relationships only worsen after first grade.

Little girls are forced to get bigger. They finish elementary school and middle school and then high school. Each year, the reality of being a girl is established even more: being shoved off the jungle-gym turns into being pushed around in bed, hugs turn into marks all over her body that her mom questions, and she loses that sparkle of hope that shone when she laughed.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if little girls were shielded from this reality for a few more years: Would that make the reality easier? Or is that just pushing away the inevitable? Maybe it would be better to tell them—burst that baby girl’s bubble right away—because that would eliminate the lies and disappointment.

Reality is not fun. It is not pink lip gloss, bright shoes, and fairytales. It is not Barbie dolls and dancing around the room with friends. It is not loving embraces or boys having cooties. Girls are told not to always eat what they want because they will be unhealthy, overweight, ugly—boys do not like that. They cannot always express opinions or feelings because boys will judge you. They cannot wear what they want because boys will call them mean words or misinterpret and do what they want to girls’ bodies.

Being a girl is so far from what it is when she is born. It is pressure, pain, and misunderstanding; being treated unfairly by a man who is supposed to be your equal; not having power, even over your own organs and skin. Your body is no longer your temple—it is someone else’s.



I didn’t say “no” to the boy in the bed, but I never said “yes.” He did what he wanted and then left me there, my hand trembling in the dark and eyes glued to the ceiling, to clean up his mess. It was my first time meeting him and was most likely not my last. His pleasure, my pain. Of course, it wasn’t going to be about me and him—in his mind, only one person needed satisfaction out of this situation.

After finding my thong and a t-shirt that was not mine on the floor, I ran to the bathroom, my body barely covered. I turned the hot faucet on, hoping the burning water would help my hand stop shaking. The water warmed up and I stood staring at my own image in the mirror, all blurry and fuzzed. My hair was knotted, and I noticed my earring had been ripped out of my left ear. I could feel that my mascara had crusted under my eyes, and then I looked down at my bare legs, forgetting that I could not find my jeans minutes before. The scratch on my neck was bleeding, but I knew it would disappear in a few days.

I grabbed more tissues, dragging them across my chest and down my body; wanting to feel less sticky, less used. My fingers continued moving, unable to stop, as the water steamed.

Once I found my jeans in the bedroom, I came back out to the living room where a football game played on the television screen. The two boys sat there—the one who had just been in bed with me, and my best friend whose bed we were in. My friend motioned for me to sit next to him on the couch. He grabbed the bottle of bourbon before I had a chance and took the last swig. The other boy just looked up at me and grinned. I sat between them, and they both put a hand on my thigh—one leg for each of them.

My mind went blank and I sunk into the couch, staring at the grey wall ahead of me. There were no cracks, big or small, on this wall. I felt one of their hands climbing up my shirt, but I lay there, frozen. The only words I could remember were the ones he whispered in my ear, not asking if I was okay; not asking for my permission.

One day, will all of this be breathtaking and glamorous, full of love and great sex? Or will it keep being this pathological and heart-shattering, making me feel so stupid for hoping for something more?

The tremor in my hand finally brought me back to reality and I realized that my fingers had burns on them from the hot faucet water minutes before.

As fast as I could, I pushed the two boys off of my body.

“Rach? What the hell? Are you good?” My friend called after me as I rushed around his apartment to find my jacket and shoes.

“Yea,” I yelled to him as I slammed the door, I could hear them laughing and high-fiving as soon as it shut. The football game got louder; they went on with their night.

The next day I told my best friend how I felt so used, so betrayed the

night before. I thought I could tell him about my pain and what I was really feeling, but even he did not get it—only girls can. Instead, he told me that I did what I did, that I did not say “no,” that I wanted it. Plastic can still get cut up and hurt, scarred and damaged. Things do not stick in a doll’s head, but they always stay in mine.

His image was not clear in the dark, but it was as clear now: The face staring at me—telling me nothing happened, telling me I was fine—had been in that room. My best friend had walked in on us last night; he saw what his friend was doing to me, but he stood there and watched and did nothing. How could he not get it when he saw the cuts on my body with his own eyes, heard me scream with his own ears? It was almost like he forgot. And he forgot that later, his hands were crawling up my shirt and that he had a girlfriend who was not there.

I tried to think of what I could do to make that little girl who I once was proud. I lacked power and control, and I could do nothing to regain them, nothing to make my hand stop shaking. These two boys were so much bigger than me—at least fifty pounds heavier and five inches taller; so how could I have power? Standing up for myself was not an option anymore: I simply did not have the strength to stop these bigger boys.

So instead, I went back. I saw my best friend and his friend the next night and pretended everything was okay.

## Ms. Monkey Bread

Erika B. Girard

(Note: This monkey bread recipe, although since modified according to available ingredients, was relayed in verbal form from the author's "Home Economics" teacher in 2007 and in written form from the author's twin sister during class; the recipe resurfaces several times a year whenever a hankering for monkey bread arises. An original recipe cannot be located.)

### Ingredients

1 8-count can Pillsbury Grands refrigerated "buttermilk" flaky layers biscuit dough (or equivalent)  
1/2 stick butter  
1/2 cup light brown sugar  
1 Tbsp water  
1/2 tsp cinnamon

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400°F (no more, no less). Using kitchen scissors, slice your sanity apart, cut the tension in the room—no, my bad, don't do that; just cut each raw biscuit into sixths or eighths to make a heaping plateful. If you can't follow directions, you don't get to help. These are not safety scissors.

2. In a small saucepan (stainless steel or glass works because I was always shown how to use glass yet choose to use *other*—there's no chance of accidentally shattering stainless steel, even though *stainless* is generous hyperbole), melt the butter over low heat. Low heat, not off. Low heat, not medium, unless you want the butter to burn. I don't want it to burn. You shouldn't want it to burn. Stir so it doesn't fry. Stir *it*, not yourself. Once melted (the butter, I mean), add brown sugar, water, and cinnamon. Stir (the now-syrup, the mixture, the melting messy mess) until the brown sugar melts and cinnamon is well-distributed.
3. Spray a Bundt pan with cooking spray. Spray, spray, but not your face; keep the cooking spray out of your eyes, hon. Too much and you'll go blind, blind as a bat in daylight.
4. Place one-half of the cut biscuits in the bottom of the pan. (Only half; eyeball it if you can still see.) Pour one-half of the syrup mixture evenly over those biscuit pieces. (Only half; take it as a mystery, even though it is the least mysterious thing in the room.)
5. Place the remaining biscuit pieces in a second layer. Leave none behind: that's the motto, right? Pour the remaining syrup mixture over the second layer. By layer, I mean *new terrain*.
6. Place the Bundt pan on the middle rack of the preheated oven and bake for 15 minutes or until light golden brown. Remember that every oven is different, like every friend and sister and mother. Every oven has feelings, too. Every oven needs to know it is loved. Well, for 15 minutes at least. And don't overcook the bread. This is baking but not baking. Important but not important. Woman but not womanish, at least not always. The *ish* is always silent.
7. Before taking the Bundt pan out, ready your oven mitts, two trivets, plates, and courage. You'll need all the help you can get. Pray a little (or a lot) too. After all, this is a kitchen. Pray away the mistakes and lurking pain. Set out one trivet on which to place your Bundt pan after you remove it from the hot oven (or place it on a cool stovetop). Set the other trivet on the counter, a dinner plate on top of the trivet, and a



large paper plate on top of the dinner plate. (Using a disposable paper plate creates easy cleanup because syrup hardens quickly on surfaces, and maybe we're all disposable anyway). Got it? Good. Be careful. Be bold. Be ready. Now is the moment of truth—as opposed, of course, to the lies you told yourself when you said you didn't want to burn.

8. Remove the Bundt pan from the oven and place it on the cool stovetop or trivet. Not on the counter; you'll burn it. Not on your hand; you'll burn it. Not on your tongue; you'll burn it. Don't burn, love.
9. Keeping your oven mitts on—protected, protecting, protective—grab the paper plate (I double mine so it is sturdier like a man, like a woman, like a manner of speaking) and flip the paper plate upside-down on top of the Bundt pan—upside-down like the flip-flop of your traitorous stomach at that sturdy man you want. I told you, don't burn; *love*.
10. Carefully pick up the hot Bundt pan, with the paper plate (or plates, one or two, depending on how much you want to burn or not burn) on top; move to hover over the dinner plate; and *very* carefully flip the Bundt pan over so the Monkey Bread (Ms. Monkey Bread) lands on the paper plate(s). She deserves to rest, but not yet.
11. Slowly remove the Bundt pan by lifting straight up. *Now* let her rest. But not too long. She hardens if she is left too long alone.
12. Enjoy! Remember to be patient but not too patient; simply do not burn your tongue. There is no remedy besides sugar. And sugar can only do so much for a woman.

#### Pro Tips

- Soak the Bundt pan in warm water in the sink soon after removing the dessert to avoid excess syrup hardening in the pan. (You are a woman, not a dishwasher. Even if you wash dishes. It is only your job if you claim the title. Otherwise, take care to soak while you are eating.)
- Use plastic utensils to avoid the hassle of cleaning hardened syrup off regular silverware. (This is a biggie. Take my word: it is worth the cents,

this common sense. Listen not to those who claim toothpicks are better. They are not. They poke you and leave splinters in your tongue if you're not careful...at least, they do if you're a woman.)

- For a better ratio of syrup to biscuits, double the syrup recipe with a single can of refrigerated biscuit dough. Trust me; more syrup makes this recipe a whole ton better. Try it! If it's not better, you only have me to blame—me, a nameless, faceless voice in your head saying, “You’ve got this, love,” and “Please, please, please, try not to burn yourself or someone else. Remember to smolder until you can blaze fiercely like you were always meant to.”

## Miles with Meth Ducks

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Laurie Griffith

There is not much in Cliffside, North Carolina. It is a city that clings to the fragments of a shattered past. Known colloquially as the “Meth Capital of the South,” Cliffside has an overwhelming abundance of dilapidated trailer homes, long-shut-down mills, and Baptist churches calling for repentance. It is common knowledge to never walk down White Line Road or veer too close to the blue-tarp city of the homeless. However, in Cliffside, two miles off Highway 74, there is a high school and a park.

Frank West Memorial Park is bigger than it looks from the road. Sandwiched between houses with peeling paint and the American Legion Post Office, the park hides, and visitors struggle to make out anything other than a red-dirt baseball field and rusted playground. The entrance is unmarked: simply an open path between overgrown grass pockmarked with potholes. The park does not even boast a parking lot.

I learned the hard way that the park had no parking lot. In my freshman year of high school, pressed against the backseat window of my cross-country teammate’s car, I watched the heartland of Cliffside roll by, taking in the neighborhoods just beyond the border of Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy’s campus. I could not see much of the sights; Ailey’s car rumbled down the half-gravel, half-grass path, snagging on every rock; my forehead thunked against the glass, and I said “fuck” out loud for the first time.

She parked behind the playground, over the top of a hill, so our coach

would not see us. We watched him pull in between the faded yellow slide and half-melted merry-go-round. He called Ailey's phone, and we rushed from our hideout, swarming across shredded wood chips that had once been mulch.

He crossed his arms, mouth set in a grim line.

We had only come to Cliffside because he had finally lost his age-old battle with the football coaches. Our school had only one practice field, and the coaches of the bigger team decided they needed all 100 yards to practice fumbling.

Jackson hopped on the only swing with the rusty chains holding it up still intact. "Is this your secret make-out spot?" He joked, long legs kicking as he propelled himself higher.

Coach rolled his eyes and told Jackson to get down before he got hepatitis. He marched our ragtag crew to the crest of a hill, and the landscape unfolded. The park dipped into a deep valley ringed by gnarled pine trees, a pond pooling at its center. The pond steamed, the water-stained acid green with algae, dirt, and God knew what else. A gravel path wrapped around it, sloping gently downwards on the far side before rising back up to a nearby pavilion. Our coach aimed for that building, marching down chipped stone steps that looked as if they recently had been painted.

*"Good. At least someone was looking out for it,"* I presumed.

Gravel crunched beneath our feet as we followed coach in a mini procession, grating in the humming silence. The sun beat down on the crushed rocks, turning them a stark white, and we shielded our eyes as we walked under the pavilion's wooden roof and observed the scrawled graffiti—vulgar statements intertwined with gang tags and lovers' promises. The neglected concrete floor stuck to the soles of our shoes. We edged around needles and broken glass. Kilia nudged a condom wrapper with her toe.

Coach blinked once, twice. "Stretch on the tables."

The two rows of wooden picnic tables creaked beneath our weight as we clambered up. We passed the time calling out the most creative lines we could find on the walls, the best ones often written in what appeared to be faded black Sharpie. Kilia was a fan of "South Side Country Boys," whereas I was fond of, "Ants get bitches like cookies get crumbly." I got the sense that if I were to lie on my back, I could spend hours picking out the marker constellations in our own unique conservatory.

Each time we returned, we identified new phrases, as if the park was

trying to entice us to keep coming. We did, but we always washed our hands with Germ-X before we ran.

We must have looked ridiculous that first day that we practiced on the path: five girls and seven boys, with our HOKAs and Mizunos collecting dust as we stood in a path sculpted by rainwater. Across from us, a blue box on a stand boasted, "Choose Books Not Drugs." The wind fluttered the age-browned pages of a left-behind copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* as our coach stalked to the lone picnic table on the side of the hill.

His whistle split the air.

As we jogged down the path, the wind kicked up. It scattered half-dead oak leaves across the fenced-in basketball court that was nestled against the road and cooled the sweat dripping down the backs of our necks. We were running a ladder, alternating between jogging and sprinting. Picking up speed meant paying more attention to the uneven ground, and we hopped from one side of the path to the other, hoping for traction on the scant grass.

Ducks with salt-and-pepper feathers watched us from the shore of the pond, their black webbed feet stamping indignantly. They honked at us, cherry redheads bobbing with growths and excess skin. We nicknamed them "Meth Ducks," and when Kaitlyn flapped her arms and honked back, they ran for the water.

They became the legend of our program, and Frank West Park became the only place we ran ladders.

I think the park grew on our head coach too; he had grown up in Cliffside.

We marveled at the fantastical seediness of the place. There truly was nothing quite like it. Hills were run at a teammate's farm, and mile repeats on the local community track. But Frank West Park was unique. Where else could we speculate the number of teenagers who had sex on the floor, or ponder how long the Meth Ducks would live (if they even died)?

By the time I was sixteen, I was the one driving the younger runners to their first introduction. By that point, we had started playing kickball and ultimate frisbee on the old baseball field. The park and field were completely overgrown, the red dirt a faint memory rediscovered when someone dove for a catch. One day, the old men from the American Legion Post began watching us from their porch, leaning back in their rocking chairs in blue overalls and wearing army vet caps crooked on their graying heads.

Life crawled from the woodwork of Frank West over those next few months, cropping up in unlikely places. The house across the way got two new pitbulls, and they chased us along a fence when we jogged the sloping decline. College dropouts brought a half-deflated basketball to the court, and they called out their phone numbers as they dribbled across the cracked cement. A mother cat watched us slog our way up the big hill, her kittens mewling when we stumbled. We even fed the Meth Ducks a few stale English muffins; they seemed to think the bread was adequate payment for trespassing.

The seasons grafted themselves to the park, not the other way around. Our footprints were sucked into the mud whether it was fall, spring, or summer. Our prints fossilized in weird depressions, the edges of the mud reaching for the sky. Misting rain brought leaves into their centers, and we screeched when an errant step kicked chilled muddy water up and down our calves.

The car came out whenever it rained too. We did not think much of it at first, hidden between low-reaching branches of an oak tree. Only when it took up residence on our path did we decide it should not be there. It was a black Mustang, the sides scored deep with white scratches that could have been racing stripes with a bit more careful aim. It hunched by the base of the big hill, a bulwark against the rain, the windows half-cracked and oozing smoke.

Coach had a list of things he hated. It went like this: snakes, communists, and cold wind.

“Get on the path,” he grumbled.

Our assistant coach (a new addition) hesitated. “I think I’m going to call the cops.”

He did so as he ran, bronzed arm raised at the front of our pack. He ordered us to go around with him in front. In hindsight, his orders were our first indication that something was incredibly wrong. He was a stout Mexican man, and he typically joked that the white kids had to go first because we were less likely to get shot.

We had barely gotten in front of the car when Frank West came to life. The ducks squawked, gravel skittered, and the car’s engine roared to life. It shot down the path, wheels fitting perfectly into the two divots as if it had been the creator that had shaped this landscape. I dove aside, my hand wrapped around Audrey’s wrist, and we toppled into the prickly grass.

Frank West cradled all of us, scattered like bowling pins, with crunchy hands unused to comfort.

After that incident, a school resource officer accompanied us to every practice, and we shared an unspoken rule that we did not tell our parents what happened, lest they relegate us to the sidelines of the game field, where we were equally as likely to vomit from the heat as to get bonked in the head by a soccer ball.

Not that we did not raise a bit of hell there ourselves, one time taking a whole practice to see who could get the closest to the ducks. Assistant coach said they were “all that was left of the dinosaurs” and, judging by how scaly their babies looked when they hatched one November, it probably was not far from the truth. We had been neck-deep in training for the state championship when the ducklings were born. We were ranked first in preseason, and we held on to that title and remained undefeated. It was Kilia’s and my senior year and, as the only two who first stepped foot in the park, it seemed right that we hold our last practice before regionals at Frank West Park.

COVID—like many things—had not seemed to touch Frank West: fish still bubbled belly-up in the pond, Meth Ducks still plucked at half-dead grass, and the rain still made it difficult to run. We had been stretching when the humming insects quieted, the hornets dropping to their nests in reverence.

A woman stepped out of one of the homes, the one with the pitbulls. Her curly blonde hair glowed as corn-silk white as the gravel, and her red lips pursed as she took in the landscape. She wore a tight black dress that cradled the generous swell of her belly, and her six-inch stilettos sunk into the grass. A cigarette bloomed from between her thin fingers. In her other hand, she clutched an amber bottle of Jack Daniels’ finest. A little boy walked next to her, an urn clasped in his small arms.

Frank West waited, silent and still. The Meth Ducks lifted their heads as the pair walked past their nests, yet not a peep left their bills. We stood in a line atop our hill, the freshmen chattering.

“That’s something you don’t see every day,” Michael mumbled.

Coach shot him a look.

The boy reached into the canister and, without flourish, tossed a handful of ash into the lake. The ducks moved closer, encircling them. The trees seemed to dip, the oddly warm wind ruffling their naked branches. The

gray flecks spread across the crystal surface of the lake, dissolving into the green-brown sludge the second they landed. Frank West took whomever it was back into its depths as easily as it had stirred up leaves mere months before.

The woman tossed her cigarette into the water. The *plip* broke the spell, and the insects started buzzing. Frank West came back to life, the ducks waddling out of their trance with indignant quacks.

Coach's whistle split the air, and I took off again one last time. The dirt held firm beneath my running shoes, wafting up onto my ankles as I sprung after Kilia. We did an Indian Run that day, alternating leaders between our entire team, Frank West always two steps ahead of us as we went around and around. Steamy mist from the lake might as well have been its sweat, the grass scattering the residue of its footprints in the wind.

The team won that Regional Championship and went on to win the State Championship. Now, Kilia runs for Montreat. Jackson got a scholarship to Gardner-Webb. Kaitlyn committed to Lees-McRae. A year ago, Ailey graduated from Western Carolina. Audrey and Michael, well...we will see. As for me, I do not really run anymore.

Our assistant coach took our regional trophy back to Frank West. That day, the sky was a crisp spring blue, which looked down on grass that had recently grown back in. The pond was as brown as always, of course bubbling with whatever fresh concoction it decided on that week. He put the trophy on the ground, and the Meth Ducks waddled over. They did not honk or hiss. They formed a ring around the glossy wooden plaque, accepting it into their raft. The group sat there for a long time, as if the Meth Ducks decided that the trophy and our team were part of Frank West Memorial Park too.



## The Smallest Nesting Doll

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Alexandra Hill

Author's Note: The structure of the story parallels nesting dolls, with the first paragraph being the largest and paragraphs decreasing in size as the story progresses.

My grandma has these old Russian nesting dolls. Intricate and colorful, the dolls have rosy cheeks, striking red paint wrapped around their cylindrical wood midribs, and the darkest black eyes with flicks of hand-painted eyelashes that radiate femininity. I always played with them when I visited my grandparents' house as a kid. My grandma hid the tiniest, most inward doll, scared that I would choke on the tiny piece of wood. I envisioned the biggest doll as the mother, and popping open her center revealed her four smaller and smaller children—the mini, two-inch doll being the one I wanted to play with most of all. I could hear the smallest, abducted doll calling my name from the locked drawer in my grandma's closet.

Despite having every other beautiful doll to choose, I desperately wanted the one I was told that I could not have.

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There is a boy who says he loves me but who will cause me to choke. Confident and absorbing, he makes my cheeks rosy. He has a charming

way of filling the room with a billion things to say that never feel like something to fill the silence and yet somehow always do, and the bounciest tone that radiates optimism to combat my chaos. My mother says that he is a serial killer waiting to happen, and that, if a bunch of redheads start being reported dead all over Massachusetts after I break up with him, we should probably call the police. *Too charming*. He fits the smooth-talking psychopath stereotype. She always tells the story of the animal shelter where every dog barked with a rabid violence of self-preservation when he approached their pens.

My mother constantly tells me that he is toxic (though I am not supposed to tell him, just in case we get married), but even so, she still falls into his traps. One night, he put on a grandiose show of resignation and sorrow for my mom and her best friend, lamenting to them how I refused to go to his senior prom just because “*It isn’t Alexandra’s thing*.” His puppy dog eyes rivaled my steely, tense gaze across the table at him. The two women’s pleas of “*Come on!*” and “*Just go for the poor boy*” ensured that he got his prom night.

My best friend reminds me that he tried to kidnap me—her exaggerated story of how he drove eight hours to stalk me at my university the day after I broke up with him. I stepped out of my dorm room that morning to find him in the hallway. Despite his pleas for me to talk to him, I ran into the bathroom and locked the door, heart pounding and liquid nausea filling my lungs. My head was fuzzy and my feet were tingling and the incessant buzz of the artificial bathroom lights rang in my ears; I could not stand, so I sat on the toilet and breathed and hoped he would be gone by the time I opened the door. He was not.

An ex-boyfriend told me that he was scared that this boy would show up one day and murder him out of jealousy. The boy is slim, not quite six feet tall, and I make fun of his chicken legs, but I suppose my ex-boyfriend constructed a different image in his head, perhaps based on the biting text he received from the boy to “*Leave her the fuck alone*.” (I told the boy about my ex’s fear, and he smiled with pure delight, his whitened teeth exuding pride. “*Good*.”)

My phone embodies the hundreds of times he has been blocked and unblocked. My brother expresses how “no” is not that hard to comprehend. My therapist assures me that the boy was manipulative to ingrain into my

head that he is the only one who can make me happy. They all tell me to stay away.

The problem with being an adult is that my grandma can no longer lock up the chokeables in the drawer in her closet. As an adult, I am old enough to read the bright red warning label on the packaging.

## Don't Be a Stranger

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Laura Martin

My newest cousin breathed air for the first time today. His name sticks in my mouth like charcoal, and it tastes like cigarettes and iodine water in melted Gatorade bottles. I try to say it audibly, but I suffocate on the attempt. To most, the name is not something that dissolves both life's troubles and triumphs. It is not something that makes everything halt for a terrific and terrible moment. It is not a name that most people hear and decide that nothing matters at all. But to me, it is a tragic ballad. And I cannot even utter a note without throwing up tar and blood.

His first name? Henry. I say it easily while relatively unmoved. Sure, it suits the infant boy. But that's not all. I cannot coax my vocal cords into croaking the middle and last name out loud: Alexander Cunningham. Henry exists as a constant reminder of the uncle he was one year too late to meet—my first cousin and first best friend, Alex. He was always one year older than me until he opted out of aging. He is now permanently twenty-two, while I am approaching twenty-four alone.

When alive, Alex was a 6'3" giant who towered over me yet barely weighed more than I did. He had brown, coarse hair, which we joked was the texture of a Brillo dishwashing pad. He had grown it out fairly long when we were middle schoolers, and he let me give him a French braid, which he proudly wore for a family trip to Cracker Barrel. Alex always wore last year's pants, which hit his overgrown legs above the ankle. With

them, he slipped on Bengals shower shoes—toes exposed for every weather or occasion. For Alex, there was no such thing as dressing too casually, no matter the setting.

He had a big toothy smile—the kind that made everyone else smile, even without meaning to. Our family told us we shared this feature. Now, every time I am happy, I see him. When I smile in the mirror, my blue eyes momentarily shift to watery green. I grow taller, my skin tans, and suddenly the mirror becomes a window as I stare at him instead of myself. But when I realize it, my smile disappears before I can reach through the window and pull him to my side—before I can intentionally say goodbye.

I miss when summer broke the boundaries of time, stretching so long that I hardly knew how to hold a pencil when I was dragged back to a desk within concrete walls. In one of these childhood summers, I took the trip of a lifetime—a trip that will never be topped because Alex can never share it with me again. Sometimes, when I smell overcooked Rice-A-Roni or hear the belting laugh of a stranger in a particularly familiar pitch, my nostrils flare, and I blink back acidic dewdrops that pool in my eyes. When I stumble across nature too beautiful to bear, the birds whisper the praises that I now struggle to articulate to the Creator we share, and I hallucinate peace for a moment. I think about how much I appreciate the beauty, but then I think about how much more he would have appreciated it. I struggle with the illusion of peace as it shifts into the realization that I am an ungrateful leach, unable to give back anything of value.

In desperation, I cry to remember that trip. I soak in what I can from photos, videos, flashbacks, stories, and journals. Flawed and fragmented remembrances that do not know Alex as well as the illiterate part of my mind does. It is impossible to write him into words and futile to try to speak him into being. I am terrified that one day, maybe even tomorrow, the attic of my mind will lose precious details and mannerisms that I cling to but cannot convey.

(Allow me to eavesdrop on my past. I go to the filing cabinet in my mind and struggle to find memories of my first trip out West. The adrenaline in my veins solidifies, and I nearly plummet through the floor in terror that I have lost it, but there it is. The roof of my brain leaks, and the file is soggy,

partially dissolving. I am irresponsible with my memory, and it is my fault. I scream and squeeze tight what is left of it.)

The first time I traveled out West, I was twelve and Alex was thirteen. My uncle took us on a two-week camping trip in the endless summer. The three of us had been to the Red River Gorge and other day hikes before, but nothing like this. We hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, where we camped for three days before making the long trek out. We hiked the captivating Bryce Canyon. And most breathtaking of all, we hiked through Zion National Park. The next time I visited Zion was July 16, 2021—exactly one year and one day after Alex’s death. Alex was on that trip too, but he arrived as ash and was given to the Narrows as part of the Creation that the birds whisper about. Now, nature is the ungrateful leach, never able to give all that Alex did. It will never be as beautiful and difficult to capture as him, but it is the closest thing in our broken world.

That first trip out West was the trip of a lifetime. As I look through the photo album my uncle made each of us, I see Alex and me in theatrical, staged photographs of us hanging off a cliff (unpictured is the ledge not too far below us). I see us chomping on beef jerky while soaking wet from our hike through the Virgin River in the Narrows of Zion National Park. I see us chest-deep in river water. As the freezing water hits our abdomens, it vacuums all the air out of our lungs, and when we can finally breathe again, we laugh and scream. In the photo, I am smiling hard, poorly pretending to be unshaken by the frigid river. I am using my hiking stick to poke Alex. He holds his stick way above his head in an awkward position while giving a fake smile, which was clearly only because his dad had yelled, “C’mon, Alex. Stop goofing around and smile for the camera!” Alex and I were always goofing around.

Once, we both had to sit in timeout for using lighter fluid and a match on a pile of dry leaves for our wilderness survival game. We were at my Aunt Vickie’s house. Vickie always told her nieces and nephews that she had one rule: There are no rules! For a second grader, that made Vickie’s house the best place on earth. Our game involved a serious plotline, and crucial to this plotline was fire-starting. We were wilderness explorers who had been separated from the group, and we were forced to survive by hunting and gathering. After we came inside while crying and showing our burns, we got burn cream and bandages for our blistered fingers and a brief chastisement

for our recklessness. We sat in timeout while making funny faces at each other from across the room and choking back our laughs. After that, Vickie had one rule. No starting fires.

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The last day I saw him was early March 2020. Alex and I drove to Jacobson Park and walked around the place we once played. We were different, both older in experiences than we were in body. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I did not know that he smoked. He must have read the concern on my face.

He reassured me: "I quit smoking weed. All done with psychedelics. This is all I do now."

I relaxed a bit and responded, "No thanks" to his cheery, "Do you want one?"

We exchanged stories. I told him about how I narrowly escaped death from my brain-swelling illness. It began to rain as we neared his car on our second lap around the trail.

He asked, "Do you want to head out?"

"It's up to you, I don't mind the rain," I said.

"Walking it is!"

By the end of the third lap, I had learned that at the time I was psychotic from my brain illness, Alex was experiencing psychosis too. His was from a bad tab of LSD. He was manic, just like I was. But unlike me, he had no real treatment available; he had lasting hallucinations of lines that moved as well as ongoing dissociation, but no treatment was available.

"They don't know if it'll ever go away."

He lit his third cigarette and slid one out for me while raising his bushy eyebrows questioningly.

"Yeah, okay." I had never smoked a cigarette before, but something about the moment made it seem like the thing to do. Maybe it was the rain. Maybe it was the news of Alex's brain trauma that, unlike mine, seems irreversible.

I began to get dizzy from the nicotine. We sat down by the pond on a wet bench. As we skipped smooth gray rocks, we recalled the previous few months of our lives. With us both being in and out of psych wards and hospitals at the same times, our stories were eerily similar.

We drove back with the windows down, and we each rushed to a

bathroom to rinse our mouths and wash our hands to avoid chastisement from our older cousins for smelling like cigarettes.

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Now it is July 15, 2020, and I am riding home with my parents from a two-hour interview at the University of Cincinnati hospital. I am on top of the world, as I am getting into my new role as a patient advocate for people struggling with the rare brain illness that I have. From the passenger seat, my mom gets a call. I scroll through my text messages while excitedly updating friends on how the interview went.

Suddenly, I hear my mom's tone shift from her upbeat "Hello" to a disbelieving "No, no. Oh my gosh. No."

My dad and I glance at each other with concern, and I say, "What is it!?" I worry that she will say that our one-year-old puppy was hit by a car. I wish she said that.

"Alex has killed himself."

I melt in my seat as I try to process what I just heard.

"No, God, no. Mom, are they sure? How do they know?" I begin to pray. I cannot remember if I say the words out loud or in my head. "God, please. Please. I pray they misidentified him. I pray it's someone else. God, why? Please, please. . . ."

But they are sure. It happened two hours ago. And no matter what I do, I cannot reverse his death. I nearly hyperventilate as I sob from the backseat. I cannot see for the remainder of the ride, as an endless stream of wet, salty tears flood from my eyes and into my open mouth.

My dad repeats, "I am so sorry. I am just so sorry."

My mom, at the news of losing her nephew, sits with her head in her hands, completely speechless.

Near the end of the hour we had left of the ride, I begin to speak through sobs: "I didn't even know. Why didn't he call? I just wish he would've called. I would've answered."

What happens to all the memories we shared? What do I do with our hilarious inside jokes? Who else would have repeated that joke for hours and days on our childhood trip? What happens to those deep belly laughs that made tears roll down our cheeks? We shared so many things that I can never do again without thinking of him: going to Cracker Barrel, hiking,



using lighter fluid, going to Jacobson Park, smelling a cigarette, and witnessing the beauty of nature.

The last time I talked to Alex on the phone, he concluded the call with “I love you. Don’t be a stranger.” I wondered if I had heard that right. Alex and I never said, “I love you.” We obviously loved each other, but we are not a family who practices the telling of it.

I was confused but responded, “I won’t be, love you too! I’ll talk to you later.”

In less than a month, he was dead—lying outside in the middle of his small college campus in Colorado, a gun next to him and a bullet wound that had grazed his neck. The coroner said he probably got scared and pulled the gun back. Then, a second shot went through his heart, ending his beautiful life.

## Japanese Blood

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Abigail Nelson

My mother once told me that she never knew how to fill out forms when she was growing up. She said she did not know whether she needed to put “Asian” or “White” on these forms and did not know if they truly mattered. I have continued this tradition: the hesitation of circling “White” or “Asian” or “Other” on a testing form in the middle of a stale classroom. Circling “White” felt like a betrayal of “Asian,” but circling “Asian” felt like lying. My test results did not depend on my response, but my choice mattered to the questions whirling in my test-taking brain. If I do not feel either of these identities, does that make me an “Other?” I always hovered there, as I sat under the fluorescent lights, tapping my fingers on the desk, twirling my pencil, and staring at those empty circles staring back at me while I debated which one felt right. Most days, I filled in both and I usually fell behind on that segment of the standardized testing. The test proctors never spent much time waiting for students to finish the circles dedicated to race because filling out ID numbers and full names and addresses took longer. They did not expect anyone to be confused about which circle to fill.

I can tell the difference between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese written on a package, but I never know what it says. I usually go by the pictures on the outside or look up reviews and hope they are in English. I tried to learn Japanese many times, looking at books and apps and papers. I once kept a

streak on an app for a week until I forgot my headphones in the car one day and did not feel like doing my session out loud. Japanese language books sit on a sagging bookshelf in the office; they are for “Colloquial Japanese,” but no one in my house can speak it.

There is a *hanten* in my closet; it is child-sized, and I cannot bring myself to put it in storage. Its boxy bright red silhouette is draped on a hanger, the wide sleeves stop at my elbows, and I can barely tie it shut in the front. It kept me warm in the winter and made me feel special. I knew none of the other kids at school were Japanese—none of them would have a *hanten*. I wore it for “Immigration Day” in elementary school; I brought in *miso* soup for the potluck afterward, and I felt so cool because everyone else was from Ireland or France or Spain. Nobody else was from Japan.

When my brother participated in the same event years later, his teachers told him he could not come as a Japanese immigrant. They were learning about Ellis Island; Asians came in through Angel Island, so he was required to pick someone from the white side of our family because they came through Ellis Island. I often wonder if these were the same teachers who taught during my elementary-school days who changed their standards or if these were new teachers who valued accuracy over anything else in their fifth-grade historical recreations.

A folded Japanese flag has been on my shelf for years, the red circle concealed by the surrounding white fabric as it gathers dust. My father gave it to me one day, and I was thrilled that it was now *my* flag. I used to tell myself that I would hang it outside at my future house or in my college dorm room, but now I am worried about the questions people will ask and about the lines they will draw between me and that flag to make assumptions they will never voice.



When I am asked, “Where would you go if you could go back in time?” I usually say I would visit my grandmother. I would go see her house in Florida before the dust set in, see the old furniture in its prime, breathe in the air, and not be in danger of her future lazy cat giving me an allergic reaction. I would tell her, “Don’t stop teaching your daughter Japanese. It

won't matter if she starts getting an accent from it, she'll never learn it if you stop now."

Part of me is tempted to create a time paradox and go further back, to tell her to avoid immigrating and stay in Japan. But if I did that, I might immediately turn to dust, or explode, or maybe nothing would happen to me, and there would just be a universe in which I do not exist, my brother does not exist, my mother does not exist. Maybe one day, I will create the cure to cancer, maybe I will discover Atlantis, maybe I will write the next great American novel, maybe I will do nothing; but now, in that timeline where my grandmother never crosses that ocean, none of my accomplishments will exist.

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When I tell people my mother is half Japanese, I always try to guess who will say what before I tell them, placing bets on their pre-programmed reactions. It usually goes in one of three directions:

- Some people accept it as a fun fact (I often use it as my classroom introduction fact) and say, "Oh, that's interesting!"
  - Some people exclaim, "Knew it! I knew there was something about you, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. I could totally tell you are. I could tell because of your eyes or hair or vibe. I don't know how to explain it, but I could just *tell* that you were part...something. I totally knew it though."
  - Some people do not believe me. I must share a family picture—my mother and grandmother and brother beside me, smiling on a Florida lawn. They surrender, and tell me they believe me now but "You don't look Asian at all; I would've never known."
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I am sixteen years old, and I am clumped together with my friends, eating lunch in a nearly empty classroom. The teacher is working in her corner, and a few students are spattered across the rows. My friends say something, and I respond with a joke I often make.

"Oh, it's because I'm Asian."

"You're Asian?" A voice asks from across the room. It comes from a pair of girls whom I have never met.

"Yeah, my mom's half Japanese. I'm a quarter."

“Oh, so you’re white,” they deadpan and turn away from me. I falter.

If I am banned from explanation, then yes; 75 percent of the blood in my veins is Swedish or Irish or something I cannot identify unless I send my DNA to a company that will tell me my ethnic background. I have a lineage that I cannot trace—that my father cannot trace and that my grandfather never shares.

If I am allowed a minute to explain, then somewhat: I spent my childhood visiting a house decorated with Japanese dolls and tapestries and musical instruments, the house in which my grandmother spoke to my great-grandmother at a scheduled time every day in a language I cannot understand. My grandmother rushed up to me, pressed the phone to my ear, and whispered Japanese phrases for me to repeat, phrases that my young mouth could barely pronounce: *Konnichiwa*, *Genkidesuka*, *Kore wa Abi-desu*. I watched Grandmother do the same to my mother, whispering words to her as my great-grandmother cried with joy on the other end of the phone. My grandmother paced around her kitchen, the linoleum shifting with her steps, and I watched her speak.

If I am allowed an hour to explain, then maybe: I have spent moments throughout my young life asking myself what I call myself—if I am Asian enough to claim that label for myself. I feel an immediate bond with anyone else who tells me they are a “quarter” anything. I get excited when I see other Asian people in public, though I will never speak to them. I go home, and my mother makes *gyoza* by hand. The rice cooker sings to us almost every afternoon. I cannot stomach frozen, ready-to-eat Japanese meals because my tongue knows better; they use all these fillers in the frozen meals, the vegetables are gross or mushy, the meals contain too much sauce, or they just taste bad. Our house showcases a display case for the *hina* dolls that my mother inherited—the emperor and his court lined up on shelves in a glass case with colorized pictures of my great-grandmother framed and sitting above them. I take my friends to the local Asian market; it is actually a Vietnamese business. I feel a sense of pride when I talk about Ghibli movies, though I did not watch any until I was in high school.

If I am allowed a lifetime to explain, then no, not completely. I am ten years old when I sit through a sixteen-hour flight to visit the ancient family member I heard on the other side of my grandmother’s phone for the first and last time. *Obachama* (Great-grandmother) is the oldest woman I ever met. She speaks no English except when she calls out “bye-bye!” on her

doorstep. I speak no Japanese except for when I whisper “*sayonara*.” I barely understand her, even as my grandmother translates. She is so small, her hands so wrinkled. I am ten years old, and I can see over her head as she stands in front of me.

We visit her small house every day for three weeks, passing in and out of her sliding front door. No shoes inside, so my light-up sneakers stay in her foyer. We sit on cushions spread out on the bamboo mat floor, knees tucked under the shortest table I have ever seen. My father looks like a giant when he accepts a cup of water from my *Obachama*. My brother and I crowd around the space heater to warm our hands. *Obachama* has cut up apples and stuck toothpicks in each slice. They are unbalanced and totter back and forth on the plate. They are the best apples I have ever eaten: crisp and bright and sweet like candy. I show her how I make friendship bracelets, braiding vibrant vinyl strings back and forth, and she cries when I give her one.

We spend our days visiting her and visiting my grandmother’s friends—people who knew about me before we arrived and speak about me in a language I may never understand. They make food for us in their houses. I eat so much, look at so many things, and feel so many small emotions. We meet people in the city who know my name, but I cannot pronounce their names.

The cold is different here, and I often press my hand to the windowpane to feel the chill on my palm. We go through shops with toys and trinkets that I cannot recognize. The memory of them feels like a hazy dream in the morning filled with colors and shapes that are impossible to solidify. I ride a train for the first time and watch as the countryside turns into a city through a foggy window. I stand in a glossy, fluorescent mall, and I am lost in the grandeur of it all: fruit stands in the food court with *mochi* desserts lined in perfect rows. (I learn that I do not like the red bean paste inside them.) People stare at us as we walk through the stores: a little white girl and a littler white boy walking with a tall white man and two Japanese women. I must point at what I want on a menu based only on the picture, hoping that it will taste like I imagine it will when it arrives at the table with billowing clouds of steam.

We see castles that remind me of LEGO sets, and I climb the hundreds of stairs in that LEGO-set castle that is centuries older than I am. My brother will not remember most of this trip; he is only six and will complain for

the rest of his childhood that he barely remembers the coolest trip he has ever taken. He does enjoy the picture we get with a real, genuine samurai. We spend these days visiting strangers and visiting *Obachama*. Our time is split between the calm of her bamboo mat floor and the inescapable rush of an entire country.

There is a moment when I am sitting with my family on the floor of my *Obachama*'s house. I am ten years old, and it is then that I understand: I am nothing more than a stray thread in an extravagant tapestry, and part of me is woven throughout an entire picture of culture and beauty and history. Somewhere deep in that intricate design is a segment of myself, but I cannot recognize it, cannot trace it, cannot understand it. Once the final design has been finished, the rest of me will be trimmed from the edge and swept up with the scraps. I know that I am in this tapestry, adding something small to a greater design, but I am witnessing it from the discard pile.



I am not allowed any moment to explain. I do not know what I am, and I am unable to answer. I am sixteen years old, and I stare at those two girls across the room. They are now disinterested in what they have said to me, these two girls I have never seen before and will never see again. I say nothing. I am perpetually hovering my pencil over those ACT circles: "White," "Asian," and "Other."

## Of Feathers and Frailty

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Gretal Yvette Shank

Sitting on a mossy log beside the decrepit hunting cabin, I finish carving the feather. Its wood is soft, unlike the feather clipped in my hair. Soft wood may be easier to carve, but it is not as durable; it will not hold up when battered by wind and rain. When I am satisfied with my work, I stand and brush the wood chips off my lap. After slipping the knife into my pocket, I walk through the dead field, where the wheat is flat and the weeds lay low, and the bright January sun looks down from above the mountains on the horizon. I cross the road where animals have lost their lives, and a memorial where a young lady rests somberly beside a tree. I walk slowly up the driveway, washed out by snow and rain, past where the bank is steep and the ancient tree with the rope swing spreads its strong roots under the ground. Daffodils will grow here in the spring. I do not know yet that daffodils will be the only life I find here when that time comes.

I walk around the house and enter the dark, musty garage. Chainsaws and other tools fill one side, while a freshly chopped stack of firewood takes up the other. Along a shelf, motorcycle helmets are cocooned in cobwebs, and other things that have been here for a very long time are gathering rust and dust. There are gnarled walking sticks leaning against an old sink beside the door, sticks that Pawpaw carved himself. I turn the sticky brass doorknob and warm air wafts into the garage. I step inside and say “Hello” to Diana, who has begun to make coffee. She asks if I would like some, but



I tell her, "No, thank you," as I walk past the burning woodstove into the living room.

My grandfather is asleep on the worn-out gray recliner, curled up sideways with a canula in his nose, pumping a continuous stream of oxygen into his lungs. I bite the inside of my cheek; he looks so helpless and vulnerable. I turn back to the kitchen, where my Uncle Bing has appeared.

"I can wake him for you," he says.

I shake my head. "No, let him sleep. He'll wake up when he does. Besides, I might stay for a while. If not, I'll be back later with the rest of the family."

Bing does not respond and goes back to his bedroom. I take a seat in the kitchen. Pawpaw made these chairs himself. Little do I know that this is the last time I will ever sit in one.

When Bing emerges from his room, he offers a second time to wake Pawpaw for me. I start to refuse, but he says he will be so happy to see me.

"He isn't doing well," he tells me.

I nod sadly and follow him into the living room to hear him say softly, "Dad, wake up. An angel's here to see you."

I may be the first angel to visit him that week, but I am not the last. Pawpaw slowly wakes up and uncurls his legs to sit properly in his chair, the one he hardly ever gets up from these days. He smiles when he sees me and begins to stand. It is hard for him, but somehow those frail arms are strong enough to get him on his feet. I move into the kitchen, and he puts his hand on my shoulder as he shuffles past—partly for support and partly out of love. I give him a hug, which must take him by surprise, since I rarely give them to him voluntarily. I have been getting better about that though.

The oxygen line disappears under the bathroom door, and I wait for him while Diana tries to make conversation as she does the dishes, asking me about school and other mundane things I cannot recall. When Pawpaw comes out, he stands just over the threshold into the kitchen, one hand on the counter beside the microwave and the other on his chair. I do not know yet that this image of him will remain in my mind for months to come and probably for forever. I will capture it in words at the end of April. His back is bowed, his head hangs low, and he looks at me while he talks. I will not remember what he says, but I will remember the way he stands: one gnarled hand on the edge of the counter, the other on his sturdy chair with the red

leather draped over it. His old jeans are fastened tightly with a belt, because though they once fit him, they do not any longer. A plaid shirt hangs off his bony shoulders, but I do not remember its color. Perhaps it was green, or orange, or maybe red. All I know is that he was wearing green the last time he left his house five days later.

His thick hair, hardly even gray, sticks out in all directions, and his beard is as wild as ever. And he smiles. He is happy. But behind those old blue eyes, I see deep sadness. I tell him to take a seat and he gladly complies, though, of course, he does not need my permission. It is his house after all, though in a few days I will not be glad to call it so. When he sits down, I notice that his oxygen line is twisted around his leg, and I mention it with a slight chuckle. He grins and tries to untangle it himself, but it slips from his feeble fingers. I come to his aid, but after I free his leg, he puts his foot down on top of the tube.

"No, no," I say, slightly amused but a little nervous. "Don't put your foot on it, you won't be able to breathe." He shifts his foot away, but I still feel like I must keep an eye on the oxygen line, that clear green tube that snakes across the floor, wrapping itself around everything in its reach.

Diana gives us some soft-boiled eggs, still warm. They taste good, but I am more focused on making sure Pawpaw eats his; his weight loss makes me worried that soon he will simply disappear into thin air. Of course, that is not what will happen, but I do not know that yet. I do not know that he will disappear into *thick* air, then reappear again, then disappear once more, and again and again, as my crying fills the stale air in my bedroom before I disappear into the woods outside. Back in the schoolhouse, he pours an unnecessary amount of salt on his food, as he always does, and slowly begins to eat. I tell him I came down by myself to see him, partly because I wanted to hike but mostly because I wanted to visit.

I show him the feather I carved when I was down by the creek, next to the dilapidated cabin, and he smiles proudly. Then I take the other feather, the original one, out of my hair and put it in his hand. "I made this," I say, and his smile grows bigger. He holds it close to his face and peers at it through his reading glasses.

"My, my," he says, "You really *are* becoming an artist." And although those are not the last words that I will hear him say, they are words I will remember.

I call my dad to see whether I should hike back to my aunt's house or

stay at the schoolhouse, and he says, "Consensus is that you should come back." I nod, but I do not leave. I stay and talk to Pawpaw, Bing, and Diana instead. We make conversation as the sun sinks past the grimy kitchen window, the one with the bowl of handmade corncob pipes on the top sill and a bowl of overripe oranges and bananas on the bottom, along with a few broken pieces of mirror; Pawpaw used to collect broken mirrors and place them around the house and even in the woods, propped up against rocks and the old well across the little stream.

I stand by the woodstove and even though the heat exhausts me, Pawpaw shivers. He sinks into his recliner and falls asleep once more as we wait for the rest of my family to bang open the door and make themselves at home. It will not be a home for much longer. Later on, my dad will tell me that preparations were being made for hospice nurses to come to the schoolhouse the very next week. At that point, however, I already know they were not needed. Pawpaw has stage IV lung cancer and, while he sleeps, Bing tells me again that he is not doing well. He tells me that he gave him a bath earlier that week and his back was very bony. His limbs were thin and frail.

I blink back tears and say, "I know. I know he doesn't have long."

But I still do not realize just how dire the situation is. I do not realize that once I leave the schoolhouse that night, I will not see Pawpaw in person ever again. I will not see the schoolhouse either, at least not the way I see it now, full of light and warmth. It will be full of warmth five days from now, but not the comforting kind. It will be the destroying kind, the deadly kind, the kind of warmth that leaves nothing behind. Nothing but a shell.

After my family comes down, we visit a little longer and all is well. I look at the wooden elk art on the wall and I think about recreating it. I move my eyes over each of the cards on the chalkboard; I made them for Pawpaw three years ago when he was in a deep pit of cancer. On one card is an illustration of my hand holding his. It will be gone soon. All the cards will be gone.

I lean in to give Pawpaw a hug as we leave, and he teases me, saying "A second hug? Wow." He jokingly asks for a third and I roll my eyes and shake my head before walking outside. I should have given him that third hug. I did not know then that I would never hug my grandfather again.

As we walk out, all is still well, as long as I set aside the fact that Pawpaw is slowly slipping away. That fact will hit me later, and it will hit me hard. It will hit us all with a force as strong as an explosion because a spark will

cause Pawpaw's slipping to turn into a tumble, which will turn into a fall. And it will knock the wind out of my chest, as if I were the one who fell. It will make us cry out in anger, in shock, in horror. It will make our throats dry and our lungs tight because we will not be able to find him after he is rushed away in that ambulance. We will not be able to find him, and flames will fill our minds. Flames catching wood, catching paper. Burning the stools he worked so hard to build, igniting the layers of polyurethane that were meant to protect the beautiful wood beneath. Flames licking those cards I spent so much time making: lions, trees, footprints, and two hands that will never hold again.

But I do not know this yet. So, we roll down that driveway without looking back and I think of feathers and frailty, believing that things are already as bad as they could get. And yet all is still well. Compared to what is to come, all is very, very well.

## Jaguar

Elissa Williams

There was a girl who loved to watch animal documentaries. She watched them for fun and was fascinated by the differences and similarities that could be observed between more primal species, like the apex predator, the jaguar, and humans. She watched them to escape the realities of her life. She wanted to immerse herself and drown in the realities of the animals that share the world alongside her. As time went on, she would soon see the characteristics and behaviors of the animals being displayed in and infiltrating her own reality.

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Humans and wildlife have an enthralling relationship. Although not completely different from each other biologically, they do differ. One group has evolved to the point of being deemed the most intelligent species on the planet, whereas the other group is less developed. One group's members use their brains to think logically about things, and the other relies on instinct. This difference creates a disconnect between the two groups.

However, the two groups are not as different as they appear. Sometimes, humans act in ways that appear animalistic. Literally and figuratively, the concept of predator and prey is one that humans know. Just like animals in the wild, some people are bigger, smarter, and more manipulative and will take advantage of others who may be smaller and more vulnerable. When

those people are done, they leave their victims to rot like a dead carcass and to become fertilizer for the earth beneath.

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It was the girl's second year at university. Her previous roommate, and her only friend at the time, now lived in a different dormitory. As a result, she had been paired with a stranger as her roommate—one she was not particularly fond of. She would learn to deal with the situation, as she decided not to interact unless necessary. This led to a living space where the volume was constantly on mute, but she could deal with the silence. She had lived separate plenty of times; what was one year? After all, she was used to not associating with others. She could become lonely, but she learned to enjoy her own silent presence.

*The white-tailed deer can be seen in the fields, full of grass and fruit bearing bushes. Its solitary personality lends to the calm atmosphere of its surroundings, along with the gentle breeze of the wind.*

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Early in her third semester, she met someone. A boy. She actually talked to him. Usually, talking to anyone, let alone boys, was difficult. This boy was different; he made talking easy. Comfortable. They were in the same chemistry lab and decided to be lab partners. During their first experiment, they talked about their interests and found that they had a few similarities. The girl had not made a friend in what felt like ages, so she leaped at the opportunity to be his friend.

“Do you want to be friends?”

“Yes.”

They exchanged numbers. Then, they walked back to their dorms together. They lived in dorms across the quadrangle from each other.

The girl and the boy became fast friends. The boy was extremely friendly and open to meeting new people. He had just transferred from a different university, and he already knew many people. Most of them were girls, but the girl did not think much of the gender of his friends.

*The male jaguar, in search of a mate, comes across the deer's field. He does not find a female to mate with. Instead, he finds what could be his next meal, a lone female deer. Because of the deer's great senses, the jaguar cannot attack immediately. He must be patient and wait for an opportune time.*

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Weeks passed. The girl and the boy had become very close. They were always in communication. They texted and visited each other's rooms when their roommates were gone. The girl was growing attached to the boy, although she would not admit her feelings. He was a breath of fresh air; to her, he was the missing puzzle piece. She did not need a friend group to keep her grounded. It was almost as if he was placed in her life for a reason. He came out of nowhere, and their friendship was unexpected, but it was all she needed; for her, he was enough.

*Using his senses and basic instinct, the jaguar returned to the spot where he had previously spotted the deer. Once there, he watched her from the bushes, the foliage acting as camouflage to him hidden. He did this daily, picking up on and matching the deer's routine.*

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Those weeks of close bonding turned into months. However, the girl's good thing soon came to an abrupt halt. The boy had gone home for personal reasons. Her roommate was gone too, so she was alone, which was not unusual. It was just a coincidence that they were gone at the same time. She desperately tried to convince herself that this was true.

Upon his return, the boy called out to her in the hall. Her stomach fluttered. She had missed him, and he was only gone for a few hours. She raced to her door. She wanted to see him and call out to him in return. As she swung the door open, she was startled to see her roommate standing on the other side, equally startled, albeit for different reasons.

The boy and her roommate returned to campus together, she realized. She was upset, and her reality was starting to crack. She attempted to regain her composure and retreated to her side of the dorm room. She settled for texting him a response instead.

"Hi."

"Hey."

They did not talk for the rest of the day.

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The girl awoke the next morning with a text message from the boy waiting on her phone. He wanted to know why she was being distant. At

the time, she was confused; not even 24 hours had passed since they last talked. She told him this.

She realized later that such a long silence was unusual, considering they talked every minute of every day. She would text, and he would respond with statements that would appear manipulative, gaslighting, and borderline aggressive.

After reading the messages, the girl put her phone face down on the desk. She heaved and tried to steady her breath as her heart started beating at an abnormal rate. She raised her hands, which were visibly trembling, and wrapped them around herself. Rocking back and forth, she began to feel tears welling in her eyes; no matter how much she resisted, the tears began to fall, creating a river. She shrank into herself and pressed her face into her arms before letting out a scream. She did not know how to respond. She wanted to talk to him about the issue but not through text.

He was making an in-person conversation difficult. He did not respond to her pleas for in-person communication. He left campus for the weekend and ignored her for the rest of the day.

*One day, when the jaguar returned to the field, he stepped on a twig, which startled the deer. The deer took off running, her long legs giving her a boost. The jaguar huffed in frustration and turned to leave.*

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That night, the boy and the girl finally talked on the phone. For her, it was a difficult conversation. He knew that seeing him with her roommate made the girl uneasy. Unbeknownst to her, he had done this before. He tried to reassure her that she was a priority. His reassurance worked, and she confessed her feelings: She did not want anything from him, but the truth of her feelings had been weighing on her more than usual. His response caught her off guard.

“What do you like about me?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Just because.”

Stupidly, she told him.

*The next time the jaguar encountered the deer, he made sure to stay crouched and low to the ground. Peering through the bushes, he could see the deer’s back turned to him. He slowly pressed his paws into the ground and got into prime position to pounce. He held the position and waited for the best moment to stage his ambush.*



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After this conversation, the girl felt a shift in their relationship. Their text messages got shorter, and the visiting stopped. They rarely saw each other alone. He was always with her roommate, and she saw them together almost everywhere. Additionally, her roommate was never in their dorm room; she was always in the boy's room. The girl was torn. She wanted her friend, but he had made his choice. She respected his choice, but she could not bring herself to be around them—not when they were always together. It hurt too much.

She felt silly admitting it, but she was heartbroken. The strong connection, like a rope that kept the boy and the girl together, was stretching and loosening. She was trying to hold on; she pulled continuously, trying to get him closer again, but he was too far. With her feet planted on the ground, she grabbed the rope with both hands and pulled with all her might. She struggled to hold on, as the fibers rubbed violently against her hands and as the rope slipped from her fingers. In the end, the rope ripped from her fingers, leaving them burned and bruised. She lost him.

For weeks afterward, the girl suffered. Losing him was like losing air, and she could not breathe. At times, she felt like she may have overreacted, but then she remembered: The boy had called her a priority in his life.

He lied.

When confronting him on this, he said, “You just want me all to yourself.”

That was not what she said. How could the boy disregard everything that she had said to reach that conclusion, she wondered.

And with that, their last conversation ended. For the remainder of the semester, she wondered how things turned out this way. Her mental health took an immediate decline. She barely ate and avoided her own room like the plague. She often snuck into her previous roommate's room and slept there, as she could not stomach being so close to the people that triggered her pain. She cried to her friends about the boy and the situation. They tried to comfort her, but she often cried herself to sleep. She could not forget the things he said to her, both before and after the fallout.

She was too blinded by her sadness and feelings for him to realize it, but he had been gaslighting her. He tried to make her seem like the one who made a problem out of nothing. She was surrounded by an unimaginable

darkness, and it swallowed her whole, dragging her down into the dark abyss.

This time, however, she did not try to escape it. It was too late. The damage was done.

*The jaguar pounced onto the back of the deer, digging his claws into her flesh. During the struggle, the jaguar held on tightly to deer, weighing her down. Once she hit the ground, he put the weight of his body on top of hers to keep her there, before delivering a skull crushing bite to her skull, effectively putting an end to the struggle.*

Author's Note: Information about the jaguar's behavior was pulled from two sources:

Born Free. "Jaguars." 2023, <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/animals/jaguars?gad=1>.  
Lamar University. "Jaguars." Department of Biology, 2023, <https://www.lamar.edu/arts-sciences/biology/study-abroad-belize/jungle-critters/jungle-critters-3/jaguar.html>.

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# FICTION

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## An American Soldier

Ellie Atkinson

George came into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him and startling me out of my daze. He hit the counter and started yelling. I did not respond, letting his words flow freely as I always did. It was better to let him talk without interruption, which I had learned the hard way a few times. I was placing bacon strips in the pan when ceramic shattered against the wooden floor. I turned away from the stove, staring at him in shock. In hundreds of shards lay my favorite platter from my German grandmother.

The pan sizzled as the bacon began to cook.

“Do you know how hard it is to tend that farm by myself?”

“I take care of the chickens and the calves,” I justified, pointing an old wooden spoon at him. His eyes darkened before his hand swung so fast to my cheek. Tears filled my eyes, and the spoon clattered to the floor. The bacon popped against the heat, the smell wandering through the house.

My eyes widened, and my throat squeezed. My lip quivered as a tear threatened to fall. He stared at my face before pulling me into him. He leaned his face against my shoulder, the ruffles of my green apron shielding us from each other.

I stood frozen.

The kitchen became too hot. Claustrophobic. Suffocated. George rambled quiet apologies before he cleaned up for dinner.

I did everything I could think of to make his anger toward me stop for

good. Maybe if I dished out his food for him, he would be calm. Maybe if I cleaned up after dinner and took care of the kids, he would be happy. Maybe if I was out and around the cows more, he would be appreciative. Maybe.

"Mousie," he began, and my heart jumped. It was a pet name he had given me but had not used since he had changed. He came home from the war as someone I did not recognize. That was nearly a decade ago. Now, George stood in the doorway of our pale-yellow bathroom, as I pinned my hair into curls for the night. I met his gaze through the mirror, and he looked away.

He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

I did not know if I was stunned by the apology or his unexpected use of the pet name, but I was unable to speak. The pet name jolted me into a memory. He always said I reminded him of a mouse because of my small stature and high-pitched voice.

"Mousie, please know that I'm trying."

I returned from my memory to reality with a tear in my eye, which I blinked away quickly.

"You know that these past few years haven't been easy for me. I've done a lot of things wrong. . . ." George paused, trying to find the words before his eyes met mine again. "I'm sorry. I want to change."

I licked my lips as my heart struggled. I did not have a response because I had longed for "my George" for years but never knew if he would return. I had lost hope, just like I had lost hope when I could not get pregnant early in our marriage.

I shifted my gaze from to my husband, who was wearing a soft smile—another thing I did not see often.

I blushed, and a giggle squeaked out. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're beautiful," he breathed.

My heart fluttered, and I shoved a pin against my scalp, securing the curl. The pain distracted me from the butterflies in my stomach. George hugged me from behind and kissed the crook of my neck and then my cheek.

"I love you very much."

He left me alone in the bathroom while I stared at myself in the mirror, dazed and confused.

I did not know what to think or do in that situation. I was skeptical, and

I tried not to get my hopes up in case George did not change. However, I saw hints of the original George every now and then. It was at random moments. Sometimes it was after church and other times, it was when we were sitting together in the living room after dinner. The kids would be playing, and we would each be reading or doing crosswords on the couch. He would lay his arm over my shoulder, pull me close, and help me with the question I was answering.

Anytime I saw that man—the man whom I fell in love with—my heartache disappeared. He was who I remembered as I fell asleep at night. He was who I remembered when I covered the bruises or cleaned up the blood when that started to become a frequent occurrence again.

George increased his drinking to help him sleep and to take “the edge” off. The nightmares never decreased; even years after the war, he was reliving the horrors he had witnessed. Kids lying in the streets of Europe. Cities bombed to rubble. Dirty, dead bodies scattering war zones. It was heartbreaking to be a bystander and helplessly watch him suffer.



One Sunday afternoon, our small family was out with the cows for an overdue barn cleaning. The twins were singing a song they had made up, while George rambled on about cow prices. I nonchalantly rolled my eyes at a remark of his, not realizing he noticed. But he did and he slapped my face, covering my cheek with half-dried cow shit.

“Daddy,” our girl started, “Mommy says that hitting isn’t nice.”

George looked at our three-year-old daughter from the corner of his eye and took two long strides before repeating his aggression with her. I gasped and yelled his name, my anger boiling. Tears ran down her cheeks as she screamed. I ran to her and picked her up, holding her tightly.

“All of you,” he roared, “get out!”

I glared at him, unable to speak, before stomping out of the barn with our twins. If he hit me, so be it: I could take it. Hitting our children? I would not tolerate it.

I put the children to bed early. George did not say a word before he cleaned up and left for his Thursday game night. I did not care that he was going alone tonight. I did not want to go anyway.

I passed the mirror in the hallway and stopped, staring at myself. I did not recognize the woman who looked back at me. She had hazel eyes and

dark hair like my mother's, but deep lines were written across her face. She was thin and hollow. My heart fell, and I rolled my lips together. I hated what I had become, even though I did my best to be like my mother. Her selflessness. Her passion. Her love for her husband.

I took a deep breath, gaining courage before I grabbed the beige rotary phone in the living room and spun the dial. I listened to the ringing, waiting for an answer on the other end. None. I set the phone down before picking it up again and dialing the same number. I waited some more. *Pick up, pick up.*

"Hello?"

Relief waved through me as I heard her soft voice. "It's me. Can I come over tonight?"

Sensing my anxiety, she worriedly asked, "Elaine, is everything okay?"

"No. Can I come over?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Thank you, I'll be there late tonight." I slammed the phone down and ran to my room. I snatched my trunk from under the bed and started throwing in random clothes. I opened the top drawer of the dresser and started to dig through its contents for a small amount of hidden money. Faded stripes of red and blue caught my eye: the countless letters George and I wrote back and forth as we managed the war on opposite ends. I pulled an end of the string, and it unraveled, freeing the letters. I slowly opened the first envelope and pulled out the creased letter. The date at the top told me that it was the first one he had sent home to me. My throat tightened.

*Dear Mousie. . . .*

I gasped; my heart responded just reading his pet name for me. My eyes wandered across the curved letters. A tickle against my cheek brought me back to the present. I itched my cheek only to realize that a tear had slipped. I grabbed a wad of money I had been saving and stuffed it in pantyhose, leaving the letters in the drawer. I took the opened letter and placed it between pages of his current reading. I went to the twins' room with a smaller trunk and used the light from the hall to guide my haphazard packing. Anything I could grab I packed as quickly as I could. I shoved both trunks under the twins' bed before going to the kitchen and putting crackers and cookies wrapped in parchment into a metal saltine tin. I stuffed the tin and a few of the children's favorite books into a bag that



my mother had crocheted for me. That bag went in hiding also—in a place where George would not look. I waited with adrenaline for him to come home.

The inside of our home appeared like nothing life-changing was happening. I climbed into bed, wearing a thin dress under my nightgown; I was ready to leave when the time was right. My mind raced as quickly as my heart, and I waited for what seemed like hours before he came home. As he drove up to the house, I heard the gravel crunch under the tires of his loud truck.

That was my cue.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing, feigning sleep. The heavy front door slammed as George stumbled in, mumbling to himself, undoubtedly drunk. He cursed when the bedroom door squeaked and then shuffled around the room before he turned on the lamp. I continued to lie still as he dropped into bed, tugging blankets over himself. Long minutes later, snores erupted from George—the telltale sign that he was out cold. Ever so slowly, I slid out of the bed and tiptoed out of the room. Thankfully, I did not need to worry about the squeaky door; George had left it open. I breathed a sigh of relief before grabbing the two trunks from the twins' bedroom. I took them outside through the backdoor so I would not wake anyone, specifically my husband.

I snuck back into the house and quietly woke the twins, hushing and cooing to keep them calm and quiet. We slipped on their shoes, snuck out of the house with some blankets, and climbed into the car. My biggest fear was that the sound of the Ford would awaken George. I took a deep breath, started the ignition, and hit the gas, launching us beyond George's reach.

I glanced in the rearview mirror, watching our home as it got smaller. My chest hurt as I continued to drive away from the house. I was as euphoric as I was heartbroken. I was finished with being a pawn in his war—a war that he never escaped. But his continued struggle to escape did not mean he could trap me.

## Frostbite

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Riley Atzert

Squinting through slanted blinds, Joan peered down at the ragged cat sitting on her porch. The feline sat at the corner of the concrete slab, looking out toward the mess of trees that made up Joan's backyard. The cat sat still and stoic, the black and white hair wrapping his figure, which glinted in the pale light, absorbing the evening snowfall. The sky emerged dark and gray overhead, sprinkling opalescent snowflakes across piles of fallen leaves that shielded the earth. Joan kept quiet, listening to the wind whistle through cracks in the windowpane. On her porch, food and water bowls sulked against the mud-stained support column, and a weathered cat tent reserved for the strays rested alongside the house.

Despite that she provided food and shelter for the gangly looking cat, he never let Joan touch him and never fed into her tricks to get him into the warmth of the house. Joan had taken to calling him a plethora of vulgarities but settled for naming him something proper as he demonstrated his permanence. Naming him Martin amused her, as his black and white coat with his serious, wide eyes gave him an air of humanoid poise.

In her days of solitude, Joan took solace in the little wisps of life that made their way into her front yard. Under the cover of night, deer came to feast on the mums planted next to her door, while bobcats patrolled the woods and crawled up trees. Martin and the other feral cats tracked their expeditions in the grass and snow that hung about her dwelling, leaving

their small prints in the soft earth. Cardinals and thrashers swooped in and out of the foliage, making headway toward a worn terracotta bird bath filled with worms and stale water. Thimbleweed grew along the dull picket fence where hawks perched in the early dawn. Snowdrops flourished in her yard during the spring and winter months, opening their milk-white petals when the sun reached its peak.

Glancing away from the cat, Joan let out a sigh as she inspected the inside of her house. Thick blankets of dust obscured the blinds and most hard surfaces, simultaneously blurring hard edges and clogging the air filter tucked away in the corner of her living room. Books lined the floor and the walls. Sturdy leather furniture cradled a worn coffee table that was adorned with splotchy brown rings, weighing down the room and sucking one's focus inward. The scent of patchouli oil misting from her diffuser filled Joan's nostrils and clung to her hair, colluding with the wood and vanilla aromas leaking from the scattered stacks of books and magazines. Over the years, Joan's house grew because of what she could not bear to relinquish. Her house presented an insatiable appetite, hoarding dusty relics with blind fervor.

A strong gust of wind shook the house and rustled the trees. Martin pounced back into the trees, leaving Joan with the hum of the heater for company.

She shuffled away from the door, walking toward the bedroom. Joan's knees and hips ached with each step; all efforts to walk seemed to expel the energy she accumulated while sleeping. As a girl, Joan did not need to amass energy through daytime naps and deep slumbers; instead, energy that charged her sparked and simmered in her childhood home in every little moment: in the petty arguments she started over breakfast cereal with her siblings and in every tender goodnights shared with her parents. It was as if the energy rolled off the shoulders of every key person in her life, fueled by her naivete and adolescent wishes. But as a mature adult, whenever she felt the creep of exhaustion, she sensed her bed's blankets and satin pillows calling her. She could feel the calling now and her need for respite aching like the pain of a phantom limb.

Joan paused, studying the pictures hanging on the walls, snug in their frames. She had mounted moments from her childhood and young-adult

years throughout her home, paying homage to those gracious enough to share pieces of themselves with her. Their influences kept her grounded. She saw snapshots of herself, under the cover of night, young and bodacious, grinning in her hometown with siblings and friends at the grand re-opening of the historic library that her son bought and renovated into a sophisticated cocktail bar. She saw herself as a middle-aged woman, standing tall with melancholy eyes next to the overgrown jasmine that her father planted around the mailbox of her first home. She saw herself with her firstborn, minutes after her final push; she glowed with a sheen of sweat and cradled the world in her arms. She saw herself as a girl, standing between her parents and gripping their hands with sugar-soaked fingers after devouring milkshakes.

*Would they pity me as I am now? Would they resent me?*

Joan lingered on questions unanswered, on people locked in the confines of memory. Before grief became her lifelong companion, she brazenly marked her own body with symbols from her life—the jasmine that flourished in her grandparent’s backyard, the twin floral chairs where her parents drank their morning coffee, the toy sword her brother carried for several months in elementary school—all tattooed across the bright skin of her youth. She wanted to showcase her daring as well as her capacity for adoration.

As the years passed, her tattoos faded and bled together. The ink lightened, and small details melted into nothingness. Joan’s tattoos sagged and stretched with her weight, becoming one with the brown splotches and freckles that blossomed on her skin.

She paused in the hall and stared at a picture of her parents on their wedding day. Overflowing with nerves and excitement, blissfully unaware of their bittersweet future. . . . Mother stood tall and elegant, in lace with plum-colored lipstick across delicate lips, with her eyes sparkling. Joan’s father stood erect, with a rod-like posture and a wide smile stretching across his straight teeth. Looking at family pictures, Joan experienced were moments when the grief settled in her lungs like smog, sticking to the tissue and turning each breath into a chore. She would gasp and claw at her throat, perplexed by the ease at which her chest shrunk and expanded.

Joan made her way into the bedroom, resigning to fatigue. She decided not to brush her hair or teeth or to clean her face. She undressed and found her way under the covers, searching for warmth the old heater was unable

to provide. In the winter months, Joan could not seem to shake the chill that caused her teeth to chatter. She pulled the blankets up high, scrunched her eyes shut, and waited for sleep. When her eyelids met, she thought about Martin. She visualized his eyes in all their intensity: two yellow eyes, cut deep with the black slit of pupils and nestled betwixt a charcoal nose.

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The next morning, Joan hobbled to the door, scanning outside. The ground was plastered in a thick layer of snow and the sky was an opaque silver, leaking crystals at a rapid pace. She discovered the cat bowl frozen and the tent caked in feeble layers of ice. She opened the door, the cold air stinging her face, to find the inside of the tent bed occupied. Martin's head was nestled into his body, two paws gently covering his eyes. He breathed in and out slowly, the black and white swirls on his body rhythmically rising and falling.

She crouched down, snow dampening her knit dress and bones groaning. She craned her head to better inspect Martin's eyes. He stared back, half-heartedly swiping out his paw and bearing sharp teeth with a quiet hiss. She brought her hand toward his frosted nose and forced herself to be still. Martin sniffed at the outstretched hand, moving his head methodically around the wrinkled fingers. She pulled back, easing herself into the snow and cradling her head in her hands. They stared at each other. Martin blinked slowly, maintaining a focused eye on the figure looming in front of him. Joan remained still, the cold biting her nose and collarbone. She continued to stare at the cat, wanting nothing more than his trust.

She reached out her hand once more, successfully caressing the cat with light fingers. Martin let out a short grunt and stretched out his paws, separating his toes into stars. He breathed loudly and erratically, his head bobbing under the strain of holding it upright. Fleas danced across his coat, jumping through frosted mats. She had never seen him this close; he was older and more haggard than she had anticipated.

Then, in one swift, decisive motion, she snatched up the cat and jumped inside, slamming the door behind her. To her surprise, Martin made no effort to resist and settled in her arms, allowing the heat of her chest to pass into him. Emotions swelled in Joan instantaneously, filling her whole and halting the spread of the winter chill.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," she whispered, squeezing his shivering body closer to hers.

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Joan quickly walked toward the bathroom, her mind swirling and her body aching. She moved the cat onto her left shoulder and grabbed a clean towel and liquid soap from underneath the countertop with her right hand. Void of struggle, Joan gracefully laid the ill cat on the towel, turned on the faucet, and waited for the water to warm and fill the sink. She bent down, meeting the eyes of her visitor once more.

Upon closer inspection, Joan noticed grey beginning to overtake patches of black and blending into the white that traversed his coat. She saw that Martin's tongue hung slightly out of his slanted mouth, before his front row of white teeth. The pads of his paws matched the velvety charcoal of his nose, bringing out streaks of amber woven in and out of his yellow irises. She stared into Martin's eyes, appreciating him in his entirety.

Steam sprouted in Joan's peripheral vision, alerting her of the bath's readiness. Lightly pushing him down into the sink, she spread the water across his body. He growled and lashed out at her arm, drawing a thin line of blood across leathered skin.

"Shhh. It'll make you warm," Joan reprimanded, switching between massaging and combing through the dirt-encrusted mats out of his hair as he lay in the water.

As though understanding, Martin let himself be pressed into the murk. Frost melted from hair, dirt converted to mud and pestilential fleas found themselves rising floating on the surface.

"You know, my son used to love hot baths." Joan glanced down at the cat, his small body covered in suds. She continued, speaking in a hushed voice, vigorously combing out fleas. "As soon as the weather turned or he ran too hard playing hide-and-seek, he would beg me for a hot bath with special salts. He was very particular about mixing them, with dashes of eucalyptus and lavender. He would sit and play for hours, marinating in the oils."

She hesitated, carefully ordering her scrambled thoughts.

"The last time I saw him, his hands were frozen like yours. There was a snowstorm raging during the weeks before, so furious that it stopped the authorities from finding him sooner. Although it kept him whole longer.

He had found a little abandoned shack in the woods between my house and his, complete with graffiti spoiling the outside and the remains of desperate animals that had once sought shelter within. Although I must say it wasn't as plush and forgiving as the one you've been lounging around in." She let out a strangled breath. Looking down at Marty and ignoring his soft agitated yowls, she visualized her dead son's broken body. The way frost gathered on top of his dark curls, spreading along his eyelids and at the corners of his mouth. The way his neck was rubbed raw and ragged, a cherry red ribbon neatly tied around a bent milk-white throat. She remembered the purple of his fingers and how they looked more like hardened clay than flesh, molded into a balled fist. She remembered the streak of dirt against his brow, how it stood in stark contrast to his colorless pallor.

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By the time she finished, Joan was drenched and Martin was dripping all over the towel, the sink bespeckled with fleas and clumps of hair. Throughout the ordeal, he had begrudgingly stayed put, stating his disapproval with low, primal growls. Joan and Martin exchanged exhausted glances, and Martin's small wheezes filling the silence. He looked content in cleanliness, his paws no longer touched by the harsh bite of frost.

Joan's wrists were sore from picking out the parasitic fleas with a plastic comb, and her hands were pruned beyond recognition. She cleaned up the mess, draining the cloudy water and further patting the cat with a dry towel. Martin's lethargy was intensifying; he licked only at his paws, leaving Joan to tend to the rest of his shivering body. He lay on the counter as she meticulously dried his ears and chin, closing his eyes and kneading the blanket. She watched his claws slink out and retract, their sharp ends poking holes in the fabric.

She wrapped Martin cocoon-style in his blanket and laid him on the couch, feeding him salmon-flavored treats while she poured herself a glass of cheap cabernet and listened to him crunch. She grabbed a small bowl from her kitchen cabinet, poured fresh milk, and placed the full bowl beside the dwindling pile of kibble.

Joan sat with Martin, stroking his sleeping figure and scratching behind his ears. Together, they sank into the brown folds of the couch, sharing warmth. She grabbed more blankets and curled up with the cat, resting her hand against the rise and fall of his midsection. She drank her wine and

listened as a quiet purr emerged from the wrapped figure pressed against her hip. They sat clustered together, inattentive to the ticking of the clock. The moment she felt the warmth begin to fade and the tiny movements halt, Joan closed her eyes. She sat there with him, hot tears sliding down her face and dissolving onto his striped head. She heard the wind scrape through the trees outside at varying speeds. It slammed against the windows and leveled out to a gentle breeze, repetitively cycling through conditions as if it could not quite place itself.

Joan pulled the blanket tighter, protecting them against the winter air seeping through the vents.



## Why I Should Have Never Left: A Story in One Sentence

Mary Olivia Brown

I fell through the door and kept falling and falling until I lost all sense; I could have been falling up or down or sideways with complete grace or confounding chaos, but fall I did, and all I could think about in this perpetual darkness (because, mind you, I could not differentiate my own hand from my foot) was why I ever left (which, I might add, is a question that haunts me still), for when you leave—when you walk through a door—you risk never walking through it again, because that door can disappear and be lost and locked to you forever, but we never realize (or we don't *want* to realize) that doors close just as much as they open until we are left facing thousands of closed doors and only one key,

and it was as if that last thought had gained sound and breath and life, for the darkness fell faster than I was falling because that is when I saw it—the rough ground (and soon that impossible city)—for my face was just inches from it, my body splayed on the street except I felt no pain where I expected quite a lot (it was a *long* fall after all), but pain quickly became the least of my concerns because the street I lay on was not a street I had ever seen; this street was made of keys—yes, keys of all shapes and sizes: jagged, gold, smooth, rusted, small, large—that lived linked together, terribly impossible to move, and, therefore, horrifically useless, and I say *horrifically* because once you dared to move your eyes from those taunting keys, you'd finally see the insane monstrosity of doors stacked atop doors, endlessly

reaching up until the sky was simply a sliver of blue and endlessly outward, for I could see no end and no beginning to this long key-stoned street hugged by these towers of doors that were at least (thankfully) connected by thin wood stairs upon which scores of people from all walks of life and all moments in time labored in a shared desperation to get back through to some version of life, and as I stood and gazed upon this unexpected place, I became distinctly aware of my own key indenting the palm of my hand; I squeezed it hard till my knuckles turned white, for I feared losing the only means of leaving and shook at the thought of becoming like those littered across the street and among the doors begging for a key that no longer existed or banging on doors to the point of splitting skin while pleading for an answer that never came or clawing at the ground with bloody fingertips, desperate to dislodge *any* key at all; but my hands also shook at the sheer impossibility of the task because I had only one key and no idea where my door rested in this labyrinth, but still, I forced myself to gather my resolve and decided to climb upward, for I had fallen at my arrival here and so our door (hopefully) must be somewhere amongst the clouds; yet, as I began this laborious climb, my eyes and thoughts strayed to the mysteries of each door I passed, for no door bore the same scars—some were littered with swirls of graffiti and others appeared gilded in gold or carved with animals and spiraling shapes that danced together while others were marked with bright colors and each alluded to a life being lived (and some lives looked better than others)—and I thought about our own worn door and thought that I might not want to go back to a door that had been slammed so much that it had started to crack; and so of course that’s when my temptation was met by a stranger and a sly voice that said,

*“Would you like to trade?”*

which I did consider for a bit because that key was shinier than mine and spoke of a new and rich life, so trading keys and, consequently, lives didn’t seem so bad, and besides, my legs were sore from climbing so high and I had no guarantee of even finding my door, but then I thought about why the stranger would want to trade because what was so bad about that key that someone would give it away; the stranger had given up on that key, and at least my key was familiar and our door with all its cracks and dents was still ours and our dull and slightly bent key was one that I trusted (and trust is even rarer to find and a lot easier to lose than an oh so very small key), and that’s why I said no and kept climbing and climbing and climbing

up and up and up past thousands of doors until I thought I had slipped beyond earth and into space, where the ground was no longer visible, and my lungs fought for breath—or maybe that was the exhaustion that dragged my limbs down or maybe my panic as I realized how petty I was to leave you behind and that I might not ever find you again and that this might be the last time you wait for me to walk back through that door,

and as if willed from a dream within a dream, it appeared before me like it had been there all along—our door with chipped white paint and cracks along the left corner and a wobbly door knob that rattled in rough wind—and I laughed and cried, sagging against the door, and my heart just about burst out of my chest when I fumbled and almost dropped the key before sliding it into the lock where an electric shock traveled up my arm, and I heard a shout of something indistinguishable that called to me like a distant thought and I wanted to find that voice—your voice—in all its familiarity, and so my hand shook—a slight tremble—as I willed the door to unlock and simultaneously feared that it wouldn't (that I had it wrong), and for a moment, it felt like the door would reject my plea, but then I remembered to jiggle the key the way you taught me, and it clicked and opened, and I—*finally*—walked through to greet you with a newfound clarity of why I should have never left.

## She Saw Me

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Kai-li Davey

We had a fire drill. This was not a drill ordained by the school but a practice planned by Mrs. Carter. She wanted us to practice for the practice drill so that we did not panic. The class formed two lines—one for boys and one for girls—and Mrs. Carter walked up and down the lines, checking everyone’s posture and ensuring that we all faced forward. Unsurprisingly, the girls were all in perfect formation, one after the other like trained little soldiers. Sure, we talked, but we did not mess around because, as my mama said, it was not *ladylike*.

Waiting to be inspected, I stood staring at the back of Jenny Erickson’s head when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Ryan Linden. He was digging for gold. I hoped that he was not using the same finger he had used to touch me.

“Hey, wanna see something?”

No, I did not. I stayed quiet. Ryan wiped his nasty finger on his blue gym shorts, took his hands, and pulled the edges of his eyes up saying, “Chinese,” and down saying, “Japanese.”

I had no words. My chest tightened, and I felt my own eyes narrow at him.

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Mrs. Carter grabbed Ryan by the shoulder and led him back to his spot

in line. She never said anything to me. That's when I learned a hidden rule that Mama never told me—words that I would not understand until much later.

*We do not talk about how I look.*

I always sensed that I was different. When I felt Mrs. Carter's perfectly manicured acrylic nails absentmindedly running through my hair, I knew that other people noticed too. She was talking to my mama, saying something—I don't remember exactly—about enrolling me in more science and math classes. She said I had *potential*. I just needed to grow into it.

Mama was going to take me to get new shoes soon. I wondered if I would grow into my potential then.

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Sundays were for two things: church and the grocery store. I had two dresses to choose from: One was knee length, light blue with small white dots and a frilled collar, and the other was all white with puffed sleeves. The white dress was worn *in good company*. I slipped on the first dress.

The grocery store was in the center of town. We passed it almost every day in the car, but we only went into the grocery store when the regular crowd was gone. Mama was more comfortable sneaking in and getting out as fast as possible. Back then, I did not understand why. Back then, I saw everyone as a friend.

The checkout line was where it happened: right before we were in the clear, steps away from the sliding glass doors, so close that I could turn my neck and look out at the parking lot. Cars pulled in, and the sun peeked through the clouds. The shadows of people much taller than I moved swiftly, covering the pavement. Shadows blocked out the bright sun, cooling down the blacktop quickly before racing off to the next place.

A blonde-haired woman was waiting to check out and began to unload her eggs, peppers, and chocolate ice cream onto the belt. I wished we could go to her house.

"Wow, she's beautiful," the blonde woman said. She pointed to me and smiled. She had red lipstick on her front teeth.

Mama brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "Thank you."

"You must be a great nanny." I noticed a freckle on the woman's cheek as she examined me with wide eyes.

Mama's shoulders dropped. She looked at the lady. "She's a lovely daughter. I'm very lucky."

"Oh," the woman inhaled sharply, "it's so nice of you to take her in." Mama's hands tightened on the shopping cart. Her knuckles turned white. She fixed her purse higher onto her shoulder.

The cashier handed Mama the receipt. When all of the bags were in our cart, we headed toward the sliding door, the squeaky wheels getting louder. I swung my legs, pretending I was on my favorite swing set at the park. I would look up into the clouds and feel the blood rush to my head. With each push Mama gave me, I felt more empowered, determined to touch those clouds and never let go.

Mama stopped the cart as we were about to head out to the car. She turned around and pointed toward the blonde woman.

"You know, I hope you get food poisoning, lady."

I did not know why Mama said that. One of my rules to live by was to never talk back, especially to adults. I guess when I was young, I never imagined adults could talk back to one another.

We walked out and got into the car. I buckled my seatbelt and grabbed Jumper, my stuffed bunny. I was not allowed to take him to school. I was nearing the age when carrying Jumper was not cool anymore. I almost had to put him in a bag with my old clothes to be *donated*. But Mama let me keep him as long as he stayed in the car.

It was not until we stopped at a red light that Mama knew what to say. Actually, I do not know if it was so much a situation of *knowing* what to say as much as wanting to address it before I did. I could not stop thinking about it.

She adjusted the car vents, the cold air hitting her face and her brunette hair blowing out behind her—frizzy, brunette hair compared to my straight, black hair.

I wondered why she used her angry voice. The blonde lady only smiled. I thought she liked me. She appeared to be happy on the outside, although I never thought that people could feel differently on the inside.

"Why were you so mad at that lady?"

Mama knew everything. I savored her words like sweet honey on my tongue.

"You were a twinkle in my eye for the longest time. Now, it's even better. Do you know why?" She never responded to my question. I saw her searching for me in the rearview mirror.

"Because nothing's stuck in your eye anymore," I said.

Mama giggled. Man, I loved the sound of her laughter.

"Oh, my sweet Hazel!" She parked the car along the curb outside our apartment—the only one with a skinny sapling in front. I remember planting it, our hands and knees filthy. She promised that it would grow bigger one day. We had to be patient and wait, so every morning, the first thing I did was to look out the window at the tree. I tired after a while and gave up: I could not wait forever.

The apartment door opened, and I found her there, kneeling down beside me. I forgot I was holding Jumper's paw, and he fell, face down on the sidewalk. Mama took my hand and pointed to the bracelet dangling from my wrist.

"This is a special bracelet, sweetheart. It holds so much of your Chinese culture." Her voice was a whisper, meant for only my ears.

I examined the bracelet with the curiosity of a scientist. I knew what scientists looked like; my teachers made sure. Posters picturing scientists hung on the wall next to my seat: all of them white, all of them male. I imitated the serious expressions of these men, hoping that channeling their smarts would help me understand the power this bracelet held.

"What do you mean, Mama?" I brought my wrist closer to my face, under my nose, trying to believe that the closer I examined it, the more connected I would be to that part of myself that I did not know.

"It's a jade bracelet. Jade is the most beautiful and precious stone."

I rubbed my fingers against the stone, which was smooth, cool, and strong. When I first received the bracelet, I set it aside and switched my attention to the red envelope decorated with Chinese characters that I could not read.

I slid the bracelet further up my arm and stared at the place it rested. I was trying to see if it had made my skin yellow. A boy last week had laughed and whispered to his friend about it. Sitting there with Mama, I tried to figure out what he meant.

I read books about mythical legends. Mama also read to me before bed and said that I should stay connected to my "roots." My favorite legend was about the moon goddess, Chang'e, and her love for the archer Hou Yi.

They were separated and never to be reunited in a search to gain immortality. At night, we would go outside and gaze at the moon. I would imagine Chang'e up there, alone on the moon, waiting for her one true love.

I looked up at my mother, "Do you think Chang'e has a jade bracelet like this?"

She thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. What makes you ask?"

My poor mother had forgotten the tale much quicker than I thought. "Because Jade Rabbit is the only one living up on the moon with her." I glanced up at the sky, even though it was still light outside. "Maybe he gave her a jade bracelet as a gift," I said.

When Mama crossed her arms, I knew I had stumped her. Looking back, I see that raising me must have been challenging. How was my American mother supposed to answer these questions?

Mama lifted me into her arms, and I rested my head on her shoulder.

"You know what I *do* know? Even though Chang'e was separated from Hou Yi, they're still connected."

"But how, Mama?" She had been telling me this story for forever, but I had never heard her tell it like this.

She bent down, picked up Jumper, and left the groceries in the trunk. Sometimes, I thought about how much easier things would be if there were two of her. Kids had their daddies pick them up when their mamas were busy. Soon enough, I would see how fast I could match which classmate belonged to which parents (mothers or fathers); it became like a game. But five days a week, the same person came for me. I thought that happened for all children until one day I woke up and realized it was not the same for other children.

"Well, you know how Chang'e lives on the moon?" Mama gave me a squeeze. "Hou Yi missed her so much that he built a palace on the sun. You'll understand someday."

It occurred to me that she knew more about this legend than I thought. How did she learn all of this? *Why* did she? I had no way to understand her reasonings, no matter how often I turned the questions around in my mind.

My mother knew how cruel the world could be. In spite of adversity, she always prioritized a connection to my heritage. She created an invisible line between us. I tried not to worry about the connection because then she would want to have *a talk*, but it was nearly impossible not to wonder. One



thing was clear though: I was an Asian American living in a white society. The person I saw in the mirror did not fit the mold of anyone around me. No one looked like me in the movies or on TV. I saw myself in the news sometimes, but Mama would switch the channel just as quickly, whispering that it was *discrimination*.

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I get it now. As far as the world was concerned, I was a nobody. Everyone's eyes exposed everything; my classmates, teachers—everyone—stared.

As a child, I felt hollow. I felt like my mother's daughter but looked like someone else. I knew Mama loved me, but why did it feel like she was the only one? If *she* could love me, why was our community so focused on hate? Hate directed toward me, her "Hazelnut."

My answer came in her green eyes. She could not control how the world saw me; she could only control how she saw me.

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On the first day of spring every year, I meet Mama under the cherry blossom tree. Our house is not our home anymore. The door has been replaced and probably does not squeak when Mr. Soo opens it. I noticed his car last year and got to talking to him. He respected my wish to stop by once a year—nothing more, nothing less. Today, I am glad I decided to grab a sweater before heading out.

"We have beautiful blossoms this year, Mama," I whisper, "just beautiful."

I shield my eyes from the sun. The breeze blows, and I feel something land in my hair. I run my fingers through and retrieve the blossom. I think of Hou Yi, living on the sun and waiting for Chang'e. Still connected, my jade stone no longer weighs down my wrist. It is unbreakable; it endures.

"And so will we," I say softly.

## Beyond the Twisted Elms

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Isabel Garrison

Caroline has always talked to the trees.

She does not talk for them. She is not the Lorax.<sup>1</sup> Besides, they do not need someone to talk for them. No, she holds conversations with them, asking for their thoughts and opinions on the new lawn behind the Wilkinson's house or her mother's garden. When the city cut down the big birch on city property because its branches were growing into the power lines, she sat on the limbs of her favorite tree—an old, gnarled oak—and asked, “Do you miss them? When my daddy died, I missed him. I still do. Is it the same with the trees? Or other plants?”

The tree did not have an answer for her questions, but she waited, listening to it sigh and sway with the wind. She suspected that trees grieved but maybe not in the same way that she grieved her father. There were differences, just like humans died for reasons different than why trees died. There were natural causes, like Mrs. Travis' cancer or the little elm that was struck down by a bolt of lightning. And then there were human-made causes, like the sound of crunching metal in the car crash that killed her father and the marks of a saw on the abandoned stumps behind her house.

Caroline sat on her lawn one day and considered her great oak tree as it was carried away on the back of a woodcutter truck. “It's about to rip the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax*. Random House, 1971.

foundation of your house,” they had said. “You need to get rid of it before it’s too late.”

Caroline suspected that was not the truth: that the tree had been blocking the billboard for the new church uptown. Before the oak tree had been chopped down, it told her not to grieve. She was trying her best, but all she could think about were all the secrets that the woodcutter carried away with him as he hurried down the road. Caroline stared blankly into the street, watching the tree and the woodcutter disappear around the bend.

“I don’t understand why you’re so sad,” Wendy said, leaning back on the palms of her hands in the unmown grass. “It’s just a tree.”

Wendy was not a tree, but there was something tree-ish about her. The way she danced, especially when she was drunk, reminded Caroline of a willow dangling in the wind. Wendy’s shoulders were pink with sun, covered in little brown freckles. Her hair was dark, dappled with small, faded streaks. She always joked that stress would make her go white early, picking out white and gray hairs one by one. Caroline told Wendy that she was the lady version of Steve Martin—and twice as funny. Wendy told her that no one was as funny as Steve Martin.

Caroline did not answer, taking a drag of a cigarette instead. She did not like smoking—not the first, the second, or the third time and never mind all the times after that. She kept expecting it to get better, but it never did.

“Come on,” Wendy said, snatching back the cigarette. Her father bought them for her, and she was nice enough to share with Caroline. “Don’t give me that. Is it rare or something? Should it be a monument?”

Caroline shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just been there as long as I’ve been alive. And now it’s gone for a stupid reason.”

“So it’s like losing a friend?”

“Yeah. Exactly that.”

Wendy considered this. Then she leaned over to Caroline and rested her head on her shoulder. Caroline’s breath caught, but she did not move, afraid that Wendy would move away too quickly, like a restless cat leaping from a lap. “Well, I would be sad if I lost you,” Wendy said quietly. “So, I guess I get it.”

Caroline did not know what to say to that. She wished she had said something though, before her mother opened the door and ruined the moment. Wendy straightened up and brushed little black ants off her calves.

"Caroline," her mother called from their front porch step. "Dinner time."

"See you at school tomorrow," Wendy said.

"I'll text you," Caroline replied, trudging up the lawn and into her house, past the piercing eyes of her mother. The screen door slammed behind her, and Wendy pulled herself to her feet, slowly making her way home and kicking rocks as she went. Caroline watched her hair glow until she was out of sight.



Caroline stepped over the broken fence, and the screaming stopped. She stood there, staring through her tears, as her mother snarled, "Don't come back."

The door slammed. Caroline watched her mother close the blinds, disappearing behind the white wooden panels. It was as if no one lived there.

She should have changed the passcode on her phone. It was a rookie mistake—one she had learned after years of learning how to lie and hide to maintain what little privacy she could get. And of course, she failed when she actually had something to hide.

She turned and stared across the backroad. The trees beckoned her, swaying in the twilight. She wiped her face and crossed the road, stepping off the asphalt and onto the soft dirt. She gently touched the bark of a tree.

"You've always looked out for me," she whispered, her voice choked. "Now's not any different, right?"

For once, the trees did not respond. They just swayed, as if they were holding something back, keeping a grand secret from her. She ventured deeper, blinking the last of her tears away.

She walked until her legs were sore, her knees giving out. Then she sank down and rested her head against the tree trunk. She just needed some rest. The trees would protect her—she was sure of it. It did not matter that she had been forced out by her mother. It did not matter that she had never been to this part of the woods before. All that mattered was that she trusted the looming branches over her head. She was safe.

Caroline did not know how she dozed off on the hard ground, her jaw

against the rough bark, but she did. She dreamt of Wendy, of her pompous room with its tapestries and colored lights. The windows did not look quite right, warped into twisted shapes like Salvador Dali's melting clocks.

"I have a secret to tell you," Wendy said. Her face was just a blur of features, and when Caroline tried to focus on them, they warped out of proportion.

"What?" Caroline asked.

She placed something in Caroline's hand. It was a smooth round stone, fitting perfectly into her palm. It changed colors when she tried to look at it too hard. "What is it?"

Wendy would not answer her, walking past, her sunburnt shoulder brushing Caroline's. When Caroline tried to follow, she lost sense of her surroundings. It grew dark, with gossamer white threads stretching across her vision. Caroline stumbled back from the spiderwebs and fell into another. It stuck to her skin, and she flailed in it, trying to escape.

The panic woke her, and she sat in the darkness, her heart racing. Just a nightmare. Nothing more.

Of course, she was having nightmares. She was spending the night in the woods.

Caroline pushed herself up into a sitting position, picking leaves off her sweater, then froze. Was she being watched?

She scanned the trees slowly, her breath hitching again. She could not dismiss the burning on the back of her neck. It could not just be her imagination, could it?

Caroline dug her nails into her palm.

"Hello?" she said softly. Her voice drifted away with the wind, fading softly.

She must be imagining it. Obviously, this was new territory. She was scared, but the trees would protect her. She had to believe that, otherwise she would start panicking. She slumped against the tree again and closed her eyes, repeating over and over again in her head, "I'm fine. I'm safe."

She wanted so desperately to believe it, but something was wrong. She knew it, even if she did not want to acknowledge it.

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When Caroline opened her eyes, something was peering at her. It was early dawn, and the sky was starting to tinge orange. She started, her spine

hitting the hard bark of her tree. Her brain could not comprehend what she was staring at. The thing loomed over her, blinking innocently.

It was a tree. Or something like a tree. Most trees did not walk around unless they were in a film, but here this thing was. It looked almost humanoid: with legs, arms, and a vaguely head-shaped stump. Little green sprigs covered its bark-like skin. It had eyes, though they were only black divots. It was looking at her the way a dog looks when it does not understand a new word.

"Hi?" Caroline said calmly, not processing what was happening. Was she still dreaming?

The creature leaned even closer, and she pressed her back harder against the tree where she was taking refuge. The creature held up a hand-like collection of twigs and extended one "finger." It poked Caroline in the stomach. She flinched. Its branches were sharp like her mother's nails.

It poked her again, this time in the leg. She was being examined, she realized. Maybe it had never seen a person, though the woods were so close to her neighborhood that it seemed unlikely. Surely, it knew what she was. It looked like her, not a tree; that could not be a coincidence.

"Can I help you?" she asked. It tilted its head at her and then poked her in the chest. She flinched again and tried to stand up, moving out of its reach. It stopped her, grabbing her arm and sitting her back down. She tried again, but it would not let her leave. "What do you want?" she demanded.

It pulled her black hair away from her head, examining it closely. Then it stepped back, the wind whistling through its branches. The other trees rustled in response. Caroline slowly stood up, and the tree lumbered back, watching her. Waiting.

Something curled around her ankle. She looked down. It was a branch, green leaves jangling as it tightened its grip. She followed the branch, looking up at the tree it belonged to. It was the one she had slept under. It was moving.

She unwrapped the branch from her ankle and stepped back, staring at the tree and unable to breathe. The creature was watching her, its eyes unblinking. She moved slowly, her hands starting to tremble. These were not the trees she knew, not ones she recognized. They were not safe. She did not belong here.

She tripped backward over a jutted root, falling hard against the ground. A branch snaked up her leg, tightening around her ankle until it threatened to cut off her circulation. She kicked her leg, hoping to break its grip. It did not loosen; instead, it yanked her back.

Rocks and branches scraped against her stomach, poking through her sweater. She cried out in pain and fear, digging her nails into the dirt, breaking and clogging them with mud. She caught a root and held on desperately, the bark cutting into her skin. She kicked her foot again. Another branch snaked around her free leg. She tightened her right hand around the root and reached back, hoping to free one of her ankles.

Her handhold snapped back into the ground and she flew back, eating a mouthful of mud as she was dragged once more. She screamed, hoping someone—anyone—would hear her, help her. But she was alone, and the forest swallowed the sound of her voice.

Her hair caught on a bush, and she stopped. Her scalp seared with pain and she screamed, but she was caught, and the branches stopped tugging. Desperately, she kicked and twisted, writhing wildly on the ground. The bark cut into her skin as she struggled, but she did not let it stop her.

One of the branches snapped. She scanned the ground, looking for anything to help her. She spotted a flat rock, barely in reach, and snatched it up, sawing at the branches with it. She freed her left leg, then pulled her right knee to her chest, slowly unwrapping the branches. She ripped and tore through the twigs. They splintered, and she was able to pull herself free.

She could not explain the sound that the woods made. It did not sound like a human's scream of rage, though a scream is what she decided an equivalent would be. It was a horrible sound, filled with the grating of broken wood and rustling leaves, of roots tearing themselves from the dirt, of old and rotten trees collapsing under their own weight.

Caroline did not waste any time; she ripped her hair free, her scalp throbbing, and ran. She sprinted as fast as she could, maybe faster, over the gnarled ground and toward the asphalt road. She passed the creature, who sat in the foliage and watched her, with no emotion on its face.

Caroline reached the road and almost cried in relief. She stepped out of the trees and bent over, hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath and nausea rising in her stomach. The trees rustled angrily, but nothing chased her. No branches snaked out to grab her; no roots rearranged themselves. She was once again in normalcy.

The sun was beginning to peak above the horizon, shimmering on the black road. Caroline crossed slowly and reached the fence of her house, slinging one leg over and into her backyard. And then she stopped.

She stared at the back of her house, the locked door and shut blinds. Beyond that door lay her mother, who told her never to come back and who knew about the late-night conversations with Wendy—the ones that were damning enough to warrant pressing delete.

Caroline looked over her shoulder at the woods, still rustling with anger at losing her. The woods that, for some reason, wanted her. She looked back at the house of a mother who did not want her.

Caroline pulled her foot, bruised with the grip of the trees, back over the fence. She backed up slowly to the road, numbly studying the house she had grown up in, the one where she was no longer wanted. And then she turned her back on it and walked into the forest.

The branches closed around her as she stepped into their domain.



## If Walls Could Talk

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Kayla Anne Hartsock

Winnie did not want to go to college. She did not even want to be alive, let alone forced to live in a dorm room with seven other freshmen girls. The only reason she agreed to go was because her best friend June did not want to go to college alone.

Winnie and June had done everything together for the last eight years. Pre-algebra in the sixth grade began their unbreakable bond. They had supported each other through break-ups, girl drama, and prom. But Winnie was too worried about her mental health to care about going to school. She barely graduated and would not have succeeded without June. But Winnie's mom insisted that she apply anyway at a school with an acceptance rate above fifty percent—the same school June was going to.

When Winnie told June that she had been accepted into the same school, June planned everything: Pinterest boards for room inspiration, packing lists, and a game plan for how they could have their boyfriends over on the same day at separate times so they would not interrupt each other during passionate moments.

"June, I don't even know what I'm gonna major in. Don't go overboard. I might not even be there for the whole school year," Winnie said one day as June looked at sets of bedsheets to color-coordinate their room.

"I am allowed to be excited."

"What are you even majoring in?"

“Nursing. I think you would do well in psychology. Now tell me, should we do stripes or dots? Or solid colors? I could do yellow, and you could do green,” said June.

“Why psychology? Because I’m mentally insane?”

“Don’t say that. Answer my question.”

“What if I did green with dots, and you did yellow with stripes? Why can’t I say it? You know it’s true.”

“That’ll look too much like a bumble bee. And no, I don’t. You’re going to do great, Winnie; you just need a new environment.”



The entire summer was filled with similar conversations until the day that Winnie and June moved into their dorm room, two days before the first day of school. They were the first two girls to move in. Somehow Winnie ended up with the bumblebee bed sheets, and when she asked how she got them, June said they were Winnie’s own idea.

The two days after Winnie and June moved in were awkward. A new roommate would come into the living space that connected all the rooms and let out a nervous introduction before finding their rooms and then seemingly never coming out again. However, while the girls were moving in, Winnie analyzed every single one of them.

All six of their roommates—Alice, Kayla, Mary, Dezi, Naomi, and Skylar—reminded Winnie of why she did not want to be there. They all seemed self-assured, hopeful, and excited for the coming school year. And they each already had an idea of what they wanted to do with their lives. They were everything Winnie was not, and she envied that.

None of them had spent more than twenty minutes in conversation together, but Winnie already knew she was an outcast. Alice, however, seemed to view herself as some sort of ringleader and, after the tension of the first day of classes was over, she called all the girls into the living room for a “family meeting.”

“I think we should all formally introduce ourselves.” Alice stood in front of the girls. “We all had a hard first day, full of classes. I think an icebreaker could be soothing. I’ll go first. My name is Alice, I’m a nursing major, and something interesting about me is that I have a stash of Bud Light under my bed in case anybody ever wants some.” After saying this, Alice looked

around the room with a grin on her face. Winnie assumed she was looking for the next girl to call on. "Your turn!" she said loudly with a long and skinny finger pointed at Winnie.

"My name is Winnie. I'm a psychology major," Winnie said, all while looking Alice in the eye, trying to find her angle.

"Anything interesting?"

"No."

Alice and Winnie kept eye contact for ages, but June butted in, spilling her guts about who she was, what she was studying, and what was interesting about her. All the other girls followed. Winnie kept her eyes on Alice the whole time.

By the time everybody finished introducing themselves, they were ready to go to their own rooms and be awkward with the one person instead of the other six girls. Everybody got up and said they would see each other later, as if a shared wall was a mile away.

Alice exclaimed for them to wait.

"There's a party tonight at one of the frat houses. Does anybody want to go?"

"I was actually about to do homework," said Kayla, whom Winnie saw as somebody with high standards that Winnie would never live up to—goals that Winnie would never have thought of achieving. "But you guys be safe," Kayla said as she walked down the hall to her room.

"We'll be fine," Alice said as she grinned down the hall.

Naomi, Mary, Dezi, and Skylar all said that they also had plans to either study or go to sleep—it was ten o'clock by this time. The only person who seemed to want to go to the party with Alice was June, which meant Winnie had to go as well.

"That sounds great," Alice said in a voice Winnie thought sounded like Barbie.

"Let me change real quick and then we can all ride together. Sound good?"

"Great!" June said excitedly.

Winnie gave June the side-eye as she followed her into their room to change into clothes that did not look so much like pajamas.

"June, we don't know her," Winnie said as she pulled a sweater over her head.

"We literally live with her now; we should get to know her. She seems nice. I was going to wear that sweater," June was looking at Winnie with puppy-dog eyes. She always did that to get Winnie to do something she did not want to.

"It's my sweater, but fine. And we could have stayed here and studied with the other girls. Don't they seem nice?" Winnie pulled off the sweater and handed it to June, who snatched it quickly, as if she thought Winnie would change her mind about her wearing it. "You said yourself that I need a new environment. Is a party really a good idea? If we stay here, maybe I can dig myself out of this hole I'm in. I could make decent grades this year, and not have to ask you all the time for help. I could get better."

"They seem nice, but they also seem shy. Alice is very outgoing. I think she could become a great friend. One party isn't going to hurt you, and we can stay in tomorrow and study with the other girls if you really want," June said, tying her hair up on the top of her head.

There was a knock at the door followed by the song-like voice that Winnie was already tired of hearing. "Are you guys ready?"

"Just one sec," June called out. "Give her a chance, Winnie. Please?"

"Fine."

The girls left their dorm and made their way to Alice's car. Winnie ended up sitting in the backseat.

Once they arrived at the frat house, the girls slowly made their way through the crowd outside to the loud, dimly lit mass inside.

Alice put a can of beer in both June's and Winnie's hands in what seemed like seconds after walking through the door. Then she grabbed one for herself.

"Aren't you the DD?" asked June.

"I'm very good at controlling myself; don't worry," Alice said as she greeted other people around her.

Alice slipped away to a group of people and seemed to be making rounds, as if she knew every person in the room.

"It was just the first day of school. How does she know every single person in here?" Winnie asked June after taking a long sip of her drink, finding another can, and putting it in the pouch of her hoodie for later.

"I told you: She's friendly. And go easy on the beer, you know you don't know how to control how much you drink."

"Well, I think I'm about to become friends with the wall and hang out

for a while. This party already seems kind of lame. You wanna join? And I can handle myself just fine."

June rolled her eyes. "I think I see a girl from one of my classes over there. I'll join you in a sec, okay? Yell if you need me."

And for the first time in a while, June was doing something without Winnie. Winnie watched June walk away. She was happy that June was becoming more independent but felt abandoned as she made her way over to a wall to sit by herself.

She was not alone for long before a boy wearing sunglasses indoors walked up to her.

"What you doin' all alone?" the stranger asked.

"Sitting. What are you doing talking to me? And why are you wearing sunglasses? It's dark outside and you're inside."

"I just wanted to introduce myself. You seem pretty miserable sitting here by yourself. You don't even got a drink."

Winnie pulled the Bud Light from her pouch. "I'm always prepared," she sarcastically said, and she looked to see if June was anywhere around.

"Huh. Name's John. And that drink doesn't even have any kick to it. No wonder you're not havin' a good time."

"Do you have anything else to drink?" Winnie questioned. The boy had come up to her empty-handed.

"Oh boy, do I," He pulled out a silver flask and handed it to Winnie. "This'll have you feeling great."

"What is it?" Winnie asked with a side-eye. "I'm not stupid. I'm not just going to drink this random stuff you pulled out from your pants."

"You don't trust me?"

"I don't even know you."

"Fair. How about I take a sip, and then you do the same? We can be loner drinking buddies together. Sharing a wall." He unscrewed the flask and made a show of taking a swig.

"Open your mouth to prove you swallowed," Winnie said. She was not sure if she should trust him, but she did enjoy talking to him. Even if it was awkward, she figured making a new friend could be nice. June would be proud of her.

John opened his mouth and wiggled his tongue around to show Winnie that not a drop was in his mouth. He handed the flask back to her, and she grabbed it.

Winnie took a big gulp of the drink. The metal of the flask was cold and dry on her lips, and the drink tasted like the rim of a margarita.

"That's disgusting," Winnie said, handing the flask back to the boy in sunglasses.

"It does the job," he said as he grabbed the flask out of her hand and slowly knelt next to her in time to catch her head before it carried her to the floor.

"I feel gross," Winnie said as she tried to pick her head up out of John's hand.

"It's not that bad."

"It tasted like salt," she said, a slur in her voice.

"It's not so bad. You want another sip?" John pushed the flask to Winnie's lips, and she could not help but follow his lead. "You wanna get out of here?"

"No, I feel dizzy," Winnie said, confused.

"I'll take you out to my car. Come on." John stood up and lifted Winnie with him. She stood up limply and moved her feet, although she did not want to go.

"I don't want to go," Winnie said, trying to stop her legs. "I don't know you."

"You'll get to know me," the boy said as he held Winnie's body tightly to his.

Winnie let out a shaky cry. She was trying to look around but could not lift her head.

"Don't cause a scene. People are just trying to have a good time."

"June," Winnie said. "June!"

"No, my name is John." John had dragged Winnie all the way outside of the house by this point and finally picked her up to make his trip easier.

"I don't want to go," Winnie slurred.

"Don't you know you should never come to a party by yourself?" John said as he sat Winnie in the back seat of his car. After he got into the front seat and started the car, the boy took off his sunglasses.

"June!" Winnie called out, though she knew her friend could not hear her.

She stared into the rearview mirror. All Winnie could focus on was the reflection of John's eyes, empty and hollow. She wasn't sure they were even real.

Her eyes grew heavy as she lay in the backseat of the car, and she fought the urge to close them. John had looked back at her every few minutes as he drove recklessly down what felt to Winnie like roads made of cobble. She closed her eyes as they grew warm. Maybe she did not want to die after all.

## Perpetual Morning

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Kendra Hurst

Petunia wished for it to always be morning. She loved the bright warm sunshine, the birdsong, and the peaceful breeze.

She dreaded the waking city, the loud populace, and the dark shadows as the sunlight crested over her building and left her window empty, functioning more as a picture frame through which she could view the enviously lit hotel across the street.

She woke every morning with the sunrise, soaked up its warmth, and lazed in the windowsill, lamenting the receding brightness as the line of shadow crept closer and closer to her toes.

And then, one day, it happened.

The sun rose, and Petunia rose with it. She brewed her tea as the light came in, sat down in the windowsill as her small studio blazed with fresh light, and settled in to enjoy the sunrise while it lasted.

Only, it did last.

Petunia, as was her habit, glanced frequently at the line between light and shadow on her floor, the line that denoted the exact angle at which the sun was positioned through the room as it crossed the top of her window. At first, she did not think much of the way the line was abjectly failing to move.

She was looking too frequently, she supposed: watched pots and all that. Or the movement was simply imperceptible. She did spend a good portion



of her mornings in the window box, so it stood to reason that the line might move so subtly as to avoid her notice. But as time passed and her tea dwindled, Petunia could only succumb to wonder, and no small amount of confusion.

The line really was not moving.

She touched the light, or attempted to touch it, brushing her fingers across the floor at the point of demarcation and watching her fingers travel from sunlight to shadow, warmed to chilled laminate.

She checked her clock, which seemed to be functioning, although it was well past the hour when the sun should have escaped her window.

She phoned a friend. The sun was stuck in the friend's window as well, and she had lost track of the time as the sun stood still and now was quite late to work, so they hung up hastily.

Petunia folded into a seat on her rug in her unmoving patch of sun and marveled at her good fortune. It was morning! It was the longest morning she had ever experienced.

Gradually, though much delayed, the city came up to speed around her. The elevator pinged over and over in the hallway as neighbors rushed to work and school and obligations they had nearly missed as the sun refused to notify them of the passage of time. Cars hit the streets, horns blared, and people shouted; the city was awake.

This, Petunia did not enjoy. But the sun—the sun was unmoving, and her home was alight, and she was warmed through and sparkling with it.

She lazed in that patch of sun all day, feeling like a cat as she rolled this way and that, reveling in the fact that she did not need to adjust her position to keep out of looming shadows.

Eventually, after long hours of sunbathing and soaking, thoroughly warmed to the bone, she tired of the floor and, consulting her clock once again, discovered it was approaching bedtime. She abandoned the floor for her mattress, dug a sleeping mask out of her bedside table to spare her eyes the light, and went to sleep.



In the morning—was it morning?—the sun remained unmoved.

Petunia slightly mourned this disruption in her morning routine, as an

unmoved sun meant she could not wake with it and then set the kettle to boil as the first beams of light peaked through her curtains and began to spill across her floor.

But no matter. The water boiled in the lit kitchen, the tea steeped the same under the full rays of the sun, and the window seat was already quite warm as she settled down into it, only momentarily discontented that she could not enjoy the cool morning breeze through the window, as the unmoving sun had, of course, not allowed the air to cool through the night.

Again, she enjoyed her perpetual morning, this time accompanied by the normal morning sounds, as her neighbors seemed to be paying closer attention to their own clocks to stay on schedule. She retired briefly to her own work, which she rarely got to do while drenched in sunlight, and, while she enjoyed the brightness immensely, she was distressed to discover that full exposure to sunlight for more than 24 hours had resulted in an overheated computer, which slowed her work significantly.

She was too busy enjoying the sun to complain.

This continued for the next day and the next and the one after that, and although Petunia really enjoyed the sun and the light and the warm brightness, she had to admit that after a while the sun had become quite hot without the intervening nights to cool the air, and the light made it difficult to sleep in what her clock insisted to be evenings and that the inescapability of it all really wasn't doing to her electronics, her skin, or her circadian rhythm any favors.

She still loved the sun, and she loved her mornings in the windowsill. The sill itself had become too hot to rest on by the third day, but she had solved this problem by laying a blanket over it before she went to bed. The blanket insulated the sill from the heat, providing her with a slightly cooler surface on which to rest herself.

The next day and the next and the next, things became hotter. Petunia was beginning to miss the cool breeze and the way the light crept in, and that the birds had stopped singing in the mornings—likely, Petunia suspected because they were struggling to determine when it was morning.

The next day and the next, Petunia's computer refused to turn on, and her steaming kettle made the kitchen unbearable to stand in. Despite the protection of the window and the curtains and her consistent application of sunscreen, she was beginning to break out in rashes.

Petunia wished it was not always morning. She dearly missed the creeping light, the cool breeze, the singing birds, the things that came with the morning and left as it fell away, the things that would come back with the next morning, and the next. She missed the shadow, the dark night, and the trade-offs that made the bright mornings and the bright light so enjoyable.

She settled into her window seat, carefully peeled away the blanket on the sill, and forlornly lay her forehead on the warm glass to watch the sun bake the street below.

She sat and she sat and, out of long habit, glanced at the line of light. She froze.

Had it moved?

Carefully, afraid that, as if by noticing, she could cause it to stop, Petunia turned back to the window. She looked down at the street. She found a tree on the sidewalk and stared at its shadow. A minute passed. More passed. She was too far away to see the tree's shadow with any degree of reliability. She turned back to the line of light.

That morning—what Petunia now recognized as that morning—the line of light had been firmly positioned in the same place, far back in the hallway by the door.

It was nearly to the kitchen now.

Petunia held her breath, eyes wide with anticipation, and turned back to the window. She anxiously drummed her fingers across her knee and stared hopefully at the shadow of the tree.

She could see it had moved too.

Unable to contain herself, Petunia leapt from the window seat and slid across the floor, gliding over the line to sit fully in shade for the first time in what felt like years.

The sensation was thrilling.

For the rest of her morning, she tracked the light edging across the floor, which she noted upon inspection was now curiously faded from the point the light had been sitting.

She drank cool water and did not start her kettle, as the heat had yet to follow the light out the window. She sat just inside that line of shadow and inched along with that line, as it worked its way further and further toward the window. As the last of the sun slipped outside and Petunia's studio was left in shade, she wiggled her toes against the cooling floor.

That night, she went to sleep without her eye mask.



The next morning, Petunia woke to a quiet dawn. She smiled as she set her kettle to boil, watching as the light gently pierced the curtains and started to creep in across the floor.

## Falling for the Moon

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Caitlin Anne Johnson

There was once a young man who fell in love with the moon—not in a metaphorical, appreciation-for-nature sort of way, but in an all-consuming, romantic way. She was the only one for him. She was the love of his life.

His friends and family brushed it off at first. They thought he was joking. How could he truly be in love with the moon? But it became all too real. She was the only thing he thought about. Her beauty was awe-inspiring. He loved the way she watched over everyone, always a reliable presence. When she left, everyone knew she would come back. And she was powerful, too; she was strong enough to move the seas.

The young man was handsome and kind, to be sure. He had admirers across his college campus and beyond. But none of them could hold a candle to the one he loved. He even declined women who offered to date him.

“Would you like to go on a date sometime?” a woman would ask, feeling bold.

“Oh, no thank you. I’m in a relationship,” he would respond with sincerity.

After one particularly embarrassing turn-down in a crowd, his roommate questioned him.

"Why would you blatantly lie like that? You embarrassed everyone there, and she was perfectly nice."

"I didn't lie. I'm with the moon."

His roommate scoffed. "You can't be serious."

"Do I seem like I'm joking?"

He did not.

His roommate shook his head, completely aghast. "You're not dating the moon! The moon is *the moon*! It's a big ball of rock floating around in space, thousands of miles away from us!"

"And I love her," the young man replied.

The air was sucked out of the room, leaving a cold that chilled his roommate to his bones. It was clear that the young man was not playing some long-running gag but genuinely believed that he was in a relationship with the moon. What could possibly be done?

"You've lost your mind," he said with a sad, incredulous shake of his head. "I'm serious."

He left the young man standing alone in the measly kitchen, a single moth flying into the lightbulb above the sink. The moth knew it would hurt, but it did it anyway.

The young man left the apartment and began wandering the empty streets. The lights along the roads were too bright. He took a path to the lake, where the only light was that of the moon.

"They just don't understand," he said, sitting on the cold sand of the beach and looking up at his luminary love.

"You're everything to me. And you love me, too. Don't you?"

The moon did not reply.

## Trauma

Alec Kissoondyal

I wait in the car while you fool the clerk with your fake ID and pay in cash. You are on your mom's credit card, but you don't want her to know about the beer and cigarettes you buy on the weekends. You walk out from the Shell gas station carrying a packet of Newports and a six-pack of Bud Light—not a bad haul for two eighteen-year-olds on a budget.

You slide into the driver's seat of your old Toyota, hand me the beer and cigarettes, and crank the music to maximum volume. A grizzled, Australian-accented voice fills the car, growling the lyrics to an American murder ballad. We pull out of the parking lot and bid farewell to the gas station with a noxious smoke signal that plumes from the tailpipe.

You wrench a can free from the six-pack and guzzle it down as we cut through the lane of oncoming traffic. I cringe at the screeching tires and blaring horns, but we make it to the opposite lane unscathed. Your face splits into a rabid grin as you belch and toss the empty can into the back seat.

By the time we reach the park, you are smoking a Newport. I light one up for myself and you snatch the rest of the beers off my lap.

I climb out of the car and squint against the buttery afternoon sunlight. A gravel path snakes from the parking lot to the playground, where children laugh and play, their parents watching. A well-kept field extends beyond the slides and swing sets and stops at the edge of the woods.

We follow the path for a while, slowly veering onto the grass. You exhale a smoke cloud that coils around your shaved head. Ashes flutter off your cigarette and cling to the sleeve of the bulky leather jacket that you wear year-round, even on sweltering days like this one. People often mistake you for a boy, but you always laugh it off.

You finish your cigarette. I share mine with you, and we pass it back and forth until it burns down to the filter. You nudge me with your shoulder and run for the woods, and I sprint after you.

We stop at the tree line, sweating and trying to catch our breaths between bursts of laughter. You toss me a beer and take another one for yourself. I pull back the tab, and foam slithers down my fingers as I take a reluctant sip.

I do not hate beer; I enjoy it too much. I love how alcohol fills me with a gentle numbness that tells me everything will be okay. But I know it is all a lie, no matter how bad I want to believe it. I prefer cigarettes; the buzz fades fast and leaves behind a familiar edge of sweaty, pulse-pounding paranoia. Still, I drink because I want you to feel comfortable. People can get mean when they are drunk and self-conscious.

We trudge through the undergrowth, avoiding poison ivy and low-hanging branches until we arrive at our spot: a clearing in the middle of the woods marked by a fallen oak tree. You set the three remaining beers on the ancient trunk and ask if I am ready to go foraging.

Sure, I say. It has been a while since the last time.

You drain your second can, except for a few drops, which you pour onto a cluster of ferns—an offering to the forest gods so they will bless us with a bountiful harvest. I follow your lead and watch with satisfaction as the beer forms a frothing puddle at my feet.

With our ritual complete, we journey deeper into the woods, and it does not take long to find what we are looking for: Clusters of magic mushrooms, white-stemmed and tawny-capped, protrude from the soil. You reach into your jacket pocket, pull out a plastic bag, and start plucking away. I crouch next to you, and together we fill the bag with enough fungi to invite an army of psychedelic elves into our skulls.

We return to the clearing. You peer into the bag and reach for a mushroom but hesitate and withdraw your hand. You look up at me, grimacing. Mushrooms are cheaper and more fun than therapy—until they are not.

The last time we choked down a few grams, you told me about your



older brother and how, even after he moved out, you still saw him stalking around the shadows of your room whenever your half-dreams crossed into waking reality.

Then you cried.

Tears and saliva ran down your red face, and when I saw you through the psychedelic caul that the mushrooms threw over my eyes, I swore to God you were melting. The only thing I could do was wrap my arms around you and hold on until you stopped.

We leave the bag on the ground and sit shoulder to shoulder on the decaying trunk like we are Frog and Toad.<sup>1</sup> We each crack open another beer. You finish yours in record time and eye the last can.

I say you can have it.

You ask if I am sure; we are each supposed to get three.

Go on, take it. I do not mind.

You open the final can and rant about how much you hate learning about citations in your English class, a freshman's curse. We are both enrolled in our first semester at the local community college. It was the only option, considering our grades. Our high-school teachers thought it was a miracle that we did not drop out altogether. It was not a miracle—it was survival. High school was hell, and college is not much better, but it beats working a minimum-wage job that cannot cover rent, joining the military, or being stuck in the house with my dad, who has not been sober since his last tour of duty ended, or with your mom, who turns a blind eye to your brother's actions and justifies her complicity by paying for your classes.

We do not talk about these things.

We share an understanding not communicated with words but through something intangible that lurks behind the eyes. I have witnessed similar unspoken conversations between my dad and the one-armed clerk at the liquor store. With a shared glance, they swap truths in dialects of palpable hurt, not fully comprehended but vaguely recognized.

We spend the afternoon discussing manga and PJ Harvey albums while we drink and smoke and watch our shadows grow longer and darker. You finish your fourth beer and mention that you want to write children's books, but your story ideas are always too upsetting: a princess who eats strange candies that turn out to be spider eggs that hatch inside

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Lobel. *Frog and Toad are Friends*. Harper & Row, 1970.

her; a boy convinced that his mom is a vampire because she sleeps all day and stays up all night with wine-stained teeth, which he mistakes for blood; or two schoolyard friends who sacrifice grasshoppers atop a mini ziggurat built from Legos, hoping that they will summon a fairy to whisk them away.

I tell you that it makes sense. Trauma equals drama, after all.

Ain't that the truth, you reply. If you want to make something happen, kick the dog. Shoot the kid. Hell, kick the dog *while* shooting the kid. I snort mid-sip, and beer spurts out of my nose. We rock back and forth, laughing until it hurts.

Evening arrives by the time we gather our senses. A gentle breeze tousles the foliage, and the branches tattoo a web of navy-blue shadows across your face. I do not want to leave, but you never want to stick around long enough to sober up.

I leave my unfinished beer on the trunk and pretend to forget about it as we gather the empty cans and the bag of mushrooms. We emerge from the woods into a world dyed cough-syrup purple beneath a bruised sky. You fumble with your keys, and I hold out my hand and insist on driving. You flash me a reassuring smile and promise that you are okay.

Normally, I insist again, and you get angry, despising any situation when you are not in control. I do not deal well with anger. I can sniff it out like a dog, and it always smells like my dad.

This time, I lower my hand and retreat to the passenger side. I toss the empty cans and the bag of mushrooms into the back seat and press my forehead against the window while you drive. The bass from your music reverberates against my skull and scrambles my vision, distorting the dimly lit streets and the silhouettes of homeless folks lying on bus stop benches. I wonder if my dad is asleep in front of the TV, cradling a handle of vodka, or if he is still awake, waiting for me to walk through the door.

The yellow glow of the Shell sign appears as we turn the corner. My house is a few blocks away. I lower the music and ask why we are calling it quits early; it is the weekend, after all. I continue with all the clichés: We are adults now, we never obey rules anyway, we have stayed out much later than this, there is no reason to go home early, and there is nothing good waiting for either of us.

You ask what we should do.

I think for a moment and then suggest that we return to the park and

mess around with the playground equipment. There are not any kids or overprotective parents to worry about at this hour.

Fine, you say. But first, we need more beer.

We return to the gas station. I wait in the car while you disappear into the store and emerge with a fresh six-pack. You slide into the car, wrestle a beer free, and pass me the rest. You drink deeply and jam the half-empty can into the cupholder. The can rattles as a peal of bass shakes the car. The tires squeal as we pull out of the parking lot and cut through the lane of oncoming traffic.

I do not see the truck until it is too late.

Pale light floods the car.

Your silhouette recoils from the inevitable.

The impact shakes me to the roots of my teeth, sending us pinwheeling out of control.

When I come to, the music has stopped, and the car is pretzelled around the Shell sign. The dashboard is littered with shattered glass and a scattered bouquet of mushrooms. My face is warm and wet. I taste the coppery tang of blood, and something—several somethings—rattle inside my mouth. I wheeze, and teeth spill from my parted lips.

You lie lifeless and mangled on the crumpled hood of your car, framed in the shattered windshield. Jaundiced light spurts from the Shell logo and stains your vacant eyes the color of egg yolks.

The back of your skull is split open. A bloody halo radiates from the wound and pools beneath your head.

I open my mouth to call for help, but my voice fails me. My heart crashes against my ribcage, and the metallic flavor of panic mixes with the blood.

I recall my dad's drunken war story about the time he rode in a vehicle that hit an IED. When he regained his senses, he was lying on the ground and could not move, but the pain told him he was alive. Then he saw the fragments of his friends scattered around him and realized they were not so lucky, and he knew it should have been him instead.

I stare into your egg-yolk eyes; there is no point in looking away. I know I will see them every night, glaring out of the hollow shadows in the corners of my room.

## Grape Juice

Sarah McLaughlin

**Y**ou itch in your butterfly costume. You lean against the white bedpost with your legs tucked underneath you and your feet have started to go numb, but it is better than red and raw; your black ballet flats lie abandoned on the carpet. The elastic bands of your wings chafe the exposed skin of your underarms, and you wish you were wrapped in your crocheted baby blanket—the one with lumps and stretches and frayed pink ribbons.

Cackling, shouting voices echo up the stairs like fireworks, which always scared you, which is why you watched from a safe distance in your grandmother's backyard on the Fourth of July.

Clara keeps looking at you with a face that says, "*I'm sorry.*" Both of you were promised to get your first cell phones when you turned thirteen—four years now for Clara, three for you. You count this on your fingers and also count how many empty bottles of wine you remember seeing on the kitchen table.

You do not take off your wings because maybe they will be done soon. But then you count the bottles, picture the gloss in your mother's eyes and the purple in her face, imagine her keys in her purse and her car in Clara's driveway, and think it would be nice if you could fly home.

Clara, newly nine and eight inches taller than you, is an acquaintance by vague association. She has not spoken more than nine words to you tonight ("Hi. Waters and sodas are in the blue cooler.") and gave you *Little*

Women, while she read *The Secret Garden*. You do not have the heart to tell her you have already read *Little Women* and hate everything that happened after Beth died.<sup>1</sup>

Your feet tingle with pins and needles and you shift, the mattress creaking, to hang your legs off the side of the bed. You try to get comfortable, your thin shoulder stuck against the white bedpost. You glance back down at the first page. "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents." And Halloween did not feel like Halloween anymore. Your favorite part was not going to parties but rather coming home from trick-or-treating and sorting your candy: chocolate in one pile, organized by size, fruity things in another. The big candy bars got their own pile. Then, after the sorting came the trading. Your siblings had their preferences, and you had yours, and you struck a hard bargain. Two small Skittles for a full-size M&Ms. Three Reese's cups for five Starbursts. What did Mrs. O'Connor's bottles of wine taste like? Orange? Yellow? Pink? Red?

You did not like the color. It looked like the blood that the doctor took from your arm when he thought you might have anemia. The sight of the blood made you pass out. When you woke up, the nurse gave you boxed grape juice.

Wine is made from grapes, you knew, but that was not the smell on your mother's breath when she turned over her shoulder to look at you from the barstool. The smell was more like something you would put in the toilet or the washing machine.

You would rather be at the doctor's office, you think. At least the doctor and the nurse would be looking at you and asking if you were okay and giving you grape juice when you were not.

"I'm going to use the bathroom," you say. You slide off the bed and into your shoes.

You leave *Little Women* face-down on Clara's bed. You tiptoe downstairs, following the loud voices. In the kitchen, you hear a man say, "That's fucking ridiculous," and you shudder at the word you do not know. You tiptoe up to where your mother is standing with a group of people in a half-circle shape—adults you do not know. Everyone is red-faced and

<sup>1</sup> Alcott, Louisa May, *Little Women*. Penguin Books, 1953.

open-mouthed, and the air smells like something you would use to clean windows. Your mother seems to see you, but her eyes are wet. So wet, you can see your own reflection.

Still on your toes, you cup your hands around her ear and, with all the force you can muster, you whisper, "Can we go home?"

She laughs, and you sink back onto your heels.

"Oh," she says. "Aw. You want to go home?"

Something constricts your throat; you nod.

"Aw, we can go home soon," she says. "We'll go home soon."

You start looking around for her purse before she does. Someone, one of the moms or dads, eventually finds it. She holds it as you lead her outside and down the long, empty driveway to her car, which is parked between a few others on the curb.

You stand beside the driver's door as she unzips it slowly. The brisk air raises goosebumps on your bare shoulders.

"Can I have your phone?" you ask.

"Hang on," she says.

"Please—let me have your phone." Your voice cracks. You wish it would not.

She giggles and, as she moves, she sways side to side slowly, like she is on a boat. Her hands move like she is swimming, like she has fallen overboard and does not mind. "Alright, alright."

You wrestle your hand into her purse. Her diamond ring scratches your index finger.

"What are you doing?"

"I need your phone."

"Okay." The "ay" is long—long as the driveway. At the end is a lamp post that is giving off light and holding a white felt ghost.

Your hand finds the phone and she allows you to take it. She smiles with all her teeth, like you are an amusing, odd little thing. You unlock her phone.

Your father will be awake, you think. He will be waiting.

Buzz, buzz, buzz. No answer.

You think of the smashed car on display in front of the high school as senior prom approaches. They display the same car every year. Where does it come from? Where do they keep it when it is cold?

You look up from the phone and past your mother at the lamp post and

the swaying ghost. You look to the trees behind the house. Past the trees, you might be able to imagine your own house. You have ridden your bike in this neighborhood.

A shiver passes through you. When your shoulders shake, you feel the beating of your wings. You grip the phone in one hand and reach out to take your mother's hand with your other. "Come on. We can cut through the woods."

She starts to laugh the same cackle that rose up the stairs from the kitchen. You wonder how the tears in her eyes do not fall. You wonder if they are sticky. She laughs, but her laugh turns into a cough. You wonder if she will choke, if the red grape blood will come pouring out.

You hear a bang; the ghost shudders and the lamp post flickers. The bang was just the front door. One man walks out after another (Dads? Whose dads?). They come down the long driveway and you recognize them from the kitchen.

The woods. Our street backs up to this one."

Her smile is yellowish and glossy like her eyes. She puts her hand on the driver's door handle. The men are getting closer. They are laughing—the cackles from the kitchen. You shove the phone back into your mother's purse and duck under her outstretched arm, and you run up the driveway, past the two men you do not know, and past the O'Connor's house where Clara might still be reading *The Secret Garden* upstairs. You run through the cold blades of grass. Your feet are leaving your shoes, leaving the ground. The breeze picks up underneath your arms, your hands balled into tight fists, and the cool air blows strands of stray hair into your mouth.

You hear shouts behind you. The two men. Your mother.

You run. Sticks and leaves crackle under your feet like flames. It is not far. You can see lamp post lights. Hear the rising and falling hum of a passing car.

You run, and you are jolted back as something yanks at your shoulder, and you think it is the two men—until you realize it is not; it is your wing, it is caught on a branch and it is torn. You shake the costume off your arms and hold it tight against your chest.

You run, and you think you hear them running after you. You do not know if it is one, or two, or her—and who are they, these two men from the kitchen? There were no other kids left at the party. Were they neighbors? Were they dads? Why did she touch one of them the way you would pet a

cat, from its neck down to its chest, with the smell of red wine in her yellowish smile and yellowish eyes? Your mother could not run, you think; she was not wearing heels today, but she could not run anyway. Would she run, would she run after you—would your father be awake to smell the gloss in her eyes and the purplish tint of her lips and the petting and the laughing. Would he remember that she was supposed to pick you up—pick you up and take you home, take you home and ask you how the party was and brush your hair and remind you to brush your teeth and come in to check on you and kiss your forehead while you pretended to be asleep—and her breath would smell nice, like fresh mint or like the honey she put in her Sleepytime tea, and not at all like grape juice.

You run out from the trees, and your feet land hard on the sidewalk. You clutch your wings close to your chest. You see your house; you see your lamp post and the cobweb-wrapped skeleton hanging from your front porch, swaying like a clock's pendulum. Your feet land on the street, and suddenly it is all lit up, and you feel the light on the side of your face, and there it is, your mother's car, and it is going fast. Are you running faster?

But you make it home that night. Your front door behind the swaying skeleton is locked, so you let yourself in through the garage, and you run up the stairs in your shoes and throw open your parents' bedroom door and turn on all of the lights. You scream at your father that your mother is chasing you and she is trying to drive her car, trying to drive you home, but she cannot. He sits there, shirtless, and tells you to go to bed. You run to your room and close your door and push your small bookshelf in front of it because you do not have a lock.

You undress yourself and shove the torn wings in the back of your closet and kick your baby blanket onto the floor and wrap yourself in your sheets.

You do not sleep. You still do not sleep.

Your mother makes it home that night. The two men drive her car. They must walk back through the woods to wherever they lived. You do not know their names. You never go to Clara's house again.

In the morning, your parents take you to eleven o'clock Mass. You usually go at eight. They do not like the children's choir. You sit still and listen. They sit silently, and you think your mother keeps looking at you, but that might be in your imagination.

After Mass, in the garage, your mother tells you she acted irresponsibly, and she will never do something like that ever again.



Your father leaves the car before she says this.  
Who were the men? What were their names? Where did they go?  
She made it home. You made it home. Somebody drove her home.  
It ends differently in your dreams.

## Where Is Your Treasure?

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Miranda Miller

**Y**ou are slowly turning into jewels. This is not a metaphor: you picked up a cursed ring (You should have known better.) and now you have what is officially known as Precious Transmogrification and colloquially known as Jewel Disease. It is one of the nastier thieves' curses, and no cure exists, even if you were infected accidentally.

Currently, three of the toes on your left foot have become emeralds. This disease does not affect your life. For now. From here, you must track how much of you has turned into jewels. You track your transmogrification avidly, as if measuring can stave it off somehow. It will not.

SEARCH FOR A CURE: 1

MAKE YOUR PEACE WITH IT: 2

DENY EVERYTHING AND LIVE YOUR LIFE: 3

MAYBE IT IS A METAPHOR: 4

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1

No cure exists for Jewel Disease—not that you can find and not that exists. You search anyway. You travel to the coast and talk to merchants from far-off lands. You come away with three vials of snake oil and an overwhelming disappointment in humanity.

Another part of you has turned to jewels. You now have four body parts that have become jewels. Keep track now.

MAKE YOUR PEACE WITH IT: 2

DENY EVERYTHING AND LIVE YOUR LIFE: 3

MAYBE IT IS A METAPHOR: 4

KEEP SEARCHING: 5

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2

You think carefully through all of your options. Piece by piece, you will turn into jewels. You imagine the outcome: beryl for eyes, rubies for knees, and diamonds studded down your shin, tightly tucked next to amethysts and topazes because every patch of skin and muscle and bone in you will turn to jewels before this adventure ends.

You wonder if the shift will occur in a pattern or if it will be random. Will both your knees be rubies, or will you be a mismatched set of ruby and emerald kneecaps? Will the shift hurt? You do not know, and there is no one to ask. No one has survived this disease. You will find out soon enough.

You open your eyes from your imaginings to find that another part of you has gone to a jewel.

You take a deep breath. For today, you are at peace, but peace is not a one-time decision. You must wake every morning and make peace with your fate. You can accept your fate for today. And tomorrow. You decide to be okay today and tomorrow. But many more days wait in the future.

MAYBE IT IS A METAPHOR: 4

SEARCH FOR A CURE: 1

GO INTO PHILOSOPHY: 6

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3

You buy long gloves and tall collars and thick pants to prepare for the day when your limbs turn to jewels. You can do nothing about your face but

hope. You can continue on for some time like this, out laughing with your friends and neighbors. You complete the next job and the next. You are careful with what you pick up, but you can still live your life for now.

You can continue until you rip a hole in your pants while traveling through a forest at night with a friend. You do not notice the hole until he tosses you the water pail, you miss, and the pail clacks against your thigh—the clank of metallic and crystalline impact. He looks at you. You look down. Through the tear in your pants, you can both see a diamond shining in the moonlight.

You must wait until later when you can privately count the jewels. Two more parts of you have become jeweled.

Your secret comes out, and your friends begin to look at you with fear and pity. You can live your life a little longer, but then the day comes when a crystal is set in your cheekbone—like the newest fashion at a royal court. With such wealth on your face, your friends begin to look at you with hints of greed. You are distinctive. You can no longer live your life ignoring the shift.

The number of jewels you have affects your options for the future.

SEARCH FOR A CURE. (7+ jewels): 5

APOLOGIZE (6 jewels or less): 7

4

Perhaps the disease is a metaphor.

Another part of you turns into a jewel. What could this mean? Is it irony?

*Look, you wanted to take something precious, and now you yourself are turning to wealth. It's what you wanted, isn't it? Is that irony? Or is it just sad?*

You never understood irony. Perhaps the metaphor is that you are becoming that thing you wanted to steal. You now feel sympathy for shiny rings and golden trinkets faced with bandits. People look at your fingers—your ruby

pinky in particular—and you can see them consider if they could remove your finger—chop off your finger and leave you with the loss because, to them, that ruby is not you: it is wealth. You are becoming what you wanted to steal.

For the remainder of your life, you will be stealing yourself back, wary of people with greedy eyes, lest they steal pieces of you that you want and need to keep.

SEARCH FOR A CURE: 5

GO INTO PHILOSOPHY: 6

STEAL YOURSELF AWAY TO SOMEPLACE SAFE: 10

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5

You go to the mountains, and another jewel replaces a body part. The climb to the mountains is cold and difficult. At one moment, you cannot feel any of your toes, and you panic, thinking that the loss of your toes was not supposed to happen this quickly. Then you realize that your toes went numb from the cold—that is, the toes that you still have.

Many of the mountain people work as miners. The miners look at you like you would be easier to pick apart for diamonds than bedrock. You do not stay long in the mountains; if a cure for Jewel Disease exists, it does not exist here.

At some point, you lost a piece of yourself. You did not feel the loss. You return from the mountain and remove your hat to realize that your earlobe is missing. It had gone opal, dangling from the shell of your ear like an earring, unless you looked closer and realized that the opal was not set in your flesh but replacing it. The opal lobe has disappeared; you do not know whether it detached in the long, cold climb down the mountains or if someone stole it. You are also unsure which option is worse. Either way, you did not feel the loss.

The number of jewels you have affects your options from here. Still, count the piece you lost. That piece is still a part of you, even if it is no longer in your possession.

MAYBE IT'S A METAPHOR (7+ jewels): 4

APOLOGIZE (6 jewels or less): 7

DENY EVERYTHING AND LIVE YOUR LIFE (4 jewels or less): 3

6

You travel around the world to speak with the philosophers in their circles. You like philosophers, but you never had the chance to study to be one. Now that you are a commodity, they invite you to visit so they can look at you. You are part display, part thought experiment.

In what part of the body is the person? Are you being transformed or replaced? If someone were to take your ruby finger, when does it cease to be the finger?

What makes a life meaningful? Do limits make a thing more precious? Your limits are on display—more obvious than others' limits. You ask the philosophers: "How should I live my life to be happy? To have lived a good life? To have been worth more than the wealth of the body that I leave behind?"

They do not come to a single answer. The answer, as always, is up to you.

Another part of you turns into a jewel. The number of jewels you have affects your options from here.

APOLOGIZE (6 jewels or less): 7

DENY EVERYTHING AND LIVE YOUR LIFE (4 jewels or less): 3

You are spontaneously cured—a miracle. You leap for joy and touch parts of your living, warm, soft self. Being cured is not really an option; you cannot get here. Sometimes, though, it is a relief to daydream about being spontaneously cured. Think of all you could do. All the places you could go. The life you could live. You enjoy dreaming about your cure, but the possibility does not exist; a cure is not an option, and you have nowhere to go from here.

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7

To whom do you apologize? You have stolen so much more than a ring. Do you apologize because you were caught? An apology will not save you from Jewel Disease.

Does the ring's owner deserve an apology because she outsmarted you? Is everyone else from whom you have stolen less intelligent than and thus beneath you?

APOLOGIZE TO THE RING'S OWNER: 8

APOLOGIZE TO EVERYONE: 9

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8

She sadly looks at you. "That ring was worthless," she says. "Just copper and steel. But it was precious to me because it was my grandfather's. I thought the only person who would take it would want to take everything I had and empty my heart as well." You cannot look away from her. "Did you intend to steal my heart?"

"No," you say. "I was greedy and curious, but I did not intend to hurt you. I am sorry." The apology does not feel like enough.

"Did you bring the ring back?" she asks. You are surprised: You had determined to apologize but you never thought to return the ring. You had taken it, felt the curse on you like a weight around your shoulders, and fled. You kept the ring, a sign of what you are becoming. Giving the ring back feels like giving up a chance to be cured, but she is holding out her hand for the ring, and you drop it in her palm. The ring clinks against you as it leaves your fingers.

"There is no cure for the curse," she says, with something like regret on her face. "I will not use it again."

You nod and leave. Although the apology means something, it does not mean much to you. Still, you cannot bring yourself to hate her. You think

about her for several days; you realize that she was easy to steal from because she was alone.

GO BACK (8+ jewels): 11

GO SOMEWHERE SAFE: (6 jewels or less): 10

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9

You go into the streets and, one by one, you find everyone from whom you have ever stolen. You apologize to each of them—many, many people. You finish in one town and realize that your legs are covered in jewels—too many to count. They are currently only skin-deep, but soon enough, they will be in your muscle and sinew, and you will not be able to walk. You go to your hometown. You have not been home in years.

You walk the streets, apologizing to those from whom you have stolen. Each day, you wake and go out again. Walking becomes more difficult. Moving your limbs grows complicated. The jewels do not fall off unless they are taken; you discover this when your childhood friend's daughter, only three years old, tugs at the glint of green above your shoe and takes a piece of your emerald ankle. It does not hurt. You let her keep it.

You start to leave pieces of yourself with your apologies. Shortly, you will not need the jewels. The process is speeding up.

Soon, you cannot walk. You ask people whom you remember from your childhood—not always friends, but you are past the point of grudges—to take you to the town square. You sit in the square for days, unbothered by wind or cold or hunger, and watch the people as they walk by. You talk to some of them. You tell them that, when you are gone, they can take you.

A gift. An apology. An ending.

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10

You go to your hiding place: where you went when you were first cursed. No one else knows about it. It is a small, forgotten place. Here, you keep your treasures—things you have stolen. Now you will keep your last treasure here too.



You sit and look at the things around you until you can no longer stand. You lay back and close your eyes, and when you open them again, your eyes are jeweled. You do not know what kind of jewels: you cannot see them, and you have long since lost skin to touch.

You lie there and realize that you will become buried treasure for someone to stumble upon one day.

You smile slightly. You always loved stories of buried treasure.

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11

You go back to her. She is surprised to see you.

“Tell me about your grandfather,” you ask, and she does. He was a strict man, but he was incredibly kind. Few people can understand; she did, and you do.

You cannot rise to leave because your hip has turned to topaz. She brings you a blanket, although you are not cold, and she sits with you.

She asks you about your grandfather. You did not know him, so you tell her about your sister instead. She listens to you. When you can no longer talk without clacking, you say carefully, “Will you tell me a story?”

“Yes,” she says. She pauses. She can see you have something else to say.

“Will you accept my gift? It is freely given. I think that perhaps I could have been your friend, and so I trust you with it.”

“A gift,” she says, “and a responsibility. I accept both.”

“Thank you,” you say, and it is the last thing you speak.

She tells you a story, and another, and another. Your jeweled hands rest on your jeweled legs. The layers of fabric keep you from making noise when you shift. You are nearly all jewels now. She places a hand on your shoulder, and though you cannot feel it, it is nice to know that it is there.

You close your eyes. Her voice goes on. Perhaps this relationship will become another story. The woman who spoke you into treasure because you took hers. A thief who became a treasure. A self stolen and returned.

## Mortem Obire

Eliana Sera Plumb

The sharp hum of the heater drew me from my thoughts. I adjusted my sleeves and stepped through the door. Despite common beliefs, the funeral homes I had frequented did not carry the chill of death. Even in the winter, they offered a welcome respite from the chill. I slipped off my woolen coat, and my wrist snagged a small bunch in the collar's seam. A solid lump lodged itself in my throat, but I swallowed it down and hung the coat up. Maroon carpet dulled my steps to a rhythmic thump as I padded down the employee-entrance hallway. Heat breathed through the vents, tussling my hair.

A frustrated growl escaped me before I smoothed my hair once more. Professionalism was of utmost importance, but I tried everything without success to manage this. I had grown out the front, hoping that it would cover the cowlick when I slicked it back. Of all things I could not change, it had to be something so obvious. No one mentioned it to me, but it was impossible not to notice.

I stopped before reaching the secretary's desk and pulling at my collar, my sleeves, and my shoelaces. Not a single wrinkle could be found on my button-down or slacks, save the sharp crease down the center. Fearing I might get trapped in an endless loop, I forced myself forward.

The carpet ran into the polished wood, as the hall opened to the wide office. Numerous ceiling lights covered the room in an egregious yellow

tint, making my impressionably pale skin appear jaundiced. The blue light of the computer clashed with the fluorescents that hummed an unidentifiable melody. Papers rustled behind the desk, and a head popped up.

"Oh, Phillip, you're here." Maureen shoved the last forkful of salad into her mouth and rummaged through a pile of papers by the computer. How she managed to keep track of all these files in that mess was beyond me, but despite her questionable methods, she had not lost anything. She brushed her short hair from her face as she handed me the files. "I have two death certificates for you to sign, and we've already got her on the table ready for you." She paused. "You sure you're good with this?"

I took the papers, clasping them and my hands behind my back.

"Positive. Thank you, Maureen." I dipped my head and did not wait for her response. Perhaps I owed her more, considering she did vouch for me. I completed my training when I was only twenty years old. For five years, I worked in Plymouth until the management changed. I moved back to my hometown to help with my mother's health complications, and once I found a suitable one-bedroom apartment, I began searching for alternative places of employment.

Then, Maureen convinced Mr. Powell, the funeral director, to hire me despite my relative youth. Coincidentally, I had embalmed her aunt when I was still training in Plymouth. After Maureen remembered the association, she made every effort to get me hired.

In any case, they were pleased with my work so far. I passed through one more hall and stepped into the embalming room. Grey tile sloped into the drain in the middle of the room. A sheet covered the woman on the table, but I did not turn my attention to her yet. My hands shook from the cold as I drew on the gown and gloves, ignoring the slight stain on the left cuff. The gloves were thick and trapped the cold inside. I took a breath and tied the plastic apron over my gown.

Having stalled long enough, I turned my attention to the body. Typically, it would be against policy for me to attend to this embalming, but the family requested me specifically. My eyes caught on the marker along her thin calf, branding her name; I did not need the tag this time.

"Alright, Mrs. Parks," I muttered, "this won't take long."

I pulled the sheet away from her face. Deep wrinkles formed canyons around her eyes and mouth. I knew she would not have a peaceful expression yet, so I diverted my attention to the ink pad and paper; it was

customary to take the fingerprints of each body. Her hand was stiff as I took it into mine. Her hands were thin; little separated my glove from her bone, save for the papery skin. The blue of her fingertips almost matched the color of my gloves. Massaging her fingers to rid them of their rigor mortis, I pressed her thumb onto the ink and the paper. Mercifully, the print was clean, and I dropped her hand.

Stealing another breath, I began to position her arms. Her papery skin clung to her bones, and whatever muscles were left protested the shift until I massaged them into place. Patches of dark purple skin marred her hands; though she was frail, she never did stop working. Her left hand rested above her right, allowing the wedding ring to be shown in the casket.

With care, I propped her head on the stand, tilting it forward and to the side to appear more natural. Though death was just as natural as life, somehow, people found comfort in seeing their loved ones look even more alive than they had moments before they died. My very way of life drove a rift between the living and the dead, but after so many years, I had found that some families need one last glance of the one they loved.

The hose rumbled in my hands as I turned the faucet on and poured the water over the body. It drained down into the porcelain basin beneath the table. With any luck, having the water running would keep the fumes and the mess down. I drew my instruments from the sterilizing tin, placing them on a towel by the sink. The smell was sharp and devoid of any other distinguishability as if, with enough cleanliness, one could eradicate the stain of death altogether. This smell was what I associated the most with death; covering up reality was my job.

I set aside two pieces of ligature that I had cut and began retrieving the various chemicals. Four ounces of dye went into the water tank along with formaldehyde and 32 ounces of lanolin. The rhythm of my process soon took over, stabilizing my hands as I washed and shaved her face.

I did not wash her hair; the silvery locks had long since fallen out. With nothing to hide it, the birthmark on the back of her neck displayed itself against blue-tinted skin.

From my array of tools, I selected the curved needle and drove it through the septum and down her nose, threading it underneath the lip and lower frenulum. The string pulled tight, and I tucked the ends out of view. My hand hovered over her eyes a moment too long before I inserted the barbed eye-caps under her lids. I stuffed a wad of cotton in each of her cheeks,

forcing her lips into a smile. The expression was serene, like a child pretending to be asleep when her parents were happy to carry her regardless.

I tore my eyes from the façade, taking up the scalpel and creating the incision just above her collar bone. The skin parted without resistance. The cold air returned and my hands shook as I felt for the vein and carotid artery. My breath caught as I felt something snap. Blood welled around my hand and followed the string to drip onto the table. I closed my eyes and tied the ligature around the artery. All had gone well up until now, but I could tell the vein was broken. I needed to perform a heart tap on her left side.

A writhing pit filled with snakes formed in my stomach; surely, I had remembered to eat earlier. It was barely half past two. I could not be sick, so I ignored the feeling and grabbed the trocar.

The hollow needle glinted under the lights, and I had to swallow down the bile that rose in my throat. Whatever this was, I still had a job to do. I inserted the instrument into her artery and turned the apparatus on. The blood drained from her right side, through the tube, and into the basin below. She was dead already, but for the first time in my life, I felt like I was draining her life away. It was too late before I had started, but this was final somehow. Chemicals would now replace the life that used to course through her body.

The tube continued to suck though nothing was left. I stood completely immobile as the needle sought out whatever blood it could find. The machine groaned in protest, ripping me from my haze. I switched off the fluid aspirator and ran the hose over the incision. I needed some time, but my job was not finished. Removing the trocar from her artery, I took a deep breath and set the instrument two inches above and to the left of her belly button. The trocar stayed still when I applied pressure before plunging under her ribs into her heart. The skin and muscles broke way for the invasion. The blood suctioned away as I held back my gag.

Once it was finally gone, I started the task of filling the vessels back up. The pungent chemicals flowed through her body, changing her skin back into a pink tone. The color only approximated the natural tone. I took her hand in mine once more to massage the fluid into the tips of her fingers. Only half of her face returned until I put the fluid into the arteries. I had the water running to keep the fumes down, but they still managed to reach my eyes, making them water without my consent. I blinked, which only spread the blurry spots across my vision.

I could not stop yet. I suctioned all the fluid from her organs, ignoring the sound like a straw drawing up the last bit of liquid from a glass. I replaced the fluid once again and flushed away all the fluid left in the basin. The hardest part was over, but I found my hands shaking more than before. I placed the trocar button in the hole in her abdomen and turned my attention to the gash in her neck. I took up my needle to suture the incision, weaving the thread through the skin and creating a baseball stitch. Halfway through, I poured the appropriate amount of dry gel and finished the stitch. The gel would expand and absorb any liquid left. I tied the stitch off, pausing before I passed the needle under the skin one last time to hide the knot. I stared at the sutured wound—the skin braided together.

Minutes ticked by as I watched her body. Nothing moved, which I expected. Death comes for us all; it was not something to fear. But death was permanent. You left people behind; people would give almost anything to talk with you again—wishful thinking, something I refused to indulge.

I washed everything off and prepped for the next embalming. I thought replacing her bodily fluids with the chemicals had been the worst part, but I did not realize how wrong I had been until I began massaging the moisturizer into her face and lips. Her skin was soft once again. The chemicals were gone, but their effect remained, pulling the tears from my eyes. As soon as I pulled the sheet over her face, I dashed out of the room. I took several steadying breaths as I tried to write the embalming report through my blurred vision. *Diane Parks. Age: 62.* Her name, written in my handwriting, burned into my eyes.

Maureen jumped when she came up behind me. “Philip, are you crying?” she asked. I shook my head and brushed passed her. As I opened the door, I ran into Mr. Powell. Dark eyes peered through heavy spectacles. I half-expected him to be upset, but his eyes softened as he let out a low breath. Mr. Powell placed his hand on my shoulder, fingers tightening over me. “Go home, Mr. Parks. You have done more than I should have allowed.”

There was no hiding it anymore. As if all I needed was permission, I broke down into his open arms.

## Murky Waters

Madeline Pearl Wolf

It was Tuesday morning, and the fluorescent-lit classroom smelled of mold. Gemma sat toward the back of the classroom and shrugged off her raincoat. Something wet hit her leg. Gemma moved it and looked up. There was a brown, wet spot on the ceiling, almost above her head. As she watched, another fat drop fell from the ceiling onto the linoleum floor where her foot had been.

She was early for class, having gotten out of her previous one early, so she had bought a bitter coffee from the little campus coffee shop. The coffee, which she desperately needed—she had barely slept the past few nights—was almost gone. As she sat in silence, she could not help but watch the floor, the growing puddle of water, and the spreading brown stain on the ceiling. The classroom was on the fifth floor of a building whose elevator never seemed to work. The floor originally was an attic, back when a residential home before it was donated to the small, liberal arts University of St. Michael. Like an attic, the ceiling was slanted, and the taller guys in the class needed to duck when walking around the room's perimeter. Gemma watched another drop fall and decided that this was too much.

In a burst that was noble and selfish at the same time, she downed the last of her coffee and took the lid off the cup. She crouched before the puddle and watched a drop fall in front of her onto the floor. Gemma put her cup down, watching the empty cup tip over, caught in the rippling of



the puddle. She picked it up and held it down, waiting for the next drop. The water missed, and so she adjusted the cup. Again. And again.

By the time the first and then the second drops had fallen into the cup, only 10 minutes remained before her class began. She threw out the lid of the coffee cup and went to the restroom to wash her hands. In the mirror, Gemma looked at herself. If she squinted her eyes, she supposed that she looked like an adult—an actual adult—rather than a twenty-year-old student who pretended. She was wearing clothes that an adult would wear, and her hair was down and not in any childish style like the pigtails she had favored when she was 11. She was not wearing make-up, but in the mirror, she could almost pretend that she was. There was something about the darkness of her eyelashes.

The tables in the classroom were ordered in a funny-looking circle—or as much of a circle as a bunch of rectangles could make. Gemma returned to her seat and watched the cup for a moment as her professor, Leary, walked in and set his things on the table where he usually sat. He was surprisingly short and had a full head of dark black hair that Gemma was not sure was real. Given his age, she wondered if he stood in front of his mirror at night and plucked the inevitable white hairs or maybe he dyed his hair, but Gemma did not see him as a person who would be willing to buy hair dye publicly. He was not that outwardly vain. Maybe he ordered it online.

This class was a history class that had not interested her, but she needed the humanities credits. It was a second-year course on the complexities of the Vietnam War, which were not up Gemma's metaphorical alley. They were too brutal, too easily avoidable; Gemma often found herself disconnecting from the material. The class was small—only 18 students—and most of them never showed up. She watched as her classmates arranged themselves as they sat. Some put their coats on the back of their chairs before sitting; others wore their coats to sit and then shrugged them off. Lana, who sat next to her, took her pens out and arranged them in a line before taking out her notepad. Gemma watched as Lana wrote the date and then highlighted it with a pastel-colored marker. Gemma wondered if she had her whole life as organized as that notepad. She could practically see it: a calendar with photos of cute animals or maybe classical statues hanging on the wall of her bedroom with all of every day's events lined

out and color-coded in each little box. There would be no spontaneity: simply a daily checklist, something that might be mind-numbingly boring and repetitive. Today, the calendar would say HISTORY and LUNCH and maybe ECON because she looked like she studied economics. The entire week before would be crossed out with EASTER BREAK written on top of the perfectly straight line.

The clock above the door said there were three minutes until class, but Gemma knew the clock was two minutes off. She glanced down at the coffee cup to make sure it was still collecting water from the leaking ceiling. Slow drop after slow drop fell and landed within the tiny pool inside of the cup. Satisfied, Gemma settled on watching the rest of her classmates arrive. Juan was the tallest guy in the class and probably a history major; he ducked as he made his way to his seat. His red shirt had some bleach stains on its back, and when he pulled out his chair, it squeaked on the uneven flooring. He turned his face away from the professor and hunched over toward Gemma as he subtly tried to take a hit of his shiny blue vape pen. Gemma watched as he held his breath and tried to release it slowly without creating a visible puff of smoke. It was an art that had been perfected over year of hiding his nicotine addiction. She could imagine him sitting in class in high school, hiding his vape in the sleeve of his hoodie and sneaking hits behind the teacher's back.

Gemma took out her notebook for the class and rummaged in the pocket of the faded purple backpack that she had used since she was a sophomore in high school. In the end, it was a dull-tipped pencil that she pulled out. The pencil had a few teeth marks around the center, though Gemma was not a pencil chewer. The teeth marks probably resulted from her holding the pencil in her mouth as she reached to do this or that.

Professor Leary stood up and turned on the computer. As he did so, he asked how everyone's break had gone and if anyone did anything particularly fun. A long moment of silence followed.

"Please?" he asked. He was trying so hard to get them to participate. "Anyone? No one did anything fun during the week off?"

Juan raised his hand. "I watched a movie." Gemma had taken another class with Juan—an English class in which he never spoke a word. They had worked on a group project—Gemma, Juan, and a third person named Isa—for which they presented on the themes of revolution within *A Tale of Two Cities*, which Juan had not read. He had stumbled through the presentation,

but because Gemma and Isa did well, he also did. Gemma did not think he deserved a good grade. He was one of those D3 school athletes who was too focused on their sport—which Gemma was pretty sure was lacrosse (He looked like a lacrosse bro, with his arrogance and his hoodie pulled up over his head.)—to truly care about academics but who still did well for some reason that made no sense to her.

“What movie?” Leary asked. Juan told him, and Professor Leary wrinkled his nose in distaste. He looked like he was about to say something about his taste in movies but instead said, “Anyone else?”

“I also saw that movie,” said Lucas, who sat next to Juan as they were friends.

“Did anyone do anything that wasn’t ‘see a movie?’” Professor Leary asked again, and it almost sounded like begging. He was still busy logging onto the computer. Gemma did not raise her hand; she had not done anything interesting over the break. She had worked every other night as a waitress at the diner and she had knitted, slowly working on a blanket she was tired of, all the while listening to an audiobook she had borrowed from the library. She had gone to church on Easter—Of course she had; her father was the pastor—and after, they had a wholesome family meal. Her break was most definitely not interesting enough to share.

She was saved the indignity of being the one person to raise a hand—Gemma did not like silence in class—by the late entrance of Dimitri. He walked in with his head down, and although the two had never spoken, she knew this was uncharacteristic. He dropped his bag unceremoniously by the chair closest to the door and looked up. On his face, like an ink stain, was a bruise—a black eye, a purple mess of pigment that should not be there. What was it from? Gemma could not help but stare; she did not think she had seen a black eye before. She had read about them and seen them in movies, but those were adjectives and make-up, nothing more. Seeing one in real life was disturbing and almost hypnotic. Her mind whirled with possibilities of how it had happened.

She had never paid attention to him before, but now, even as Professor Leary was starting to lecture, she could not stop. Gemma imagined bar fights over a woman, which he won. The bouncer would have dragged the other guy out, and someone would have bought him a beer. Maybe it was the woman. Maybe the bartender slid him one from across the bar with a secret smile on his lips. Maybe the woman kissed him on the cheek before she left.

Leary asked a question, and Lana answered, bringing Gemma back into the present. She caught only the last part of what Lana said. Gemma glanced over at Lana's notes to see what Leary was talking about. It was not anything too interesting. She looked back to the front of the room, where Leary, now back at the computer, was flipping through tabs. He was talking again, trying to get someone to respond to him, when he noticed Dimitri.

"Dimitri," he said. Dimitri nodded. "What happened?" Leary sounded almost too eager to know. Gemma could not imagine that Leary had much excitement in his personal life.

Dimitri's face stayed still, statue-like, almost as if he did not want to answer.

"Life," he said after a long, unblinking moment.

"A little fight?" Leary asked.

"Sure," said Dimitri, and Gemma could tell that the small smile that followed was forced. It was the same sort of smile she often needed to use at the diner when her drunk peers walked in and harangued her for fries or pancakes or milkshakes. Leary seemed to understand that the conversation had come and was about to go nowhere. He ignored it, clicked play on the video he had pulled up, and turned off the lights, thus ending the reluctant conversation.

In the dark, among the flickering light of the Ken Burns Vietnam War documentary, the sound of helicopters echoed over the room, and an old man reflected on the traumas of war. Videos of helicopters, tanks, and politicians flashed throughout the dark room, lighting the students' faces with horror and sadness. Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" played—a simple strumming guitar, followed by a question. But Gemma was not watching the documentary; she was watching Dimitri, wondering what sort of hell had created a black eye like his. It seemed like something fake, a mark of make-believe. Perhaps she was too sheltered, too unexposed to real life—Catholic school to Catholic college and no space for misbehaving.

She imagined him tripping and falling down the stairs—she supposed, directly onto his eye. Glancing back to the screen, Gemma thought it was funny that here, among the violent footage of the Vietnam War, she was thinking about a classmate's face and the film barely phased her, even while watching footage of soldiers, civilians, and loss of life and humanity. All of this tragedy projected onto a screen only ten feet from her face, and the violence she focused on was that which her mind created. Perhaps the mystery

of the situation, how she kept guessing, grabbed her. In the face of awful certainty, the endless possibilities of his black eye were more interesting. Her ideas became darker as she imagined an alcoholic, perhaps his father, yelling at his mother and Dimitri stepping in. Fists flew, and his father stormed out of the house. Gemma did not like that she thought it, but still, glancing at Dimitri, she wondered if it was valid. Her eyes settled on him in an endless stare when he glanced over to her, and Gemma panicked. Her heart seized in her chest as she quickly looked away, blushing furiously. She had been caught. And she had been caught thinking of something terrible.

Class continued, and Gemma forced herself to watch the screen, chastising herself as she viewed black and white stories of brutality and videos of exploitation and abuse. She always did that: assumed things about people. Sometimes she assumed correctly, but they were easy things to guess about people. Other times, as now, she imagined ridiculous stories and felt bad about the thoughts later: guilty, almost as if she was going to manifest the thoughts. But imagining was too easy—she did not know so many things about the people she coexisted with. Everyone wondered, but Gemma wondered more. She did not like the unknowing: the fact that anyone could have come from anywhere, having done anything, and no one would know. When she sat on a plane, she tried to talk to the person next to her—usually they did not talk to her—the exception being old ladies who loved to tell Gemma of the funeral they were attending or their grandchildren or other personal stories. She was receptive to talking to people, getting to know their stories. It was more fun though to think up her own stories and then see if she was correct.

Gemma glanced at Dimitri again, then back to the screen. People were migrating, carrying all of their belongings with them. The vague sounds of gunshot. Soldiers dying and dead.

The video ended, and Professor Leary had one minute to summarize the video (which Gemma had not listened to) and remind them of their homework while Gemma's classmates began to put notebooks and laptops away and tuck pens and pencils in pencil cases. Gemma waited. She did not like disturbing the final moments of class, and besides, she did not have much to put away. Leary finished talking, the light turned on, and Gemma put her notebook away, avoiding eye contact with the class as she did so.

She stood and put on her coat, side-stepping the coffee cup to push in her chair and pick up her backpack. She glanced up. Dimitri was staring

at her from the doorway, almost as if he were waiting for her. Her breath caught in her throat. Gemma could imagine that he wanted to beat her up for staring. She imagined a showdown in the parking lot behind the building. He would punch her and tell her that she deserved the punch for staring and not minding her own business and for creating false realities for other people. She felt helpless, trapped within herself.

Pushing her chair into the table, Gemma stepped back and into the coffee cup. Murky water spilled on the floor, puddling once more and slowly forming a stream that ran toward the door, ever-growing longer and thinner as if chasing Gemma. Flecks of ceiling tile and dirt floated within the narrow existence of the stream. It watched her leave, embarrassed, her coffee cup abandoned and on its side.

SIGMA  
TAU  
DELTA

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REVIEW

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## Out of the Whirlwind: Adaptation and Absurdism in *King Lear* and the *Book of Job*

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Preston Scott Blakeley

In adaptation studies, postmodern criticism postulates that texts are woven together in a labyrinthine web of ceaseless intersections. An adaptation functions less as an intentional resurrection of one source text but rather as one fluid artifact in an ongoing dialogical process. As American film critic Robert Stam remarks, “all texts are tissues of anonymous formulae” (64); all texts enter an evolving conversation with—and adapt to—an infinite number of conscious or unconscious source texts. Because texts exist in a palimpsestuous relationship with one another, adaptations are a constant process of transformation and transmutation, whether intentional or not. William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*—the known sources for which include *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and *The Faerie Queene* (Hamlin 307)—is a constellation of intertextual allusions. The presence of the storm in *Lear* inspires another curious intertext with the whirlwind in the *Book of Job* (ESV Bible, Job 38.1). As a result, critics can consider if and how Shakespeare’s storm may function as an adaptation of Job’s whirlwind. Whereas the whirlwind signals Yahweh’s omnipotence and Job’s cosmic ignorance, the storm in *Lear* adapts the spirit of transcendence from its source text by stressing the king’s absurdist, cosmic isolation. This absurdist adaptation serves as an intertextual critique of the pseudo-comic conclusion of the original text.

The current state of criticism is silent on the intertextual relationship

between Shakespeare's storm and Job's whirlwind; however, various scholars have delineated general connections between *King Lear* and the *Book of Job*. Literary critic George Wilson Knight published one of the first comments on a potential connection: "*King Lear* is analogous to the *Book of Job*" (191). He explains that both texts detail inquiries of theodicy and portray the presence of a maddening storm, inscrutable suffering, and the protagonist undressing in response to suffering. In addition to plot points, how can critics think *Lear* captures the chief essence from *Job*? Shakespeare scholar Arthur Kirsch argues that the prime synthesis lies in the similar "depiction of suffering in the plays" (105). Another Shakespeare scholar, John Holloway, expands Kirsch's thesis, suggesting that it is not suffering itself that signals the textual connection but rather *the way* in which Lear endures suffering (84). "Job's patience is something that Lear claims for himself" (Holloway 84). In his monograph *The Bible in Shakespeare*, Hannibal Hamlin claims that the preeminent spirit that pervades each text is the *feeling* of the inexpressible, the notion that no rational answer acquires adequate language to express the cosmic secrets of justice and suffering (333). "Neither Job's comforters, nor the voice from the whirlwind . . . answer to Job's basic question, 'Why me?' The questions posed by *King Lear* prove to be equally intractable" (Hamlin 333). As Lear's queries are also silenced by the inexpressible, he imitates Job's challenges to conventional wisdom—the genre that, in Steven Marx's words in *Shakespeare and the Bible*, expresses "enlightened optimism—that wisdom is easy to find through instruction" (60). The whirlwind in *Job* deconstructs "enlightened optimism" because Yahweh omits "instruction" in his response to Job. The response serves to heighten His omnipotence. The storm in *Lear* is also silent on matters of instruction and adapts the emphasis on transcendence in the source text with its endorsement of the absurd.

Shakespeare's adaptation of the whirlwind in *Job* is predicated on an understanding of the storm in the ancient source. The whirlwind in the *Book of Job* accentuates Yahweh's omnipotence and widens the distance between the human and the divine. In response to Job's inquiries regarding justice in the midst of suffering, Yahweh thunders from the whirlwind, "I will put questions, and you will inform me: Where were you when I founded the earth?" (Scheindlin 143). Through its commanding diction, "I will put questions," and piercing sarcasm, "Where were you" (143), Yahweh's rhetorical response expands the chasm between His omnipotence

and Job's impotence. Moreover, as Yahweh's voice explodes "out of the whirlwind" (ESV Bible, Job 38.1), the Divine and the vehicle from which He speaks are juxtaposed and fastened together. Yahweh acquires the erratic and untamed natural traits of the storm. The threatening "whirlwind [that] carries [Job] off . . . [and inspires] [t]errors . . . like a flood" mirrors Yahweh's threatening preeminence over an impermanent and ignorant worshiper (Job 27.20). The storm—and Yahweh—subordinates Job to terror because of its unpredictable power, much like the uncontrolled presence of a flood. The whirlwind-centered speech heightens human unknowingness and necessitates Job's admission of his own ignorance, confessing, "I am of small account. . . . I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40.4). Job must submit to the secret of justice that his "small amount," the limitations of human perception, fails to perceive. Through its commanding rhetorical content and symbolic, storm-inspired spirit of omnipotence, Yahweh's speech and the whirlwind mirror one another. The response accentuates His violent yet supreme omnipotence over a finite worshiper who must accept the cosmic abyss that separates him from the divine.

The storm in *King Lear* embodies the notion of the absurd and functions as an adaptation of the omnipotent whirlwind in the *Book of Job*. The absurd is a nihilistic reaction to Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead" (119). The French existentialist Albert Camus, who built his theories upon the German's philosophical work, reasoned that Nietzsche's declaration entailed an absurd existence—ontological isolation and meaninglessness. Because the transcendent standard of order and reason is dead, humanity is damned to an irrational world of freedom and chaos. Thus, Camus claims, "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said" (21). Furthermore, the absurdist spirit of Shakespeare's storm subverts the omnipotent essence of Job's whirlwind in *Lear*'s initial curse through its nihilistic tone. *Lear* curses the storm: "You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drench'd our steeples . . . / And thou, all-shaking thunder, / Smite flat the thick rotundity o'th' world, / Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once / That make ingrateful man!" (Shakespeare 3.2.2–3, 6–9).

The natural events, including the whirlwind in the Biblical text, signal Yahweh's transcendence. *Lear*'s nihilistic command that "cataracts and hurricanoes . . . [drench] our steeples" (Shakespeare 3.2.2) replaces religious order with absurd chaos. Similar to symbolism in Near Eastern literature,

Lear's self-invocation of water imagery signifies primordial chaos, which is often depicted by its ominous, threatening, and dismal omnipresence, indicating Lear's nihilistic dismissal of celestial order (Kapelrud 181). Thus, the menacing presence of water imagery implies Lear's yearning for self-destruction and his crazed acceptance of chaos. Lear revises the order of Yahweh's response from the whirlwind with the disorder of fluid destruction. Similar to Job's counter-cosmic curse that inverts the Genesis creation account (ESV Bible, Job 3.1–26), wherein the sufferer wishes "for his life to have been extinguished at his birth rather than . . . the creation of humankind" (Kynes and Kynes 54), Lear calls upon the "all-shaking thunder . . . [to] [c]rack nature's molds, [where] all germens spill at once" (Shakespeare 3.2.6–9). As Job yearns to undo creation, Lear likewise demands that the storm crush the earth, "[s]mite flat the thick rotundity," and split open the "molds" from which humans, or "all germens," spring forth into life (3.2.6–9). In *Lear*, the storm functions not as a mirror of Yahweh's omnipotence but as a symbol of counter-cosmic destruction. The chaos of uncreation signals Lear's longing for nihilistic annihilation and furthers the absurdist spirit of the storm.

The irrational element of natural imagery replaces the spirit of omnipotence in the source text with the reign of the absurd. The storm in the drama signals the absurd, as it heightens the irrational aspect of natural phenomena when Lear says, "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain! / Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters. / I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness" (Shakespeare 3.2.14–16). Lear's repetition of the natural components of the storm, such as "fire . . . rain . . . rain, wind, thunder, fire," creates an irrational obsession in the language that seems a reaction to the threatening essence of the storm. The doubled diction and recurrent syntax suggest that language fragments under an external pressure similar to the inscrutable pressure Lear's psyche encounters from the storm. The aural manifestation of the storm on stage accentuates the sudden and absurd temperament of the tempest that tortures Lear. The sound of the storm is coupled with his perplexed dialogue, which facilitates the fact that language is also tortured because its fragmentation mimics the irrational aspect of natural symbolism. The invocation of thunder furthers the absurdist undercurrent in the drama. Thunder in *Job* is tethered to Yahweh's omnipotence, and Elihu affirms this connection when he proclaims that one must "listen to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling of his

mouth" (*ESV Bible*, Job 37.2). Thunder in Lear's crazed speech, which is rendered by his "Rumble thy bellyful" command (Shakespeare 3.2.14), is but a temporal "element" that enhances the absurdist subtext because of the silence of the gods (3.2.16). Though Lear posits that "the great gods" elicited the "dreadful pudder o'er our heads" (3.2.49–50), these silent beings are nothing but "dreadful summoners" (3.2.59). If the gods exist—which is a subject of contention because of Lear's pseudo-celestial invocation of various entities that lack temporal transcendence, such as "Nature" (1.4.267), "fen-sucked fogs" (2.2.356), and the storm itself (3.2.1)—their *modus operandi* is to "kill us for their sport" (4.1.39). The existence of the divine is left ambiguous. Such celestial silence adapts the symbol of thunder in the source text in that it replaces Yahweh's omnipotence with Lear's isolation. *Lear* presents no answers from the whirlwind, no voices thundering from heaven. In a world in which the symbol of the storm rages on absurd and devoid of divine action, leaving speech perplexed and tormented, Lear is left destitute in his metaphysical isolation. Lear inhabits an irrational space where the chaos of the storm and the silence of the gods, signal his absurd and absolute freedom from divine omnipotence.

The storm in *Lear* translates the deconstruction of human language from the source text and heightens the sufferer's absurd isolation. The poetic center of *Job* fails to offer one monolithic truth but rather presents various voices who represent diverse perspectives on wisdom and suffering. In her article "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," Carol Newsom notes, "One simply has voice answering voice, as two radically opposed experiences of the world" (98). The wisdom dialogue is polyphonic, not monologic. Although no narrator exists to establish the truth of one voice over another, Job anguishes over the futility of language after each speech, proclaiming, "Do you think you can teach me with words?" (Scheindlin 66). Each varied speech fails to "teach" with "words," so language fails to signify the spirit of the ineffable. Yahweh affirms the meaninglessness of human language when he says, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (*ESV Bible*, Job 38.2). Transcendent comfort or "counsel" amidst inscrutable suffering is impossible, or "darkens," because "words" lack "knowledge," or meaning.

Shakespeare's storm facilitates the deconstruction of language and translates it from *Job* when Lear conflates his own experience with Poor Tom. While Edgar enters as Poor Tom, a disheveled figure who mirrors Lear's

own deteriorated state, Lear assumes that Edgar's daughters are to blame for his depraved existence, inquiring, "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters, and art thou come to this?" (Shakespeare 3.4.47-48). Lear's language fails to signify reality because it simply mirrors his own experience. In fact, Edgar does not have daughters, and Lear's continued assumption, "his daughters brought him to this pass" (3.4.59), implies the comic yet absurd state of his irrational use of self-reflexive language. Similar to the nonsensical and distorted state of language in absurdist theatre, which champions "meaningless questions, senseless answers, illogical dialogues, and ambiguous references" (Sharma 176), Lear's comic *idée fixe*, his obsession with Edgar's "daughters," signals the theatrical senselessness of language. The repetition of "daughters" recalls an earlier conversation between Lear and Kent:

KENT. It is both he and she: Your son and daughter.

LEAR. No.

KENT. Yes.

LEAR. No, I say.

KENT. I say, yea.

LEAR. By Jupiter, I swear no.

KENT. By Juno, I swear ay. (Shakespeare 2.4.11-18)

Lear and Kent's curt, contradictory, and almost competitive dialogue, wherein both characters fail to engage in a meaningful exchange, implies the absolute deconstruction of language. It signals an essential component of the absurdist worldview: the failure of language to elicit human connection and the ontological isolation of the individual. The repetition of monosyllabic responses, "No" and "Yes," and the obsessive reiteration of similar responses, "No, I say" and "I say, yea," imitates Lear's fractured psyche and further exhibits the isolation one experiences due to the failure of language to articulate the essence of existence. Similar to the deterioration of language into simple and irrational responses in absurdist theatre, like the nonsensical repetition of "Adieu" and "Thank you" between Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (98), the senseless back and forth between opposite values, "No" and "Yes," creates an empty dialogue that eludes linguistic value and human relation. The illogical and elusive state of language in *Lear*, which anticipates the treatment of language in absurdist theatre, translates the deconstruction of human speech from the

source text. As language in *Job* “fails to teach” and echoes perplexed in its varied polyphonic articulation, *Lear* is similarly isolated in an absurdist textual atmosphere in which language yearns for but never arrives at meaning.

The deconstruction of language in *Lear* signals the absurdist subversion of human primacy and translates the source text’s dismissal of anthropocentrism. As language yearns for connection, yet remains hollow in signification, *Lear* spirals in his absurd isolation and, like Poor Tom, he “is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal” (Shakespeare 3.4.97–98). Because language is the symbolic system that distinguishes humans from their counterparts, and because *Lear* fails to create meaning and connection, he is nothing more than a “bare, forked animal” (3.4.98). The irrational symbolism of the storm mirrors the deconstruction of language—that is, the absurdity of connection—and subverts *Lear*’s humanity, turning him into an animal. The sufferer is without linguistic connection and meaning because language creates value. He deforms into nothing more than “the thing itself,” an isolated and naked beast (3.4.97). Indistinguishable from *Lear*’s ancient counterpart, whom Yahweh declares is subservient to “the River Beast . . . [who] is the first of God’s ways” (Scheindlin 151), the storm in *Lear* translates its source text’s dismissal of metaphysical anthropocentrism. The ancient text anguishes, “how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!” (ESV Bible, Job 25.6), as the latter declares, “I th’ last night’s storm I such a fellow saw, / Which made me think a man a worm” (Shakespeare 4.1.33–34). However, the claim that “man . . . is a maggot” in *Job* subverts anthropocentrism to highlight Yahweh’s omnipotence and signal human ignorance. The fact that “last night’s storm,” an irrational and chaotic symbol in *Lear*, thunders on without the all-knowing voice; elicits “man a worm”; and represents the absurd, nihilistic state of human existence. Whereas Yahweh’s rhetorical inquiries from the whirlwind, “Can you catch [the River Beast] . . . pierce his nose?” (Scheindlin 151), negate human exceptionalism to accentuate His transcendence, *Lear*’s dehumanization amidst an absurd storm indicates his absolute cosmic isolation—the futile and worm-like state of his existence. Though Shakespeare translates the deconstruction of language from *Job*, the function of *Lear*’s subsequent dehumanization adapts the source text in that it replaces the spirit of omnipotence with the reign of the absurd.

Through the nihilistic desire to negate creation, the irrational element of storm symbolism, and the deconstruction of language and

anthropocentrism, the storm in *Lear* creates an absurdist metaphysical spirit, which adapts the omnipotent ethos of the whirlwind in *Job*. Though *Lear* translates its conviction in the futile state of language and the dehumanization of the sufferer from its source text, it does so to heighten the irrational nature of the universe and the absurd vision of existence. By replacing the celestial speech with silence, restoration with isolation, meaning with meaninglessness, and the transcendent with the absurd, *Lear* functions as an intertextual critique of the spiritual absolution, which Job experiences at the end of the prose narrative. As Cordelia's restoration in the final act of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* mirrors Job's own reintegration (Lee 5.13.17–32), Shakespeare's absurdist adaptation deepens the tragic abyss by damning the hope for sudden redemption. Shakespeare's *Lear* critiques the pseudo-comic conclusions of its source texts. Unlike the Lear in the final scene of *The True Chronicle* (Lee 5.13.1–32), Shakespeare's Lear does not reign, nor does his daughter live. The story presents no restorations and no *deux ex machina* (unexpected solution) appearances from the whirlwind. As Shakespeare's adaptation embraces the absurd and accentuates the tragic reality of death, *Lear* affirms the responsibility of life and critiques the semi-tragic state of its precursors.

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## “A Sound That Beasts Us”: Deconstructed Animal Stereotypes in Amanda Gorman’s *Call Us What We Carry*

Isabella Fernandez

As a self-described “advocate for the environment, racial equality, and gender justice” (Gorman cover jacket), poet Amanda Gorman’s work focuses on the unique experiences of various marginalized communities, often grappling with the struggles of these identities. Her 2021 poetry collection, *Call Us What We Carry*, is the culmination of her activism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the powerful pieces, Gorman makes space for a discussion about environmental justice—a theme that initially may seem out of place in the collection. However, to Gorman, environmental justice honors the intersections of different human identities. Opposed to the “kind of white, male, hegemonic tradition of old white men on benches thinking about existentialism” (Smith par. 37), Gorman presents nature poetry that tackles environmentalism from the perspective of marginalized communities and recognizes the importance of obtaining environmental and social justice together (par. 37). She cleverly reclaims minority spaces within the environment throughout the collection by deconstructing colonialist stereotypes of the colonized. By comparing racial and ethnic minorities as animals, Gorman explains a postpastoral connection between the betterment of the environment and the pursuit of social justice.

In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, literary critic Elleke Boehmer, expands on Edward Said’s conception of Orientalism and the othering of the colonized, suggesting that the key method for promoting

imperialism is undermining the humanity of the colonized as a form of othering. In examining historical colonial writings, Boehmer finds that not only do colonizers infantilize and humiliate colonized groups but they also rely on making the colonized civilization appear inferior to legitimize the domination (20).

Humiliating and dehumanizing the colonized is often accomplished through the use of animal stereotypes. In an integrative review of dehumanizing stereotypes, Nick Haslam (a professor at University of Melbourne) identified the psychology behind such dehumanization, explaining that the effectiveness of comparing racial and ethnic minorities to animals lies in attributing to them “un-human” traits such as unintelligence, amorality, and coarseness (253–57). If the oppressor can make the oppressed appear to lack uniquely and innately human traits, then they deny the oppressed membership into humanity and thus can treat them as disrespectfully and violently as one might treat an animal or pest (258). This psychology easily lends itself to imperialism, as colonizers legitimize their rule over the colonized by positioning them as animals that are incapable of thinking for themselves and therefore needing the colonizers (Boehmer 21). In fact, imperial figures such as English Lieutenant General Sir Harry Smith have historically labeled colonized people as “beasts” and “savages” to characterize them as naturally degenerate and subhuman such that they must be subdued or controlled (Boehmer 20–21). This philosophy explains their justification for civilizing other people.

The negative connotations of animal stereotypes function entirely on disrespect for nonhuman life. Essentially, these stereotypes rely on the belief that what is not human is inherently subhuman, which allows for not only the oppression and exploitation of humans but also for that of the natural world. This belief is a key element of post-pastoral literature, as first defined by Terry Gifford in his book *Pastoral*. Gifford explains how post-pastoral literature differs from the pastoral: Whereas pastoral literature often idealizes the natural world and views it as a background onto which human experiences are projected, post-pastoral literature “both celebrate[s] and take[s] some responsibility for nature” (148). In recognizing that the natural world and human minorities are oppressed in similar ways, “taking responsibility for nature” then involves addressing both ecological and social injustices

when seeking equality as well as a place in which to practice it (165). Thus, denying the value of nature influences the mindset of subhuman beings in post-pastoral literature.

In *Call Us What We Carry*, Gorman addresses the dehumanizing stereotypes against racial and ethnic minorities, deconstructing them and asserting that both nature and human minorities have the right to take back what is rightfully theirs. Beginning with “Essex I,” Gorman first confronts the stereotypes. “Essex I” alludes to the whale attack on the *Essex* whaleship, examines the crew’s perceptions of animals and foreigners, and explores the instability in the binary that privileges the human over the animal. Lines 14–20 foreshadow the *Essex* crew becoming stranded for three months and resorting to cannibalism: “Wait long enough & boys can become barbed / as beasts. . . . Does / what survives, what is salvaged, need to be so savage? Is this the / sea we rise from, not more animal, but more human? . . . In other wor / ds, we become what we hunt, as we inevitably begin to think like / our prey” (Gorman 32). Their descents into “savagery” through cannibalism are painfully ironic as they result from the crew refusing to land on an island that they believe is inhabited by cannibals, “those red fables of the foreign” (33). In cannibalizing their crewmates, the survivors have “become what [they] flee / & what [they] fear” (33). In these lines, Gorman criticizes the superiority that the crew feels over the indigenous people and their prey-turned-attacker, the whale, as they inevitably become as unhuman as they believe both the cannibals and the whale to be. However, the survivors are undeniably still human, “more human” now, in fact. Thus, Gorman suggests that the hierarchy of human over animal is arbitrary—for the traits uniquely assigned to humans and animals are often interchangeable—and easily reversed.

Gorman refers to more historical examples of dehumanization in “*Vale of the Shadow of Death or Extra! Extra! Read all about it!*” In this poem, she explains how the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act “was signed after generations of stereotyping Chinese immigrants as the carriers of cholera and smallpox” and recounts headlines—e.g., such as “Half a Million Darkies from Dixie Swarm to the North to Better Themselves”—that blamed the 1918 flu epidemic on African Americans’ migration north (Gorman 82–83). Stereotyping Chinese and African Americans as “carriers” who “swarmed” to cities effectively likened them to disease-carrying pests or vermin that, as Boehmer (21) and Haslam (258) observed, made it easier

for white Americans to discriminate and perpetuate violence against them. Gorman restates their observations: “The first step to scapegoating a whole people is to delegitimize their value—to call them a host to nothing but horror” (82). Later in the poem, she refers to how white Americans justified poor urban living conditions for African Americans during the 1918 epidemic, quoting a *Tribune* reporter who insisted that they were compelled to live in squalor (84). She then adds, “The oppressor will always say the oppressed want their overcrowded cage, cozy & comforting as it is. . . . A racial insult renders us a mammal, albeit less free. In short, a slur is a sound that beasts us” (84). Here, Gorman acknowledges that these stereotypes are imposed on racial and ethnic minorities by their oppressors, rather than being innate characteristics, and thus she begins to challenge the hierarchy of human over animal. At the end of the poem, she embraces the stereotypes while also completely reversing them, describing racial and ethnic minorities as “brave, upright beasts” rather than the submissive ones as white Americans have labeled them (85).

After addressing and deconstructing dehumanizing stereotypes, Gorman explicitly makes the post-pastoral connection between environmental and social action in her poems “Captive” and “Earth Eyes.” “Captive” compares humans kept at home during the 2020 COVID lockdowns to animals forced into captivity; the poem begins with the lines, “The animals flooded our streets / Demanding answers or food, / Here to take back / What was theirs” (67). Her imagery is reminiscent of the phenomenon that occurred during the early COVID lockdowns in which multitudes of animals roamed the near-empty streets. Animals—emerging from the wilderness to which they were delegated by urbanization—began taking back the spaces that were once theirs to the amazement and fear of many humans (“Coronavirus”). Gorman’s words parallel the later description of humans also looking to reclaim a space in which they belong: “The same sapiens, we flooded our streets / Demanding answers & change” (69). These sapiens are unidentified, but Gorman is likely referring to the surge of Black Lives Matter protests during 2020 and the demands made by many protestors for the restructuring, defunding, or abolition of the police in response to police brutality and structural racism (Westerman et al.). In 2020, both the animals that were forced out of their natural environments and the humans who were forced into their homes defied their oppressors and demanded to take up space once denied to them. Gorman views this as a step in the right

direction, as she criticizes restraint and captivity throughout the poem and depicts restoring and returning to nature as the key to freedom: "Our need for nature / Is our need for origins, / The green tangled place / Where we are of least consequence / & yet still matter as much as anything" (69). In "Captive," Gorman suggests that the parallel reclamations of land and power by both wildlife and racial and ethnic minorities are necessary if we wish to return to a freer, more idyllic version of the world.

The poem "Earth Eyes" adds to the conclusion made in "Captive" by directly tying in the concept of reparations. At first, "Earth Eyes" appears to be solely concerned with climate change and environmental activism; however, in lines 7-9, Gorman shifts its theme: "Reparation lies / not in the land we own, but the very land we owe, the soil & toil we thieved / in from the start" (Gorman 64). These lines solidify Gorman's post-pastoral statement by combining the reparations owed to groups such as black and native Americans with the concept of owing the earth for all the injustice humankind has done to and within it. The poem—a desperate plea for all generations to come together to save the earth—then insists that saving the earth means remedying the centuries of damage done to the earth's physical environment and to social equality.

Through *Call Us What We Carry*, Gorman inserts herself into the post-pastoral literary canon by cleverly manipulating colonialist animal stereotypes to construct a message that combines environmental and social justice. She deconstructs the notion that what is deemed inhuman is inherently subhuman—an assumption that underlies the subjugation of the earth, animals, and other human beings—and uses this deconstruction to push for the empowerment of racial and ethnic minorities alongside environmental activism. As an American poet, she crafts her message to clearly focus on racial and environmental injustice within the United States, summing her challenge in her final poem, "The Hill We Climb." The poem, recited at the 2021 United States Presidential Inauguration, asks its readers and listeners to "leave behind a country better than the one we / were left" (210). In the preceding poems of the collection, Gorman makes it clear that improving the country means taking responsibility for it; it means changing policy, giving back land, offering reparations, and protecting all life—not only human ones. Finally, in lines 49-52, she outlines an idyllic America and what it will take to reach it: "*That* is the promised glade, / The hill we climb, if only we dare it: / Because being American is more than a pride we

inherit—/ It's the past we step into and how we repair it" (208). Evidently, to Gorman, accepting the post-pastoral fact that racial oppression and environmental exploitation are inseparable is the key to achieving a perfectly pastoral Eden of an America.

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*Shakespeare behind Bars: A Black Male  
Inmate Receives the Representation  
of a White Male Inmate*

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Alaysia Godfrey

In John Sloop's book *The Cultural Prison*, he discusses the representation that certain inmates have had over a 100-year period and continue to have today. Two types of inmates who media often discuss are the white male inmate and the black male inmate. According to Sloop's study, the white male inmate is represented as a person who is not inherently violent, has a humane side to him, and is a reliable worker; in contrast, the African-American male inmate is represented as a person who is inherently violent, does not show signs of humanity, and is not reliable when it comes to work (154, 164–65). Sloop states, "Society is prefigured to believe in the possibility of the white prisoner's rehabilitation. As a result, African American and other 'raced' inmates are less likely to be represented as chosen for alternative forms of punishment" (154). Whereas these representations of white and black male inmates drastically differ, the white male inmate appears to be someone who can be redeemed, but the black male inmate is presented as one who cannot be redeemed from his mistakes. *Shakespeare behind Bars*, however, does not align with these representations; this documentary counters Sloop's conclusion and challenges the popular narrative of the black male inmate by depicting one black inmate, Sammie, with the representation that a white male inmate would otherwise receive: a representation that consists of not being inherently violent, having a humane side, and being a reliable worker. In this way, the film producer allows



Sammie's character to surface and, in this way, to demonstrate his potential for redemption after his time in prison.

Because of its cast of inmates, per Sloop's report, *Shakespeare behind Bars* would be expected to present white male inmates and black male inmates as different; however, the documentary begins with a large, muscular, black man skillfully reciting a *Henry V* monologue (00:20-01:22). The man reciting is Sammie, an inmate and a key figure in *Shakespeare behind Bars*. The film follows a group of inmates who work together to produce and perform William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; the documentary stars Sammie, who is a leader when it comes to work, who feels and works through his emotions maturely, and who is not inherently violent. This positive representation of Sammie in the process of preparing the production allows the audience to see and consider him as a redeemable person who deserves a second chance to change and improve his life. The documentary film *Shakespeare behind Bars* challenges the usual narrative of the black male inmate by giving Sammie a true representation and one that typically a white male inmate would receive.

When it comes to violence being represented in inmates, the white male inmate's violence is not seen as being an innate characteristic; instead, their violent behavior results from an external condition: "Their violence is not part of their nature historically; indeed their violence now stems from prison overcrowding" (Sloop 154). The overcrowding in the prison system is considered an influence that drives the white male inmate to commit violent acts; the incarcerated white man's violence has nothing to do with his character, motivation, or person hood, "... while that of the African American male and other 'raced' inmates articulates them as violent regardless of conditions" (154). The black male inmate is presented as being driven to violent acts because violence is an innate characteristic within him; that is, the public may assume that violence is deeply rooted within the black male inmate, rather than influenced by external factors.

This representation of violence as an innate characteristic in the black male inmate is receiving criticism. In "Understanding Violence among Young African American Males: An Afrocentric Perspective," scholar Anthony King claims that the violence often seen from young black males can be attributed to multiple external factors: "These discussions never

explore how chattel slavery, institutional racism, and intransigent poverty and economic deprivation have contributed to the violence observed in many African-American communities" (80). He argues that external conditions—past and present racism, poverty, and limited economic opportunities—may drive black males to violence. Hence, violence is not an innate characteristic of black males and thus of black male inmates.

One contributing factor to black males who engage in violence may involve a lack of guiding male figures. Per this theory, King explains, "The aforementioned problems create a shortage of African American males who can and will provide the guidance, love, and nurturing necessary to help many African American boys and teenagers overcome the pessimism, fear, anger, and fatalism that often surrounds them" (88). Some adult black males' struggles may inhibit them from being supportive authority figures who can guide the younger generation. This lack of guidance is supported in *Shakespeare behind Bars*, for which Sammie gives a confessional about his upbringing, the absence of his father, and the lack of support he received after being sexually abused. "Both of my parents were alcoholics, so I come running home and my dad sees my shirt torn and stuff and he immediately calls me a punk and after that I didn't tell, because it was more painful to hear the rejection of my father" (08:41–09:00). Sammie narrates his experiences as a child without an adult actively present for support and guidance, providing insight into the emotional suffering that he has experienced and that may have influenced his choices.

The emotional turmoil that Sammie and other black males have experienced can lead them to devalue their lives and the lives of others, making it easier for them to engage in violence as an outlet: "The emotional upheaval that they endure all to [sic] often leads to an obvious sense of personal devaluation, degradation, and a disrespect for their lives and the lives of their peers" (King 89). With no guidance from a supportive adult and no outlet for their struggles, black males may carry their emotional pain until they violently express their pain. Sammie supports King's theory in his personal narrative: "All this here pain and anger and frustration that lived inside of me. I had no outlet for it, so I just shut all this out, but inside there's all this rage that's lived inside of me" (*Shakespeare behind Bars* 09:11–09:23). Growing up, Sammie did not have access to support to help him deal with hurt and emotions that he experienced; instead, he held them inside. Through *Shakespeare behind Bars*, the public learned of the crime

that Sammie committed when influenced by external conditions, which indicates that he was not an inherently violent person but a black male inmate who struggled as a child but who has the chance for redemption because his crime was not done with ill intentions.

In the documentary, Sammie verbally expresses his pain—not something usually expressed by a black male inmate; in media, the idea of humanity and feeling emotions is typically represented in the white male inmate. Sloop states, “Numerous representations reveal the white male prisoner as exhibiting normal human emotions and actions, behaving in ways any human being would. These observations are noteworthy in they appear limited to white prisoners” (164). White male inmates are represented as humans who engage in actions and emotions that are comparable to a civil society, drawing more compassion and empathy. In contrast, the representation differs for black inmates: “A Caucasian male is provided with a humanity that is generally denied black prisoners” (Sloop 165). That is, black male inmates are denied the opportunity to appear as human beings and thus are not the subjects of empathy per their potential for redemption.

Despite this appearance of humanity being mostly tied to white male inmates, *Shakespeare behind Bars* steps away from the norm and shows Sammie’s humanity by focusing on his journey to forgiveness within himself. Sammie expresses that he deeply regrets the crime he committed (strangling his ex-girlfriend). The program “Shakespeare behind Bars” has been a useful tool for Sammie to process his emotions related to the detrimental act of his crime. Literature, such as William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (the production in this documentary) has been useful for inmates to work through their problems: “They gravitate to literature courses, it is because they are looking for ways to make sense of their own lives, to find answers to their own problems” (Hedin 282). Inmates can find themselves in the literary text and are able to use it as a way to understand their situations and learn from their mistakes. Literature helps inmates better understand how they arrived at their current situations and what they need to do to improve themselves for the better.

*Shakespeare behind Bars* dedicates time in the production to show Sammie processing his current situation. In one scene, Sammie confesses,

I was two years into this sentence then I realized what is wrong with me. Why do I keep coming back to prison? . . . What happened was

when I committed this crime it was some issues that I had not dealt with before that came back to surface and in a fit of rage I ended up strangling my victim. (1:16:22–1:16:49)

Sammie has realized that he committed the crime because of buried emotions, such as pain and anger, with which he never properly dealt. The scene continues with Sammie's struggle to forgive himself. Sammie claims, "I have taken a life and I've had to forgive myself and that was the hardest thing because I have taken something I cannot give back" (1:17:01–1:17:06). By showing Sammie as he deals with anger and remorse, the film presents Sammie as a human being with emotions; thus, the audience can empathize with him as he learns from his mistakes and resolves the emotions around his history. Ultimately, the audience can then believe in Sammie's redemption and hope for his success.

When it comes to reliable workers, white male inmates are given a positive image; Sloop writes, "Prisoners who are responsible enough to hold down jobs while they are imprisoned are accompanied by pictures of exclusively or almost exclusively white prisoners, an association concerning the constitution of redeemable prisoners is being made" (165). Because they are represented as the trustworthy workers, they appear as the inmates who can be redeemed and who are more likely to succeed outside prison. In contrast, black male inmates have the default representation of not having strong work ethics and being unable to secure and hold down a job, which can mean that they are not redeemable. Sloop states, "The majority of irredeemable prisoners are depicted as black. If most prisoners are black, and white prisoners are pictorially featured in articles about rehabilitation, the link between race and potential for rehabilitation is strengthened" (166). Black male inmates are consistently associated with being irredeemable, whereas the white male inmate is placed in a better light. As a result, people may view black male inmates as a group of people who will never succeed and who are less likely to be reliable for good work and a well-established life outside prison.

In *Shakespeare behind Bars*, however, Sammie is not only shown as a reliable worker but also a leader in his position of work. Sammie is the supervisor of 120 inmates at the Data Lab in the prison (56:53–56:57). Sammie in this position shows that he has a strong work ethic and has been placed in responsibility to lead other inmates in doing the same job. His successful

work record secured Sammie a job offer at a software company after being released from prison. In one scene, Sammie states, “The company that sold us this software has offered me a job to come work for them at a Captiva corporation. I have been offered a position as a programmer with them” (*Shakespeare behind Bars* 57:03–57:10). The job offer indicates to the audience that Sammie is a reliable worker who is able to secure a job outside prison; *Shakespeare behind Bars* is documenting that obtaining a job is not only attributed to white male inmates, and the audience sees firsthand the success that Sammie is experiencing through with his redemption.

At the end of *Shakespeare behind Bars*, the film updates the audience about Sammie’s status: “Was denied parole. He was given a deferment of 6 more years” (1:30:18–1:30:25). After this statement, the audience may feel disappointment; the viewers have watched Sammie be represented as taking steps to better himself and putting in the effort to deal with his emotions and to learn from his mistakes by participating in programs, such as “*Shakespeare behind Bars*.” Therefore, his being denied parole can disappoint him—he is not receiving the second chance he deserves. Sammie did not receive parole after his first request, but he was released from prison eventually and, per the cast update page, he is doing well outside the prison system (“Documentary Cast Updates”). The page updates viewers on Sammie:

He continues to make a positive life for himself outside the razor-wire working as facilitator/counselor for Goodwill Industries. Since 2011, Sammie has worked with Curt L. Tofteland on his one person memoir show, *Othello’s Tribunal*. The production tours around the country performing at professional Shakespeare Theatres, colleges and universities, and prisons and detention centers.

Since being released from prison, Sammie has maintained a job and traveled around the country to perform. The life that Sammie has established for himself outside of prison shows that his redemption was a success, and that redemption is possible for the black male inmate.

*Shakespeare behind Bars* challenges the popular narrative of the black male inmate by depicting Sammie realistically (in the documentary), with the representation that a white male inmate would typically receive; Sammie is not inherently violent, has a humane side, is a reliable worker, and is able to be redeemed when released from prison. *Shakespeare behind Bars*, providing

this positive representation of Sammie, proves that the typical narrative of black male inmates is inaccurate.

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## “Most Surely I Had Never Loved Her”: Edgar Allan Poe’s “Berenice” and Female Objectification

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Elaina Grace Gonzalez

In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant defines objectification in the context of sexual relationships; he says, “The desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being . . . the woman’s humanity is of no concern to him, and the only object of his desire is her sex” (156). Nevertheless, the objectification of women exists far beyond the realm of sexuality. Scholar Evangelia Papadaki explains key ideas regarding non-sexual objectification, defining “reduction to body” as “the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts,” as well as “silencing” as “the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak” (1). Both “reduction to body” and “silencing” are critical in examining the role of women in many of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories. This essay will build on these ideas by exploring the male possession of the female body in “Berenice,” highlighting the function of objectification within the text. In this narrative, Egaeus exerts possession over the female body in an attempt to control his own psychological and physical situation. Berenice’s teeth become his object of desire, and his efforts to gain possession of this perceived boon/benefit/prize drives the plot. Such female “reduction to body” allows him to grasp at emotional gratification, whereas subjecting Berenice to injury, dishonor, and death. Furthermore, Berenice is “silenced” as the narrative excludes her voice, which exists only as perceived by the male narrator. This trend of limited female characterization is present in other Poe works,

such as "The Oval Portrait" and "The Oblong Box." Poe complicity and repeatedly uses the objectification and possession of women in his writing to explore the psyche of male characters and advance the story's plot. In a sense, Poe himself objectifies his female characters by using them as vessels to tell an overarchingly male narrative.

In "Berenice," Egaeus reduces Berenice to her body to contain her and appease the desires of his mental disturbances. Thinking about his cousin's consumptive illness, Egaeus reflects, "My disorder revelled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice—in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity" (Poe, "Berenice" 229). By equating Berenice's physical appearance with her personal identity, Egaeus highlights his obsession with her sick body and his lack of concern for her person. He claims that his mental disorder is the reason for his fixation with her body instead of her soul, remarking on his own obsessive tendencies. This trend continues after he sees Berenice's teeth and becomes utterly absorbed. He contemplates, "In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. I longed for these with a frenzied desire . . . I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression" (231). In this extreme statement, Egaeus reveals his obsession with one part of Berenice's body and the pedestal on which he puts her physicality. He not only reduces Berenice to her body idealistically but allocates her value to him in "the most lifeless portion of her anatomy, her teeth" (Doyle 14). By assigning morality to the teeth, Egaeus attempts to vitalize the inanimate and in turn, justify his fascination with them in his own mind. His intense longing for her body parts becomes a physical manifestation of his objectification of Berenice. He now not only objectifies her but craves her as a consumable object—a mere vessel that holds items of interest.

In the end, Egaeus tears the teeth from Berenice's comatose body in a blacked-out frenzy of desire. He awakes to the vague memory that he "had done a deed," eventually finding the box that held "some instruments of dental surgery" and "thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor" (Poe 232–33). In this horrifying discovery, Egaeus's consummation of Berenice has become a physical reality. By violently extracting the teeth from Berenice's living body, she is "ultimately reduced to what can be contained" (Hayes 4). Now, she is not



a whole person, a woman beyond the understanding of Egaeus. Instead, he has diminished her to what he finds obtainable and desirable. Furthermore, he has successfully gratified the fixation of his mind in his possession of her. He is no longer subject to the unceasing image of the teeth, nor the want for their possession, which “could alone ever restore [him] to peace, in giving [him] back to reason” (Poe, “Berenice” 231). Indeed, he has returned to reason at the end of the story—at the cost of Berenice’s well-being. Assuming her to be dead, he has defiled her grave and dishonored her body. Returning to consciousness, Berenice has been “forever marked by his attempt to possess her,” both mentally and physically (Doyle 16). Egaeus’ need to obtain the prize of Berenice’s moralized teeth creates the story, and the story ends with his destructive attempt at controlling his psychological instability and gratifying his unpleasant, obsessive urges.

Throughout the story, Berenice is “silenced,” and her voice is missing from the text. From Egaeus’s perspective as the narrator, she appears only once in the flesh. Despite his lengthy contemplation of her life, illness, and appearance, she does not reappear in person. Her existence is related through his eyes, viewing Berenice “not as a thing to admire, but to analyze” (Poe 229). Thus, everything about her is revealed through his internal monologue and never from her. As a result, a glimpse of her individual account is evident in only a few short yet significant details. Awakening from his blackout, Egaeus vaguely recalls a “shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice,” which the menial relates as a “wild cry disturbing the silence of the night” (232). Egaeus notices his hand “indented with the impress of human nails” and his clothes “muddy and clotted with gore” (233). These details imply that Berenice fights against her cousin as he violates her body in his obsessive attack. In fact, her screams imply that she is not only alive but awake during her painful defilement. However, because the narrator does not remember this scene, it is present only by implication. Instead, she becomes “thoroughly subjugated throughout this narrative,” which culminates in her defilement and Egaeus’s mental satisfaction (Burke 45). In “the ultimate act of containment,” the young woman is disallowed from expressing her own point of view on her sickness, her own self-perception, or her refusal to be violently objectified by her cousin (Hayes 4). The silencing of Berenice functions as a device to prevent her impediment on the centric psychological analysis and narrative of Egaeus, underscoring her objectification. As the receiver of Egaeus’s violent actions, she serves

as a demonstration of the effects of his mental illness. The story includes her to reflect and magnify him. Poe scholar Jacqueline Doyle concludes this topic succinctly by noting that “it remains for Poe’s feminine readers to account for Berenice’s dismemberment and to articulate her silent text” (19). Berenice’s story of sickness and tragedy is unmistakably present in a silent narrative that is never explicitly told.

Berenice is a popular example of the “reduced” and “silent” woman in Edgar Allen Poe’s work due to the haunting imagery of her dismemberment and her relation to her crazed pursuer. However, this trend of limited characterization and function can be seen in more of Poe’s short stories, such as “The Oval Portrait” and “The Oblong Box.” These tales also feature a detrimental objectification of the female body, in which the male narrator attempts to possess her physical form.

In “The Oval Portrait,” a newlywed artist objectifies his wife by attempting to contain her within a painting. The bride is described as “a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee . . . hating only the Art which was her rival” (Poe, “Oval” 483). By equating the living woman with art, an abstract concept as her “rival,” the artist objectifies his wife as only an image to be recreated and possessed. The wife becomes a timelessly beautiful object that can and must be contained within the oval frame to which he “reduces” her. Like Berenice, the narrative silences the artist’s wife to set the narrative’s focus on the artist. Although his psyche and obsessive creativity is explored, she is but the means through which this story is told.

“The Oblong Box” presents a well-intended but equally destructive display of possession over the female body. In this tale, the male protagonist destroys himself by refusing to let go of his wife’s corpse, insisting on possessing her body even after death. Cornelius Wyatt brings a mysterious, oblong-shaped box (later revealed to encase his wife’s embalmed corpse) aboard the ship and keeps it in his room, where he secretly sobs over it the into the night (Poe, “Oblong” 646, 650). As an attempt to gain comfort in his grief, he contains her lifeless physical body as a moralized object of relief. Although these actions may be understandable from a grieving widower, the destructive nature of his possession arises when the ship sinks. Wyatt nearly overturns the lifeboat in a frenzy to return to the ship; he then “passe[s], rapidly, several turns of a three-inch rope, first around the box and then around his body,” quickly jumping into the ocean and

“disappearing suddenly, at once and forever” (652). Wyatt’s possession of his wife’s body and his subsequent suicide are attempts at regaining control of his grief-stricken psychological situation, as well as his immediate situation as a widower. His actions are not for her benefit, as she is already dead, but solely to assuage his own conscience and emotional despair. Again, Mrs. Wyatt is not the center of the narrative but merely a plot function by which the story of the male narrator and Mr. Wyatt is relayed. The death and transport of her body catalyze the events of the story, as she is the reason that the scene has occurred in the first place. Mrs. Wyatt cannot physically speak since she is already embalmed in her coffin. Still, her function as a silent woman is similar to the roles of the artist’s wife and Berenice. While Wyatt’s actions are not purposeful like the artist or malevolent like those of Egaeus, the female possession in pursuit of male gratification and its consequences remain present.

Due to the intense and mysterious themes within Poe’s short stories, scholars have analyzed the function of his female characters from several approaches. Nearly 100 years ago, in his article “The Women of Poe’s Poems and Tales,” twentieth-century author and scholar Floyd Stovall wrote, “for Poe, [women] were a continual inspiration, and they always reflect in varying degrees his own personality” (197). More recently, Poe scholar Paul Lewis has deduced that “both the fascination with mystery and the ostentatious authority Poe carried across the genres he worked in can in part be traced back to a failure to reconstruct meaning that followed his mother’s death and subsequent disruptions” (219). Scholars have thoroughly speculated as to how the women in Poe’s life contributed to his writing and female characters, in “Berenice” and in a more general sense. Another more theme-specific view frames Poe’s resurrected and undead women, namely Berenice, as “a masculine projection of womanhood unrestrained by the duty to nurture the male” in the form of the “female monstrous” (Hayes 3). The “female vampire,” who “represents a tension between idealism and materiality,” seeks to associate feminine rebellion as wickedness (Stephanou 46–47). This approach focuses on the function of the female body as a metaphor for punishment and revenge. In failing to satisfy Egaeus, Berenice experiences consumptive illness as punishment but returns from the (perceived) dead to exact revenge on her cousin-fiancé. Such intense and mythological ideas have gained traction in scholarly discussion as a means of explaining the role of Berenice and other women in Poe’s short stories.

Furthermore, a key to continue analyzing Poe's women from a different angle is to consider the dead and undead female body as viewed by the male protagonists of Poe's short stories. By focusing on function rather than characterization, readers will observe the limited description of the feminine apart from physical appearance and desirability to the narrator. This notion underscores the repeated themes of "reduction to body" and "silencing" in relation to female objectification (Papadaki 1). Poe complicity uses the objectification and possession of women to explore the psyche of male characters and advance the story's plot. Berenice has no presented characteristics beyond beautiful, joyful, and sometimes intellectual. She is otherwise not allowed development or personhood outside of the male perception. Instead, she is a plot device, a narrative tool, to advance the male-centric story. Of his writing of female characters, "Poe, rather than creating unique thematic pieces with minute contextual overlap, has, in fact, composed their stories as variations on a central visual and emotional ideal. . . . The traits of the women in question show remarkable consistency" (Webb 215). The noticeably recycled attributes of female characters emphasize Poe's disinterest in the female character as an autonomous person. Although Poe often tells a similar story involving a male narrator who loves a woman and loses her, he varies the male narrators in personality and physicality. The woman, flat and complacent, is physically destroyed, while the narrative extrapolates the man's experience with her destruction. Such concepts appear in the three short stories, "Berenice," "The Oval Portrait," and "The Oblong Box," in which each of the female protagonists remains silent while being used to highlight the characteristics and receive the actions of the male protagonists. Berenice exists to be a victim of Egaeus's obsession; the artist's wife dies to show the artist's prioritization of art over life; Mrs. Wyatt's corpse is mentioned only to advance the plot culminating in Mr. Wyatt's suicide.

Poe objectifies his female characters by using them as vessels to tell an overarchingly male narrative. In treating female characters, Poe creates "an inappropriate aesthetic appropriation of the beloved," continuing that "the dying woman in Poe embodies both an aesthetic crisis . . . as well as a crisis of interpretation" (Webb 216). The destruction of women in Poe's stories asks both the characters and the audience to view the dying woman in an artistic light as a representation of moral shortcomings and a lesson to be learned. Stories such as these showcase "artistic constructions that use

women to disguise death,” femininity becoming a blank page on which to write a male tragedy, and Poe’s refusal to “abandon” this method of writing (Kot 1). In his repeated use of the feminine body as a vessel for fatality, Poe “reduces” his women. Within literature, readers must continue to interpret the function of female characters within the text. Still, it is important to consider the reality of women as figures outside of the text—as real people with feelings, lives, and stories. In the bigger picture, Poe’s literary approach applies to our reality. When viewing a female narrative in history, literature, or art, it is vital to determine who is telling her story. Does the narrator only depict a body or does the narrator hear her voice?

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## Nothingness, Depravity, and the Necessity for Christian Charity: Tragedy and Hope in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Ian Hearn

When Lear demands that Cordelia wax eloquently of her love for him, her reply of “nothing, my lord” (Shakespeare 1.1.88) carries deeper connotations within their society than it does today. In ancient Britain, the word “nothing” functioned as a disempowering word to describe the lack of agency among women, specifically among daughters who were heirs to a fortune or throne (Sheerin 805). “Nothingness” was intrinsically connected to ideas of agency, inheritance, and geography (805). In *King Lear*, the three most redeeming characters in the play—Cordelia, the Earl of Kent, and the fool—are each “nothings,” all deprived of some fortune or agency. Yet, even in their deprived states, they continue to exercise kindness toward those who have wronged them. In interpreting *King Lear*, secular scholarship cannot account for this fact. Although many scholars capitalize on the play’s commentary of the hopeless human condition (for example, Andrews, Sears), they fail to present a solution—or at least a course of action—for unity and harmony to exist within the play. It is precisely the characters’ continued adherence to good that allows for a meaningful analysis of *King Lear*. Cordelia, Kent, and the fool have come to recognize their own nothingness and respond accordingly in a way that is best described as Christian charity, the “unselfish love of one’s fellowmen” (“Charity”). Thus, the quality of nothingness, naturally disempowering, is reversed by Shakespeare: in *King Lear*, the characters who first recognize

their depravity are the real “somethings”—the only people possessing any hope of living in harmony in an impoverished world.

Cordelia, Kent, and the fool embody nothingness in different ways, each becoming destitute, disinherited, or banished in some way. By virtue of her womanhood, Cordelia is already a nothing figure in society, yet in the moment she is refused any inheritance and disowned by her father she assumes her most deprived condition (Shakespeare 1.1.256–57). Kent, Lear’s loyal nobleman (1.1.183–84), is also banished when he seeks to warn Lear of his rashness in refusing Cordelia her inheritance (1.1.150–55). He loses his fortune, position in the kingdom, and agency with the king, and thus he becomes nothing. The fool, whose warnings and reprimands Lear will not heed, embodies Jesus’ words in John 4.44 that “a prophet hath no honor in his own country” (*King James Bible*). He retains neither agency nor influence among those whom he is most called to minister to and remains “isolated by his profession,” possessing a singular and seemingly meaningless vocation (Jayne 285). Thus, all three of these characters assume a status of nothingness, which renders them incapable in the eyes of society.

To understand the significance of the redemptive roles of Cordelia, Kent, and the fool, Christian charity needs to be established. Secular definitions of *charity* often focus on a selfless, intense, empathetic love exercised by humans toward one another. Biblical charity, however, is redemptive by nature, signifying “the reciprocal love between God and man that is made manifest in unselfish love of one’s fellow men” (“Charity”). A proper expression of Christian charity, then, first requires a recognition of human depravity and God’s unconditional love toward humankind before one seeks to emulate God’s love toward others.

In *Charity and Religion in Medieval Europe*, James Brodman writes that notions of charity in ancient Britain centered not around the “monastic practice of fraternal love within a closed community, but rather a sense of obligation that individuals and entire communities felt towards individuals designated as ‘miserable persons,’—namely, the poor, the sick, the crippled, orphans, widows, pilgrims, and anyone else who was seen as weak, vulnerable, or degraded” (10). Exercising Christian charity required a recognition of the nothings of society, and anyone who extended aid toward them contained religious motive, whether it was a selfless love for others or a selfish concern with one’s own destiny (10). Cordelia, Kent, and the fool, having understood their own human depravity, continue to practice charity, and



it is this distinction that separates them from others who do not practice charity at all, or who merely practice it for their own spiritual merit.

Each character reenacts Christian charity in a different way. Cordelia, the youngest of Lear's three daughters, is the character that most embodies virtue and charity throughout the play. Her refusal to "heave her heart into [her] mouth" (Shakespeare 1.1.93) is significant because, if she were to adhere to her father's wishes, she would ultimately be doing him a disservice by presenting him with a false view of love. In the patriarchally structured society in which they existed, Lear demonstrates that he imagines love to stem from *quid pro quo* (something for something). Yet Cordelia's love for Lear is not contingent on his love for her, nor the material possessions he offers her. She is the most wronged of all characters in the play, yet she still forgives, which renders her love redemptive. Her charity is foreshadowed in the moments before she leaves the kingdom, banished by her father, and as she tells her sisters that she is "most loath to call your faults as they are named" (1.1.226–27). Her forgiveness is manifest most clearly in the closing scenes of the play where she becomes reunited with Lear. In response to Lear's words that "your sisters . . . have done me wrong . . . you have some cause, they have not," Cordelia replies "No cause, no cause" (4.7.76–80). These soothing words hearken to her first reply to her father of nothing. Her depravity was previously highlighted; now, by affirming her father, she demonstrates she possesses the agency to comfort and to heal.

The Earl of Kent's exercise of charity is exhibited in his advocacy of Cordelia and her place in the kingdom. In ancient Britain, inheritances were divided in one of two principal ways: through primogeniture or through Kentish gavelkind. Primogeniture was the more customary practice, when a father bequeathed much, if not all, of his inheritance to his eldest son ("Primogeniture and Ultimogeniture"). Thus, primogeniture was associated with notions of sovereignty and kingship; succession to the throne arose more from one's societal status and gender than matters of character, capability, or qualities of individual merit. Kentish gavelkind, however, was intrinsically tied to ideas of partible inheritance ("Kent"). Gavelkind demanded that an inheritance be divided equally between heirs or be bequeathed to a particular child or individual who exhibited "prosperity, courage, and individual spirit" (Cooley 332). These means of dividing inheritances are particularly important because the Earl of Kent is named after one county in England, Kent, in which the practice

of gavelkind still continued. In "Kent and Primogeniture and King Lear," Cooley states that this reality immediately invokes matters of partibility and Kentish gavelkind (331). Thus, when Kent advocates for Cordelia, he is advocating not only for justice but also for the practice of gavelkind: "Reserve thy state, and in thy best consideration check this hideous rashness," he tells Lear (Shakespeare 1.1.167-70). By advocating for a practice that elevates a younger, marginalized member of society, Kent is advocating for nothings. Even after he is banished, he returns to Lear and intercedes on Cordelia's behalf, continuing to forward justice and righteousness. His continued charity, despite loss of status, renders him redemptive. As loyal to Lear as Kent is in the play, this loyalty is not paramount; instead, he recognizes the existence of a greater order, and it is this understanding that propels him to exercise charity toward the nothings around him.

Through his vocation and message, the fool also reenacts charity in King Lear. The fool's vocation, as has been noted, is singular; he is isolated, both "by his profession and by his natural intellectual superiority" (Jayne 285). Due to his intellectual and physical isolation, the fool embodies characteristics of a "nothing": a marginalized, unique, and oppressed member of society. Furthermore, he possesses no agency with Lear, to whom he is required by vocation to attend, yet the fool does not allow these hindrances to deter him from delivering his dire warnings to Lear: he is bound by duty to his king, and even when Lear will not hear him, the fool continues to deliver warnings and pronounce messages of doom. This demonstrates that the fool understands the importance of his message to be greater than himself.

The fool's reliance on hilarity, folly, jesting, and other dehumanizing actions proves he understands that he must compromise his own humanity before others to successfully impart his message. In Act 3, during the height of a storm, the fool offers symbols of hilarity in response to Lear's words of "blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" (Shakespeare 3.2.1). He tells the king that "there was never yet a fair woman but she made mouths in a glass," speaking of fair-faced women who make "mouths" and smile into mirrors (3.2.35-36). His words are outlandish and abrupt, in contrast with their no-doubt tattered, wet, unflattering appearances in the stormy weather. It is possible that the fool "was making a few mouths of his own, timed so the audience would laugh at Lear's grief and pain" (Shickman 75-76). "Making mouths was a function of fools"

(76). Such acts on the part of the fool undermined the gravity of his oftendire warnings and caused others to undermine the fool's seriousness and cognitive state.

The fool, however, is far from foolish. Defined by his "natural intellectual superiority" in the play, even an arbitrary reading of *King Lear* will establish his nuanced usage of language and wit (Jayne 285). Why then, does the fool resort to acts that devalue his humanity before others? He recognizes that his warnings to Lear are more important than how the fool is perceived by those around him. Thus, by placing the severity of his message before his own self and others' perception of him, the fool is engaging in an act of degradation, which proves he sees himself in the context of a greater authority than his own king. He makes himself "nothing," so that his messages will be imparted to others. The fool, through degradation of self and estrangement from society, exercises Christian charity by his selfless love of fellow man, helping to further justice and righteousness in the play.

Charity in *King Lear* is an idea that remains necessary for harmony yet remains unattainable without first recognizing one's own "nothingness" and depravity. The characters that carry the most sway in the play, ironically, are the ones most hesitant to submit themselves to any manner of higher order. In "Charity in *King Lear*," Sears Jayne writes that a presiding theme of the play is the "desperate need humans have for each other, and the paradoxical inability to satisfy that need" (277). Later he writes "man cannot live without the love he cannot himself give. . . . Shakespeare makes sure there is no one else to give [love], keeping the play harshly pagan" (287). Jayne's pessimistic view of the play, however, does not account for the way in which Cordelia, Kent, and the fool so selflessly exercise charity. Man cannot love his persecutors, yet they do love. Man cannot reenact charity without grounds to do so, yet they do. Man possesses no reason to forgive his wrongdoers, yet Cordelia forgives. Thus, the charity they show toward those around them must come from within themselves.

In 1 Corinthians 13.2 Paul writes "[If I] have not charity, I am nothing," and here, in a single sentence, *King Lear* is successfully and tragically contextualized. *King Lear* is a tragedy, not because it demonstrates humanity's hopeless efforts to live in harmony with one another, but because it demonstrates that humanity has the opportunity to live in light of a greater good yet refuses to do so. Herein lies the ray of hope in this bleak and otherwise hopeless play of Shakespeare's. There remains for us the hope of harmony

in the destitute world in which we live if we will but turn our faces toward the divine.

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## Eat or Be Eaten: Food, Flesh, and Blood Symbolism in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abigail E. Jones

In *The Merchant of Venice*, food creates community and divides personal, economic, and religious groups. In the play, Shylock becomes the villain when he tries to devour Antonio to feed himself. Because he seeks Antonio's flesh to gorge a long-standing grudge, the issue of food becomes intertwined with the play's complicated symbolism of flesh and blood. The union of flesh and blood represents both family relationships and Christian love in the Eucharist. Through his symbolically cannibalistic desires, Shylock cuts himself off from communal eating and fellowship, which Portia's division of the Eucharist symbolizes.

By refusing to eat with Christians (Shakespeare 1.3.31), Shylock destroys a meal's role in creating community. When he refuses Bassanio's dinner invitation, Shylock argues that Christian food is unholy according to the Christian New Testament: "to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into? I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following. But I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (Shakespeare 1.3.28–32). However, his revulsion is not based on the Mosaic laws forbidding pork. Shylock references the New Testament account of Jesus driving out demons from a man and permitting them to enter a herd of hogs to imply that pork contains the devil (Goldstein 68–69). Shylock cites the Christian scriptures to imply that Christians are eating the devil when eating pork, a Satanic

reversal of the Venetian Catholics' belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist (*Catechism* 346). Shylock's use of scripture is the *first* instance in *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock will point out Christian hypocrisy; here, he uses food to reinforce religious differences rather than fellowship.

Although Shylock refuses to partake in Christian commensality, he desires to feed on Antonio because he thinks Antonio is eating him. Shylock's primary reason for despising Antonio is that "in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (Shakespeare 1.3.37-39). Antonio's actions deprive Shylock of wealth, which Shylock regards as his life—"You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.374). That Shylock views his wealth as his sustenance and therefore as his food explains his desire to "feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (1.3.41). Shakespeare scholar C. L. Barber notes, "the imagery of the money-lender [sic] feeding upon his victims," yet he fails to mention that, from Shylock's perspective, he is the one being fed upon by Antonio in their economic relationship (14). Therefore, Shylock's request for a pound of Antonio's flesh as security for their bond is more than a means of killing Antonio; Shylock is seeking Antonio's flesh so that his revenge may eat it. When Shylock pretends to laugh away the seriousness of the bond by playing up the impossibility of its monetary value, he compares Antonio's flesh to animal meat: "A pound of man's flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats" (1.3.158-60). For Shylock, there is no difference between the physical nourishment of eating animal flesh and the satisfaction of committing symbolic cannibalism by taking Antonio's money or flesh.

Shylock perverts the communal nature of a meal because he sees other people as a source of food. After his first refusal, his decision to accept Bassanio's second invitation to dinner is surprising. Critics view this acceptance as character inconsistency necessary to get Shylock out of the way of Jessica's elopement (Halio 142); however, Shylock is not expressing a desire for fellowship and commensality. As Renaissance scholar Ian McAdam argues, Shylock is characterized by his emotional self-sufficiency rather than his desire for community (100). Once again, his desire is not to eat with other people but to feed upon them: "I am not bid for love—they flatter me—/ But yet I'll go in hate to feed upon / The prodigal Christian" (Shakespeare 2.5.13-15). This is not a meal of fellowship and friendship: Shylock intends to eat his host. Moreover, this is not a metaphor for simple

economic victory: Shylock desires to eat up Antonio's wealth so as to consume Antonio's very self. His description of Antonio as prodigal (2.5.15), another New Testament reference (*English Standard Version*, Luke 15.11–32), reintroduces the context of religious division, specifically concerning the issue of wealth.

The relationship between a person's wealth and emotions is evident from the beginning of the play when Antonio's friends assume his sorrows must stem from concern for his wealth at sea: "I know Antonio / Is sad to think upon his merchandise" (Shakespeare 1.1.39–40). Moreover, although Antonio does deny that his wealth is the cause of his mysterious melancholy, he only asserts this because he is sure that his fortune is safe, entrusted in separate vessels. Second, the association between Shylock and his money is as obvious to the modern reader as it was in Shakespeare's day because Shylock is a moneylender by occupation—one of the ways that Shakespeare uses the Jewish stereotype, even as he problematizes it in other aspects of Shylock's character. Third, Portia is strongly connected with her wealth, but she unites herself and her wealth when she gives Bassanio her ring as a bond: "Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted" (Shakespeare 3.2.166–67). However, the Christians and Shylock handle their money very differently.

Because of the identification of the self with wealth in Venice, what the characters do with their money demonstrates their attitudes toward other people. For the Christians, the exchange of money is a means to show love and liberality, which is most clearly shown through Bassanio and Antonio's relationship (Shakespeare 1.1.154–56). In fact, they are generous to the point of recklessness: Bassanio borrows money despite being deeply in debt, Antonio borrows money to lend to Bassanio, and Portia offers to pay double Antonio's debts despite knowing of him only through her new fiancé. To the Christians, Shylock's moneylending is a trade of love where he gives himself away for profit in a kind of prostitution. However, Shylock defends his claim of Antonio's flesh by pointing out that the Venetians themselves trade in human flesh through their slave trade:

You will answer,

"The slaves are ours." So do I answer you:

The pound of flesh which I demand of him

Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it. (Shakespeare 4.1.97–100)

The Christians cannot answer Shylock's accusation before Portia's intervention. *Merchant* scholar Kiernan Ryan writes that the Venetians' silence in response to these words expresses one of the play's darkest truths: "here is Shylock's irrefutable demonstration that his 'wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous behaviour' is the very foundation and institutionalised norm of Venice" (39). This damning similarity makes Portia's success at the trial confusing. Why does she succeed in denying Shylock possession of Antonio's flesh, which he is rightfully entitled to by law? The answer lies in the significance of blood.

Shylock uses blood as evidence of life and universal humanity. He asserts both his humanity and his right to revenge himself upon Antonio when his use for Antonio's flesh is questioned. He uses blood and food as evidence of his humanity, saying he is "fed with the same food" and that "if you prick us do we not bleed?" (Shakespeare 3.1.50, 53-54). Shylock points out that the Venetian Christians fail to uphold the grace they proclaim and tells them, "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (Shakespeare 3.1.59-60). Shylock "proceeds to show that your Jew is no less than man and as such has a right, not to respect or compassion . . . but to revenge" (Stoll 18). Shylock declares that he will exceed the Christians' teaching and outdo them in revenge, which he accomplishes by distorting the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist in his attempt to eat Antonio.

The metaphor of the flesh and blood union as a symbol of family relationships underlies the later Eucharistic symbolism. The union of flesh and blood is used by characters in the play to describe physical bloodlines and the life-bringing relationship between parents and their children (Shakespeare 2.2.82). Meditating on Jessica's elopement, Shylock cries out, "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" (3.1.29). When the Venetians mock him with coarse jokes, Shylock grimly clarifies, "I say my daughter is my flesh and blood" (3.1.31). Shylock sees his daughter as a living, loving, unified whole although Jessica's elopement indicates her disagreement. The Catholic Eucharist never occurs in the play, nor is it directly mentioned. However, a reference to it always hovers off stage because it combines the symbolism of food and the flesh and blood union. During the Eucharist, Catholics eat bread and wine, which they believe has been miraculously transubstantiated into the body and blood of Jesus Christ (*Catechism* 346, 356). They physically and spiritually unite themselves to Jesus by eating His



body after He gave His life for them; this meal symbolizes their unity with Jesus and His sacrificial love (356). This meal is for the members of the Catholic Church—to unite them with Jesus (352).

Portia's legal technicality in dividing flesh and blood divides the Eucharist symbolically to restrict Shylock, the unbeliever under the law, from the Christians' communion under grace. Renaissance scholar Barbara Lewalski argues that the Shylock-Antonio opposition functions at an allegorical level as a theological confrontation between Judaism and Christianity, the Old Law and the New (331). Shylock rejects the Duke's Christian belief in showing mercy and in hoping to receive mercy because he feels sure the Venetians' law is on his side: "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (Shakespeare 4.1.89). Portia's pleas for mercy are an attempt to evangelize Shylock and persuade him to choose grace rather than trust in the law. Shylock damns himself in the Christian court's eyes by holding to justice and his bond. He constructs his own trap by forbidding anything outside it. Portia merely springs the trap: "This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood. / The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'" (4.1.303–05). Of course, Shylock is unable to cut off Antonio's flesh without shedding his blood; their union cannot be sundered. Nevertheless, under the law, Shylock is only entitled to flesh, not blood. He cannot join in the Eucharistic meal and feed upon Jesus Christ, who, as God, is Life itself and, consequently, can survive being consumed. The Eucharist is the only meal at which the eater does not destroy the eaten; it is the true place of commensality.

When Portia's manipulation of Shylock's legalism defeats him, the Venetian community ostracizes him, even after his forced conversion. Shylock is given exactly what he asks for: flesh, not blood, as it functions in the social-commercial paradigm of Venice. Shylock may continue his moneylending just as the Venetians will continue their slave trade, but he is excluded from the life of the community. Shylock's trust in his own righteousness under the law is overturned as well. The Biblical commandment forbidding the eating of blood goes all the way back to God's covenant with Noah (Goldstein 84). For this reason, by seeking to shed Antonio's blood to feed his revenge, Shylock breaks Jewish Law. Lewalski suggests that Portia's final tactic is to permit the law to demonstrate its own destructiveness (342), which presents a positive perspective of Portia's division. The inherently destructive nature of Shylock's worldview destroys him rather than Portia's machinations.

The actions of the Venetian Catholics cloud the triumph of the Christian principles of love and mercy over Shylock's view of justice. The Venetians' hypocrisy is obvious in the false display of mercy that follows Shylock's legal downfall (Shakespeare 4.1.366). Portia uses the Venetian law condemning to death an alien who seeks to kill a Christian (4.1.344-53) to strip Shylock of his life and wealth. The Duke pretends to be merciful by releasing Shylock from the death penalty and merely gifting his wealth to Antonio (4.1.389-90). Shylock desperately protests that this distinction is meaningless: "You take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.374-75). Antonio's merciful offer to return Shylock's goods is also false because he forces Shylock to divide them between Venice and Jessica (4.1.379-88). The Duke drops all pretense and threatens to take back his pardon if Shylock refuses this tradeoff. Portia has condemned Shylock for choosing justice over mercy, but the Venetians use the law to punish his transgression, and the grace Shylock receives is hollow. "Portia's role, then, has been to use the law to save the law" (Benson 179). The Venetian Christians have saved Antonio's life but have drained away and consumed Shylock's life—his wealth.

What one eats and with whom play a crucial role in drawing personal, commercial, and religious lines, all of which begin to overlap and blur together in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock will not eat with Antonio, indicating that he will not participate in the Christian community on a personal level or in the religious aspect of the Eucharist. Instead, he desires to eat Antonio, which makes eating a kind of self-centered satisfaction rather than an opportunity to act in love. The Eucharistic division of flesh and blood in the trial emphasizes the religious divide between Shylock and the Christians, and it demonstrates the way that Shylock is permitted to participate in the Venetian economy while being cut off from its community.

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## *The Fault in Our Stars* and the Blurring of Worlds

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Hope Koonin

Although John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* is centered around Hazel and Augustus's relationship and experience with illness, a large portion of the young-adult (YA) novel also revolves around Hazel's obsession with Peter Van Houten and his novel *An Imperial Affliction*. Hazel finds his novel deeply authentic to her own experience with cancer and craves an intimate correspondence with the illusive author. Although Van Houten initially reciprocates her attempts to communicate and implies that such a relationship is possible (Green 78), eventually he harshly rebuffs her (192). The dynamic between Hazel and Van Houten could be compared to the relationship between fans of *Stars* and Green from 2012 to 2015, during the height of both his and *Stars*' fame ("John Green"; Miller par. 4). Because readers of *Stars* could resonate deeply with the book's narrative voice and themes, and because Green was unusually interactive with his fans (Maughan par. 7), readers could engage in a reader-author relationship parallel to Hazel's desired relationship with Van Houten. By allowing readers to mirror a YA novel experience in the real world, Green's internet presence before and during *Stars*' fame increased and prolonged the intensity of *Stars*' popularity.

Green's language in *Stars* establishes a voice that, while not always authentically portrayed with the language of a teenager, does authentically portray a teenage mindset. A teenager, Hazel recaps her feelings

about Support Group, narrating, "So Support Group blew, and after a few weeks, I grew to be rather kicking-and-screaming about the whole affair" (Green 6). Analyzing Green's ability to capture an authentic teenage voice, Kathleen Deakin et al. assert that "adolescence means self-consciousness to the level of hyper awareness" (70). Hazel's conversational use of slang "blew," followed by old-fashioned descriptors like "rather" and "affair," mirrors a teenager's self-consciousness and self-awareness of language and tone. Hazel breaks up the style of language to show that, although she cares about not going to Support Group, she is self-conscious of caring too much and self-aware of making the Support Group seem like a larger issue than it actually is. Her narrative decision highlights the dramatic elements to give evidence that she is self-aware of her own perceptions. Hazel's self-consciousness remains evident when, after meeting Augustus, she describes her own physical appearance:

I looked away, suddenly conscious of my myriad insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, and a yellow T-shirt advertising a band I didn't even like anymore. Also my hair: I had this pageboy haircut, and I hadn't even bothered to, like brush it. Furthermore, I had ridiculously fat chipmunked cheeks, a side effect of treatment. (Green 9)

Hazel provides specific details about her clothes, hair, and face, emphasizing that she perceives that she is unattractive. The detailed and encompassing way that she describes herself allows readers to empathize with her as well as rethink their own physical self-perceptions, considering that Augustus begins to pursue Hazel romantically shortly after this description. Deakin et al. point out that the teens in *Stars* also constantly use sarcasm as a combat weapon because "adolescence can be a time of feeling powerless, and nothing evokes the feeling more than having a terminal illness" (73). After narrating the atmosphere of Support Group by describing her leader's cancer story, Hazel interjects, "AND YOU TOO MIGHT BE SO LUCKY!" (5). Hazel's blunt and sarcastic tone gives her freedom to describe her thoughts without alienating readers who have not shared her experience. Because of Hazel's extreme situation with her illness, Green is able to convincingly use extreme descriptions and amplified emotions to describe her frustration and powerlessness. Her intense moods, combined

with her conversational language, make it easier for readers, especially teenage readers, to empathize with her emotions, self-awareness, and experience.

Green evokes an authentic teenage mindset through his continual use of metaphor, poetic language, and wit within dialogue. In choosing to write in first person, Green blurs the line between Hazel's voice and the reader's own self-insertion. This permeable boundary allows the reader to not only discover and empathize with a serious situation but also experience a sense of realistic escapism. This first-person voice is evident in Augustus's confession: "I'm in love with you, and I'm not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things" (Green 153). Augustus speaks with a confidence and eloquence many teenagers do not have, using a grammatically overcomplicated sentence with a double negative in "not in the business of denying." Also, the embellishment of the phrase "simple pleasure" implies Augustus's grasp of the English language, implying his extensive vocabulary and intelligence. The other teenagers in the novel frequently use this level and construct of language: they are presented as confident, intelligent, capable, and sophisticated. By using this elevated language, Green provides a sense of escapism, not by forming an unrealistic world but by tapping into the common teenage desire (Divecha) to be confident, capable, and intelligent or, more generally, to have qualities that cause others, especially adults, to respect them as equals.

Just as readers can connect with *Stars* through Hazel and her language, Hazel connects with *An Imperial Affliction* through the character Anna's circumstances and mindset; however, Hazel's deeper reason for her obsession with the novel comes from her believing that somewhere in the world, an adult understands her. In her mind, Hazel elevates Peter Van Houten above cancer survivors who might have similar experiences to her, calling him her "third best friend" and the only person she knew who "[understood] what it's like to be dying" (Green 13). Hazel maintains a connection with Van Houten that she does not have with her parents. She feels as if she must hold back information or thoughts from her parents to protect them, despite their care for her (116–17). Her parents eventually reveal that they see her the same way, hiding their preparations for life after her death (297). The lack of honesty degrades their ability to understand each other's experiences. Conversely, Hazel actively views Van Houten as a mentor figure, not because of any physical care or relationship but because he appears

to understand her pain (13, 34). Even when Hazel meets Van Houten in person and realizes that his lack of compassion invalidates her idea of him being a trusted mentor (193), her connection with him through his book's language makes her trust him enough to speak honestly and intimately. When he rebuffs her in Amsterdam, Hazel narrates that "he was looking for the most hurtful way to tell the truth, but of course I already knew the truth" (193). Van Houten's desire and Hazel's knowledge are paired; she speaks to him more directly and freely than to any other adult character, treating him as an equal. However, her attempt to connect fails due to his disinterest. Her resulting anger, focusing on his broken promise to answer her questions about his novel (194), highlights a universal disconnection between an adult authority figure and teenager. Either she experiences a lack of feeling understood, like with her parents, or a lack of care and desire to connect, like with Van Houten. Although the distance of this disconnection eventually decreases between Hazel and both adult figures, the distance fails to disappear by the end of the novel completely.

Unlike the adults in Hazel's world, Green's online activities prior to *Stars* present him as a figure who could both care about and understand the teens for whom he writes. Before *Stars*, Green had a large fanbase and internet presence, including a Twitter following of over 1 million and extensive acknowledgment on Tumblr (Trachtenberg); a well-set history of vlogging on YouTube (Kaufman par. 4); and fans who went by a collective community nickname (Burek Pierce 116). He was uncommonly active with his readers and had an uncommonly "vocal" fanbase (Carpenter par. 3). Six months before *Stars* was published, Green announced that he would sign copies for "pre-orders and the entire first-print run" (Trachtenberg par. 5)—more than 100,000 copies (Carpenter par. 6)—leading his then-unpublished novel to hit "No. 1 on Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com" (Trachtenberg par. 1). The *Los Angeles Times* described Green as building his readership "with resonant authenticity" (Carpenter par. 3).

When considering Hazel's own authentic narrative voice, Green's pre-publication popularity presents the idea that many of *Stars'* readers would keep Green, and his personality, in mind while reading the novel, rather than separating the novel from the author. When compared to Hazel's parents, and especially to Van Houten, Green would become an opportunity for fans to imagine the intimate relationship that Hazel desired but ultimately failed to obtain. By writing *Stars* with an authentic voice that fans

would connect to his own and by maintaining a close connection to fans through video and internet activity before and after *Stars* was published, Green presented himself as a caring adult who understood the teenage experience.

Readers' strong response to *Stars* also indicates that the fanbase actively pursued bringing a piece of *Stars*' experience into the real world. In her monograph on *Stars*, Jennifer Burek Pierce reports that a large portion of fans have visited, taken pictures with, reenacted quotes, graffitied, added locks to, and given tourist attraction reviews to a bench in Amsterdam where a specific scene from *Stars*' movie adaptation was filmed (124–27). Burek Pierce argues that these fans who have interacted with the bench “express a belief that the story is something more than a book they’ve read or a movie they’ve seen. . . . The bench is no longer a distant site, but one where they have, for at least a short time, been” (133). She points to the idea that fans can take a fictional story and, by interacting with one of its more realistic elements, decrease the distance enough to merge their experiences with the story and their real-life experiences. Green, then, becomes another avenue to merge two worlds; by interacting with Green’s authentic style through his videos or social media, fans could decrease the distance between Hazel’s world and their own.

Green further influenced the popularity of *Stars* and the activity of the *Stars* fanbase by presenting himself as an adult author who could fulfill the ultimate idealization of the YA mentor role. On Tumblr, a social media platform he used during *Stars*' fame, Green commented on posts that referenced him or *Stars*, even if the poster did not write with the expectation that he would respond (Romano). Because his social media handle, “fish-  
ingboatproceeds,” was not clearly related to his own name, users often did not realize the author of *Stars* had commented until other users pointed it out (Romano). He became so well known for this on the platform that users would post humorous comments with the goal of Green finding their comments and responding; reply posts with comments such as “is that John Green” turned into a popular platform joke (Romano). Because Tumblr had a large teenage audience (Maughan par. 2–3), Green’s abstract interactions presented the idea that he understood teenage culture, just as commenting on individual posts presented the idea that he could interact with his fanbase on a personal and individual level. Due to the anonymous nature of Tumblr (par. 2), and because many users were fans of *Stars*, his



interactions on Tumblr formed a collective personal relationship between himself and the overall platform. Green's authentic and personal style, combined with his willingness to interact with his fans, united the most desirable aspects of Van Houten and Hazel's parents. The mingling of the real-life author, realistic fictional novel, and false closeness of internet presence enabled readers to a sensation of merging the story and the real world, prolonging the fanbase's intensity.

Green's intertwined relationship with *Stars* influenced his eventual drop in popularity and his decision to leave Tumblr. Although Green exhibited the best qualities of *Stars*' authority figures, the relationship between Hazel and her parents fluctuated in a way that Green's presence on the internet could not. Along with the ongoing hesitation to be fully honest with her parents, one of Hazel's main conflicts revolves around her concern that her parents depend on her survival. When Hazel finally confronts her parents, expressing that "I worry that you won't have a life, that you'll sit around here all day with no me to look after" (Green 297), her mom reveals that she has been secretly training to become a social worker. Similarly, although Hazel remains physically dependent on her parents due to her illness, she grows more active and independent in her own choices as far as her capabilities allow (255). Hazel's relationship with her parents grows stronger once they begin to act with more honesty and recognize each member's independence (298, 300). Although Hazel and her parents never completely understand each other, the distance between them has decreased to a comfortable and expected level of disconnection.

Conversely, Green's Tumblr presence remained consistent and involved. Although his presence was initially appreciated, by 2015—three years after *Stars* was published—the Tumblr community had grown so averse to Green that he left the platform ("John Green"). Green's voice had remained the same, but his readers aged and they possibly wanted to feel more independent on the platform meant for their age group. Although a desire for fan independence was certainly not the main factor behind his shift in popularity, it may have been an influence.

Green's involvement with his fans and his narrative presence carved out a distinct place for *Stars* among the popular YA novels during the 2012–2015 era. *Stars* contained all the necessary elements for fans to compare elements of the book with their own experience or, more casually, conflate the concept of the YA authority figure with Green's public

persona. *Stars'* peak fame has ended (Burek Pierce 118; Miller par. 4), but the themes and authenticity of the novel remain. The blurred line between a reader resonating with a book and a reader bringing elements of the book into reality shows the influence that YA novels can have on a reader's desires. Newer readers may have an easier time separating Green's reputation from their reading of *Stars*. Although they may be able to judge the text's strengths with less bias, newer readers will experience a limited version of the peculiar influence of *Stars* on teenage reading culture and the unique relationship between the reader and John Green.

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## Noble Bush: Sex-Positive Feminist Linguistics in Gwerful Mechain's "*Cywydd y Cedor*"

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Miles Latham

From discussions of the body to the double standards levied on women's speech in the workforce and to modern conceptions of sex positivity, gender and language are often inexorably linked. A combination of two disciplines, feminist linguistic theory is an application of feminist theory to linguistics, the study of language (Bucholtz 24). In her article "The Feminist Foundations of Language, Gender, and Sexuality Research," Marie Bucholtz cites Deborah Cameron as the progenitor of feminist linguistics: Cameron "articulat[ed] the theoretical and political grounds for linking language and gender . . . and demonstrat[ed] the deep linguistic roots of feminist questions" (25). Cameron and her contemporaries did indeed spark what Bucholtz calls the "conversation between feminist theory and theories of language" in the mid-1980s. However contemporary feminist linguists are only the most recent voice in a centuries-long conversation, continuing the work of earlier writers like Gwerful Mechain. With her frank, joyful, sex-positive poetry, the fifteenth-century Welsh poet Mechain speaks to the same issues that contemporary feminist linguists wrestle with today.

Mechain's most famous (some would say notorious) poem is "*Cywydd y Cedor*," translated from Welsh by Katie Gramich as "Poem to the Vagina." In the poem, Mechain laments how swiftly men will praise some aspects of femininity while neglecting others: "Every drunken fool of a poet is

quick . . . to sing of the girls of the lands / in fruitless praise all day long” (43). They will praise a girl’s hair, her eyes, and breasts, but “[leave] the middle without praise . . . the snug vagina, clear hope” (43). As an antidote, Mechain provides her own poetic ode to the vagina, with an impressive array of natural metaphors. It is a “superb forest, faultless gift”; a “circle of greeting”; a “thick glade” (44). Mechain’s words also give the vagina royal associations: it is the “fleshy court” and the “sultan of an ode” (43–44). With imagery, the poet presents the vagina as a place of natural beauty and power.

Even on a plain-text level, Mechain’s rallying cry for vaginal appreciation reads like a modern-day feminist linguistic treatise. The word *vagina* can be censored on television; perhaps unsurprisingly, *penis* rarely is (Rosen par. 10). Mechain’s text might be powerful enough to proudly acknowledge and celebrate the vagina’s existence, without couching it in euphemism or using it as a punchline. But her joyous body-positivity goes further.

In the final lines of “Poem to the Vagina,” after she celebrates the vagina as a singular and attractive part of the body, Mechain turns to a slightly different direction and extemporizes on the vagina’s relationship with the penis: “Fragile frieze, fur for a good pair of balls . . . a bush to hold a penis two hands wide” (45). In these lines, Mechain positions the vagina’s capacity for intercourse as another impressive feature of its being. Her other poems, especially her erotic conversations with another medieval Welsh poet Dafydd Llwyd, continue her joyous descriptions of penetrative sex. Katie Gramich’s lyrical translations make this merry tone especially apparent: “So, Dafydd, before you’re pooped, here’s a downy crater / To tame your pecker / Here’s a perch for your peaches . . .” (84). For Mechain, the vagina is inherently beautiful and worthy of praise, but it is also worth celebrating as a site of sexual intercourse. And, even in her discussions of heterosexual intercourse, Mechain brings power to the feminine experience with the use of words like “tame,” emphasizing the speaker’s vagina’s power over the addressed man’s penis.

Modern-day readers may be surprised to learn that Mechain’s poetry was not as scandalous in her time as if published today. In fact, Mechain’s poetry has been discovered in many manuscripts, including some published “long after her lifetime” (Gramich 14), indicating that audiences enjoyed

her poems enough to continue writing them down. She was “known and admired by later Welsh women poets, as indicated by [her] appearance in manuscript compilations such as the ‘Red Book’ of Angharad” (12). What is perceived today as taboo in Mechain’s poetry did not hinder, and perhaps even boosted, her popularity.

Though many sex acts likely existed in the Medieval Era, scholars have struggled to find information confirming the acts’ existence and practice in the available texts, which are largely religious and male-centric. Existing information usually signals that the sex act in question was a social or religious taboo. For example, in the Old Irish Penitential, an eighth-century document outlining required penitence for various sins, Medieval scholar Tom O’Donnell found rare references to medieval oral sex: “Anyone who performs the fornication of the lips penance for four years if it is their first time but if it is usually their custom seven” (par. 5). Like in modern English, *lips* in Old Irish can either refer to the mouth or genitalia, indicating that this passage likely refers to the act of cunnilingus. Its mention in these documents asserts that medieval people were engaging in oral sex, but the stringent repentance required indicates that cunnilingus was indeed a medieval taboo.

A careful reading exposes that Mechain’s “Poem to the Vagina” subtly bucks these social and religious mores. Hidden within her larger call for praise are winking references to another type of pleasure she believes women deserve. The poet complains about male poets’ insufficient flattery: “He sang before nightfall / His tongue giving praise . . . but he leaves the middle without praise” (Mechain 43). Like its English translation *tongue*, the Medieval Welsh word that Mechain chooses, *dafawd*, can refer either to language or the physical body part. The praise Mechain refers to could simply be verbal praise, but the specific use of the tongue as a synecdoche for the man’s praising behavior calls to mind a more physically embodied form of affection. And to carry the synecdoche further, to “[leave] the middle without praise” is to leave the vagina neglected by the tongue. Later in the poem, Mechain also refers to the vagina as the “sour grove . . . full of passion” (45). Considering the praiseful tone of the rest of the poem, “sour” here is likely not a negative description but rather a poetic reference to the vagina’s distinctive piquancy. This sensory detail would have been gained from practice, or at least knowledge, of oral sex. When combined with Mechain’s earlier synecdochic usage of “the tongue,” this interpretation

transforms "Poem to the Vagina" into a piece not only enlightening for our time but also boundary breaking for its own.

Discussions of sex within feminist circles can often be fraught with controversy. Bucholz attributes this discomfort to the "early radical feminist theorizing of heterosexual sex and pornography as inherently violent and oppressive" (36). In sociologist Carol Queen's book *Real Live Nude Girl*, she satirically encapsulates the limitations of anti-sex, anti-porn feminism: This "focus on awful, beyond-the-pale sexuality far overshadows the importance of actual body-to-body sex in their own lives" (32). Though Queen later provides a sardonic diagnosis of anti-sex activists as so obsessed with their crusade that their activism becomes its own form of sexuality, her criticism contains truth. By focusing on potential symbolic interpretations of sex as replicating misogynistic power structures, anti-sex activists ignore the complex multiplicity of real people's sexual desires and experiences. The possibility for feminist expressions of sexuality and desire is thus eclipsed.

Gwerful Mechain's poetry depicts sex acts that could be construed to fit within this narrow misogyny-symbolic theory by focusing solely on heterosexual sex. In her poetic conversation with Dafydd Llwyd, she describes the pleasure of "chiselling a fair lusty maid" (85), conjuring violent associations. In another poem, "A Response to Ieuan Dyfi's Poem on Red Annie," she defends women against a disparaging male poet by asserting that many women are indeed virtuous because they "honour a man" (67). And one could even argue that the lengthy celebration of the vagina's capaciousness is a result of internalized misogyny, a reflection of the belief that women achieve value by being prepared for violent penetrative sex. However, a thorough reading of Mechain's poetry shows the theory of internalized misogyny is far from true. Her focus, although heterosexual, centers a woman's experience of sexuality where the vagina, not the penis, is the central actor. She elides medieval strictures to discuss cunnilingus during a time when women's sexual pleasure was rarely considered. And most importantly, in her poetry, sex is pleasurable and fun, full of noble beauty and joyful humor. In sex-positive feminist theory, Queen tells us that "all kinds of consensual sex are potentially healthy and good" (31). Mechain's poetry shows how consensual sex can be realized, even in sex that some may deem counter to feminist ideals.

Mechain has been questioning the relationship between language, gender, and sexuality for half a millennium. From her call for appreciation

and acknowledgement of the vagina in more than just sexual contexts, to her willingness to celebrate cunnilingus and women's sexual pleasure, to her sex-positive depictions of heterosexual intercourse, Mechain's poetry may be some of the earliest feminist linguistic theory. Even today, her poetry has powerful political resonance, both as a rallying cry for freer discussion of the vagina and as a sex-positive lesson in joyful pleasure for the feminist cause.

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## Insider or Outsider? Agency and Self-Perspective in Shakespeare's *Richard II*

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Sydney Logsdon

Throughout *Richard II*, William Shakespeare explores the conflicts created in elite medieval English society as nobles struggle to gain and maintain power. The system in place for royals and their kinsmen to perform their noble duties allows for certain exceptions to the rules that monitor both the functioning of everyday society and the interplay between the Christian religion and royal power. Due to the multitude of factors and viewpoints at play, the boundary between what is acceptable behavior by a noble and what is not is often blurred. Therefore, against conventional wisdom, the concepts of “insider” and “outsider” in *Richard II* are very fluid and often rely heavily upon the self-knowledge of the character in question. In the cases of Richard and Bolingbroke, both of whom exemplify qualities of outsiders at various points throughout the play, the perceptions they have of themselves in relation to the rest of society drive them to act outside of social norms—thereby making them “outsiders” in the land that raised them.

First, understanding certain characters as outsiders does not necessarily have negative implications. As is often the case—and as this paper will explore—those characters who operate beyond “proper” societal expectations may also have the most direct agency over their own lives. Though this may not always have positive implications (i.e., the eventual death of Richard), labeling one as an “outsider” often allows the character greater

influence over the course of their fate than those who must abide by the political and polite constraints of high society. Neither predictably more nor less fortunate than societal “insiders,” Richard and Bolingbroke instead operate adjacent to the status quo outside which they have the mindset to act.

It is also crucial to define what characterizes an insider to fully understand what places Richard and Bolingbroke outside of this label. In the context of *Richard II*, an insider is a character who seeks to maintain a status quo for their own benefit. By upholding the values and expectations of traditional high society, characters perform the roles into which they were born, which often protects the position they hold. For instance, take the moment in Act II when York chooses to remain neutral between Richard and Bolingbroke for the time being. This decision prevents York from disrupting his personal status quo; he acts within the boundaries of the expectations of others.

The queen provides another, more explicit example of this manicured decision-making. Throughout the play, she performs her misfortunes—longing for her husband, Richard’s imminent deposition—with an almost practiced sadness. In the garden scene, her sorrow fits that of a perfectly mourning queen; all activities remind her of her husband’s misfortune, and spending time wallowing in her despair only strengthens it. She calls the gardener who criticizes Richard’s rule a “wretch,” likening him to Eve attempting to “make a second fall of cursed man” (Shakespeare 3.4.80, 76). Not only does this comparison help her play the role of the loyal wife, but it also allows her to reinforce Richard’s divine right to the throne by equating the fall of the king—chosen to lead by God—to the fall of mankind. Herein lies the motive of her sorrow: She must defend her husband’s status in order to maintain her own. This exemplifies the crucial difference between insiders and outsiders. Insiders like York and the queen have favorable power or status to preserve. Outsiders like Richard and Bolingbroke are doomed regardless of their status. Their perspectives of their own selves result in their respective downfalls while also providing them the necessary agency and willpower to defend themselves outside of traditional expectations.

In Richard’s case, his outsider status is cemented before the action of the play begins. His defense as he loses power centers on both his perception of himself and on how Bolingbroke fits into his own view of the world.

Even before his deposition, when he receives signs that Bolingbroke may attempt to overthrow him, Richard begins to label him as his equal verbally. "What says King Bolingbroke?" he asks Northumberland only moments after musing upon everything he will lose when stripped of his title (Shakespeare 3.3.172):

What must the King do now? Must he submit?  
The King shall do it. Must he be deposed?  
The King shall be contented. Must he lose  
The name of king? a God's name, let it go. (3.3.142–45)

By speaking these two phrases within the same monologue, Richard subtly implicates Bolingbroke to the same fate he faces. The latter passage and the lines that follow it present kingliness as a position of loss. When rulers are overthrown, they suffer a fall from a greater height than anyone else in the country, and by becoming king, Bolingbroke is liable to put himself in a position similar to Richard's, which builds tension between Richard and the insider status perceived to be associated with kingship. A true insider, as seen in the cases of York and the Queen, benefits from maintaining the appearance of the status quo. Though Richard would obviously prefer to retain his leadership position, he still needs to promote a vision of leadership wherein the king is not the untouchable, wholly dignified person that history has determined necessary. If he is overthrown by Bolingbroke, this image would destabilize the view high society has of their king, and if he retains his power, he benefits both by appearing humble and by delegitimizing long-held beliefs about what a proper king should be. From Richard's perspective, as a societal outsider, he needs to disrupt expectations in order to maintain some semblance of power and legitimacy.

In the same scene, Richard cries out, "O that I were as great / As is my grief, or lesser than my name!" (Shakespeare 3.3.135–36). Here, he invokes his (soon-to-be-lost) status and equates it with his so-called grief. However, this is not the first time he is confronted with the news of Bolingbroke's rebellion and potential usurpation; he has had time to adjust to this information and compose himself. Therefore, this line, along with much of his dramatics in this scene and throughout the rest of the play, may be read as self-aware melodrama. His exclamation, use of the word "great," and comparison of his grief to the magnitude of his power add hyperbolic overtones

to his speech. His exclamation mirrors his actual response to Bolingbroke's return, as shown in Act III, Scene 2. At the start of the scene, he displays a boastful attitude, acutely expressed by the following passage:

For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed  
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
A glorious angel; then, if angels fight,  
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right. (3.2.58–62)

However, Richard's confidence is quickly replaced with fear when Richard realizes that all his soldiers have abandoned him. His tone then becomes that of a man trying to appear untroubled:

I had forgot myself: am I not King?  
Awake, though coward majesty! Thou sleepest.  
Is not the King's name twenty thousand names?  
Arm, arm, my name! a puny subject strikes  
At thy great glory. (3.2.83–87)

Here, he still calls himself "great," but his worry diminishes this defense. Despite his fear, the one aspect of Richard's persona that remains is his sense of irony, which carries through the remainder of the scene. He defends himself with sarcasm because he unabashedly believes himself to be in the right, and he loses no substantial confidence in spirit at the threat of his title, only respect from others. In this way, his own perspective of himself determines his character, not what others think of him. Maintaining a "proper" outward image is not his first concern, which makes him an outsider compared to the rest of the players.

Similar to Richard, Bolingbroke retains an outsider status, though he claims to be more representative of the will of the nation. His first priority is satisfying his own personal motives, which inherently do not align with the status quo. Though he often remains agreeable with those on his side, his self-importance comes through in his speech during moments throughout the play. One such instance immediately occurs before he confronts Richard for the first time since his banishment and compares their rivalry to the clash of fire and water. In this passage, Bolingbroke at first

speaks strongly, emphatically stating that he and Richard “should meet / With no less terror than the elements,” calling their clash a “thund’ring shock” capable of tearing the heavens apart (Shakespeare 3.3.53). Yet, he quickly backs off, softening his stance by calling himself “the yielding water” (3.3.57). He will allow Richard to burn himself out without providing any aid because Bolingbroke’s focus—or so he claims it to be—will be ruling the nation responsibly. This sudden tonal switch from commanding to “yielding” (or vice versa) is common in Bolingbroke’s monologues; in fact, it happens earlier in the same speech:

Even at his feet to lay my arms and power,  
Provided that my banishment repealed,  
And lands restored again be freely granted;  
If not, I’ll use the advantage of my power,  
And lay the summer’s dust with showers of blood  
Rained from the wounds of slaughtered Englishmen. (3.3.38–43)

Once again, Bolingbroke’s tone takes a sharp turn in the fourth line of the passage, as he shifts from simply expressing his desires to threatening to massacre the nation if he does not get what he wants. This ever-changing tone indicates a character too blinded by his own end goal to focus on how others perceive him—in other words, an outsider.

Consequently, the motivation to achieve ends that broadly defy social expectations connect Richard and Bolingbroke. The moment that best encapsulates their similar struggles as outsiders is the Westminster scene, in which the kingship transfers between the two men. As previously explained, the tone Richard adopts when he begins to lose his hold on the kingship shifts from a demanding stance to a more despondent, ironic one. He proclaims, “God save the King! Will no man say ‘Amen’? / Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, amen. / God save the King although I be not he,” upon entering Westminster to hand over the crown (Shakespeare 4.1.172–74). A few moments later, he instructs Bolingbroke, “Give me the crown. / Here, cousin, seize the crown. Here, cousin, / On this side my hand, and on that side yours” (4.1.180–82). Both of these remarks convey an air of sarcasm and feigned indifference. The first shows Richard stalling for time by commenting on the absurdity he finds in his situation. The second finds him commanding Bolingbroke for the final time, extracting

what little control he can from a scene where he is nearly powerless. Neither of these is the dignified response one would expect from a king endowed with a divine right to the throne. Though in the process of being removed from power, Richard has every reason to retain his dignity because it would reaffirm others' doubts about Bolingbroke being the rightful ruler. Instead, he chooses to make the situation more drawn-out and theatrical than it already is in an attempt to reinforce his own perspective on the situation.

At the same time that Richard is losing his last grip on insider status, Bolingbroke is getting his first chance at it since his banishment, as noted by the reference to the well that Richard makes in lines 183 to 188. However, according to Georgiana Nicoară in "*Speculum Speculorum*: Kingship and Selfhood in Shakespeare's *King Richard II*," he cannot give what he never had in the first place. What Richard lacks in proper authority, Bolingbroke lacks in divine right (119). The first never had a proper kingship; therefore, he cannot hand one over. This lack contributes to Bolingbroke's inability to achieve insider status. He does not convey much emotion throughout the scene, with most of his speech coming in short, direct lines. Still, this expresses a sense of curtness in his tone, showing Bolingbroke is not concerned about a graceful transition of power. Rather, he—and Richard—are more concerned about upholding the extremes of their self-perceived selfhoods than maintaining the status quo.

Nicoară's interpretation of this scene lends itself to reading the Westminster scene as the epitome of the portrayal of outsider status in *Richard II*. "*Speculum Speculorum*" focuses on the symbolism of Richard's request for a mirror after losing his title. The mirror, thought of in medieval Christian texts to be a platform for viewing one's "resemblance to the divine," is expected to show Richard both "his inner and outer image" (Nicoară 122). Richard seeks this comfort after his deposition because he hopes to see an unchanged image in his reflection. However, as Nicoară states, "it is impossible to remove kingship and preserve an intact selfhood" (124). In essence, the "intact selfhood" is the insider status that Richard seeks but continuously fails to achieve. Though insider status was never something he had in the first place, when he looks in the mirror, he hopes to see a king who fits the expectations he has never met. In this way, his perspective on his personhood is both warped and entirely incapable of meeting the demands of the role. Richard's entire kingship is an outsider performing the role of an insider.

Both Bolingbroke and Richard face this inherent issue. For Bolingbroke, the moment he is made a literal outsider via his banishment, he becomes permanently fixed as a societal outsider. There is no way for him to reclaim his inheritance or overthrow the king without severely disrupting the ruling social order. Bolingbroke's decision to return to England, based on his own self-interest, forces him into an outsider position for the rest of his life. As for Richard, due to the circumstances of his unconventional kingship, he was doomed to be working against societal norms for his entire reign. Both of these factors place Richard and Bolingbroke at the extremes of high society. They were willing to defy the status quo to serve their own warped self-perspectives. Their outsider status promotes a greater sense of agency in opposition to those who challenge or disrespect their authority, ultimately making them weaker, less reliable leaders in the process.

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## Blood, Sex, and Tears: The Role of Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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Kara Katherine Mauser

From a male perspective, the goal of sex has not always been to evoke pleasure for both parties. Even as early as the eighteenth century, violence toward women, including rape, was heavily romanticized as an erotic experience. Eroticizing sexual violence plays heavily into the assigned societal gender roles of men and women, with “poor weak women” needing “brave earnest men,” as described by Bram Stoker in his most popular novel, *Dracula* (286). This paper will dissect how the long-standing gender expectations of men in power and women in submission surface in *Dracula* by Stoker’s implementation of horror and, furthermore, how the societal acceptance and perpetuation of these standards have directly harmed the female community. Victorian-Era standards of sexual intercourse contribute to the romanticization of rape in *Dracula*, which establishes and defines power differences between characters of opposite genders.

Although not widely discussed due to its lewd nature, rape has been and continues to be heavily romanticized. However, the idea that sexual violence toward women is erotic stems from an androcentric world. In “Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women,” John Darling and Maaïke Van de Pijpekamp use a feminist lens to introduce Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), one of the most influential philosophers in the realm of progressive education. Despite his liberal stance on equal access to education for all, Rousseau “legitimises female subjection



to male sexual advances as a form of punishment” while defending “men who ignore women’s refusal to have sex” (117). Moreover, Rousseau envisions clear and distinct gender roles between women and men in which “[t]he man should be strong and active,” whereas “the woman should be weak and passive” (118). Such a distinct word choice illuminates Rousseau’s expectation that woman be “weak” and “passive” during sexual intercourse, so the man feels he has strength to overpower his partner. Certainly, total male domination correlates with male arousal when considering the stance of such a persuasive philosopher.

Domination often takes the form of physical control over a woman’s body. Rousseau expects the man to have more control than the woman during sex, which is evident when he writes that “the relationship between the sexes is conceived primarily in terms of control” (Darling and Van de Pijpekamp 125). Rousseau’s phrasing unearths the unsettling sentiment that a man must overpower a woman to fulfill his masculine role, disregarding the woman’s sexual pleasure in the process. Based upon Rousseau’s assertions, the female role is to be passive and submissive. He believes that “the cultivation of sexual modesty and delicacy in a woman” is their inherent role; however, this mindset “results in an argument that looks like a classic rationalisation of rape” (127). Darling and Van de Pijpekamp reinforce their argument by commenting, “Here we see a classic male fantasy resurfacing: the female offers little resistance to the male’s designs” (129). They state that Rousseau fully believes the “erotic . . . [is] associated with [the] punitive” (130), and their research demonstrates that the domination and control of women in a sexual context has been a fundamental value passed down for generations. Therein lies a more relevant topic of discussion: How did these innate concepts look in the context of the Victorian Era?

Victorian scholar Kim Stevenson reports that narratives in the Victorian Era (1837–1901) romanticized sexual violence; both of her articles—“Unearthing the Realities of Rape: Utilising Victorian Newspaper Reportage to Fill in the Contextual Gaps” and “She Got Past Knowing Herself and Didn’t Know How Many There Were: Uncovering the Gendered Brutality of Gang Rapes in Victorian England”—dissect the prevalent eroticism of violence toward females, which has been present for centuries. Stevenson’s research reveals that “the official record has made no attempt

to reflect the wider socio-cultural contexts in which such assaults were perceived"; however, she proposes a definite "wider social perspective on rape and sexual assaults" (Stevenson, "Unearthing the Realities" 407). In later research, she substantiates her claim with "the use of threats and 'force' against the victim's will" to reflect on "Victorian expectations of women fighting back to maintain their honour" (Stevenson, "She Got Past" 6-7). Her research demonstrates that a woman's role in Victorian society was not only to please a man but also to submit to his forceful domination.

Stevenson furthers her research on this androcentric viewpoint by applying it to the social culture of accepted intercourse; that is, "the law [at this time] increasingly stigmatized and 'civilized' long accepted modes of male behavior" ("She Got Past" 9), another point when a man could overpower a woman sexually without repercussions. Male figures predominantly influenced the Victorian Era; thus, the law itself conformed to male-dominated values. As a result, as Stevenson found, the act of rape was a "physical violation [that] seemed to represent the epitome—or extreme—of absolute masculine domination over absolute feminine submission" (16), and it would be glamourized as the ultimate domination for a male perpetrator. Stevenson acknowledges that "we live in an uncompromisingly violent society" (10), and as a result, the man's role in intercourse—control and domination—have stayed present in many forms.

Violence against women, and specifically per their sexuality, are a normal part of culture (Burger 202), reports art historian Stacy Burger in *The Female Body in Performance: Themes of Beauty, Body Image, Identity, and Violence*. She supports her argument in finding that "a deep preference for violence over pleasure characterizes the very foundations of Judeo-Christian traditions" (203) and continues, further arguing that "violence is viewed as innate to humans, as inevitable, even *erotic*" (203; emphasis added). As a result, violence toward women is romanticized, even arousing, when addressed through a sexual lens, and through the context presented on an "equat[ion of] sex and violence" (207), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* adds horror to the ideology of sex and violence to intensify the violent nature of rape.

By romanticizing violence toward women, especially when evoking male eroticism, Stoker palpably intensifies the reality of violence toward women and society's acceptance to shed light on the horror of the collective idea. He first implements this idea in the sexual nature of the weird sisters' advance on Jonathan, who describes one of the sisters' smells as,

"[s]weet it was . . . but with a bitter underlying the sweet . . . as one smells in blood" (42). Stoker builds upon the relationship of the sister's scent and blood when Jonathan expresses feeling a "wicked, burning desire that [the sister] would kiss me with those red lips" (42). The distinct phrasing of these two examples demonstrates that the scent of blood on the weird sisters arouses Jonathan, signifying a grotesque sexual arousal from the presence of the scent of blood and encouraging readers to conclude that Jonathan craves a level of violence that would draw blood during a sexual encounter.

In this context, blood may be used as a metonym for the erotic nature of violence toward women; however, Jonathan's intense fear must be considered as working in tandem with his arousal. Jonathan is "afraid to raise his eyelids" (Stoker 42) and the sisters possess a "voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive" (42); as a result, he fully submits himself in a state of "languorous ecstasy" (43). Part of the horror in this moment exists in the intensity of this abnormal but hypnotic sexual pull. Jonathan cannot overcome his intense sexual desire, which leaves him to submit only to the weird sisters. Here, Stoker reverses the direction of the violence to redirect it toward the male. The underlying violence is familiar to Jonathan; however, the reversal of who perpetuates the violence creates an uncanny effect, not only intensifying the horror implemented in the novel but also forcing readers to re-examine if violence continues to be erotic when gender roles are reversed.

Mina's encounter with the Count (Stoker 247) allows readers insight into the intense violence experienced by women throughout *Dracula*. After Van Helsing realizes Mina is in danger, he quickly breaks down the door to her room and finds the Count's "right hand grip[ping] her by the back of the neck, *forcing her face down* on his bosom. [Mina's] white nightdress was smeared with blood. . . . The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child *forcing* a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink" (247; emphasis added). The word "forcing" occurs twice to describe the Count's movements and to demonstrate that the Count's is completely dominating Mina. The blood covering her nightdress speaks to the violence of his actions. If blood is a metonym for sexual violence and the Count is *forcing* Mina to drink his blood, he is forcing her to engage in activity against her will and metaphorically subjecting her to an unwanted act of sexual violence. *Dracula* once more brings forth the rampant social

normality that depicts sexual violence as an eroticism rather than as the violation of a woman.

The terror and grief that Mina experiences following the Count's attack (Stoker 247) is not abnormal, when considering its violent nature. Her "eyes were mad with terror" (247), and following this description, she holds up her "poor crushed hands [in front of her face], which bore on their whiteness the red mark of the Count's terrible grip, and from behind them came a desolate wail which made the terrible scream seem only the quick expression of an endless grief" (247). Mina's line is intense, showing the effects of the horror Stoker strives to implement within *Dracula*. The scene does not conform to the idea that sexual violence is accepted and arousing; contrarily, it presents a hysterical Mina falling apart as soon as her attacker flees the scene. Although forcing a woman into submission may be familiar in written works, Stoker chooses to implement the uncanny by having Mina forced into submission *for the purpose* of inflicting violence on the Count. Stoker strives to emphasize Mina's intense terror by creating a horrific scene in which the Count craves violence to satisfy himself. As heinous as this brutality is, readers may wonder when this violence will satisfy the male counterpart; this point is the same at which a man can reach "absolute masculine domination over absolute feminine submission" (Stevenson, "She Got Past" 7).

Readers observe an intense level of sexualized violence most clearly during Lucy's murder when she is an undead creature (Stoker 192). Arthur is tasked with killing Lucy, which is fitting because of her betrothal to him. When he finally drives the stake into her heart, the vulgar description of her murder reads,

The Thing in the coffin writhed, and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions. The sharp white teeth clamped together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. (192)

That Stoker chooses to depict Lucy's murder in a way that mirrors a violent orgasm is no coincidence. He specifically describes the object used to take

her life as a stake (which is used as a penetrator that would correlate to penetration during sex) that drives “deeper and deeper” until he completes his task (PAGE)—literally murder, but metaphorically an orgasm. This sexual metaphor is mirrored in Cristopher Craft’s “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” when Craft writes that this instance is “the novel’s real—and the woman’s only—climax, its most violent and misogynistic moment” (455). Craft speaks to the level of violence as a direct attack on women’s respectability: again, a man both dominating and violating a woman sexually in vulgar and explicit depiction.

Stoker is purposeful in his inclusion of the “hideous, blood-curdling screech” and in his inclusion of the blood in Lucy’s mouth and at the site of her penetration (192). The hideous screech is indicative of Lucy’s agony at being forced into such an intense level of violence, and the areas that contain the blood are those where the male would penetrate the female. Stoker implements an uncanny element in this scene by mixing a familiar female orgasm with an undead creature, creating a horrifying scene that combines both pleasure and pain. However, the violence exceeds any other instance in the book: Lucy does not make it out of this encounter alive. Just as an orgasm is the height of a sexual experience, death is the extent to which violence can be imposed. Stoker equates the most intense point of sexual pleasure to the most intense point of gruesome violence. He essentially argues that the more violent a sexual experience is, the more arousing it is for the male counterpart, and he brings awareness to the prospect that erotic violence will not be satisfied until the point of ultimate completion: murder.

Through each instance of intense violence against the characters in *Dracula*, Stoker confronts and exposes the absurd gender roles surrounding sex during the Victorian Era. He embeds horror, specifically in the form of the uncanny, through different instances of violence against women in his novel. Burger confronts this same revelation when commenting on the severity of our current-day notions of gender roles in sex: “As long as [we continue] to equate sex and violence, no matter what form, the relationships of both men and women will continue to suffer” (207). The horror exposed speaks not only to the heinousness of violence against women in sex but also to its tangible presence of violence in women’s present and past. The characters in this Victorian-Era, fictional setting suffered from the aftermath of violent advances, and they are not alone in their anguish. Stoker creates an uncanny effect in his book to depict elements of familiar

violence in tandem with elements of horror, essentially equating the two. “Violence is viewed as innate to humans, as inevitable, even erotic” (203), and readers gain some insight into why the perversion of these roles have stayed constant for centuries. Unfortunately but inevitably, women will never escape the gender roles in sex imposed on them because sex accompanied with violence (power) is natural to men. The argument that society has imposed these roles on women is incomplete without a pivotal element—that the actions of men have perpetuated this ideology. Society, then, is not the enemy; instead, the humanistic male who equates and connects sex and violence is. Even with Stoker’s testament to how horrific these violent tendencies can be, the unfortunate but undeniable truth is that “as long as fear exists and women are subject to being conquered, rape will continue to exist” (Burger 203). The plight of blood, sex, and tears, demonstrates/conveys/explicates that the struggle to eliminate violence against women in sex is not a small fight but a war that will continue.

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“Though few can reason, all mankind can feel”:  
Hannah More’s Rational and Emotionally  
Authoritative Persuasion in “Slavery”

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Erin O’Keefe

British abolitionists combined modes of persuasion to formulate their arguments against slavery by the fault of British power, and Hannah More achieved the perfect balance of *pathos* and *logos* for persuasion in “Slavery: A Poem,” published in 1788. To fully comprehend what More conveys through her poetical mode of communication, the reader must acknowledge that she is writing to an audience in support of slavery, which was a stationary crutch on which British society leaned. As the popularity of abolitionist efforts increased, so did the output of attacks against the lack of morality and inhumane cruelty of slavery within artistic endeavors. The tension within More’s poem lies in the opposition of her powerful sympathetic, emotional appeals and her logical reasoning, which appears to demean the slaves for whom she advocates. However, the *logos* she uses to persuade reveals her audience: slave-owning or trading white men. More’s consciousness of how she approaches balancing different rationales against slavery sheds light on the calculated persistence required of abolitionists near the turn of the nineteenth century, a time when the popular opinion of a Christian nation would eventually end the age of British enslavement.

In the 1780s, abolitionism was hardly at the height of its public popularity. Most abolitionists were pessimistic at the prospect of slavery ending in Great Britain. According to historian Seymour Drescher, during this decade, “Edmund Burke was discouraged from presenting a plan for

ameliorating slavery by a sense of the power of the West Indian interest and viewed the idea of the abolition of the slave trade as a ‘very chimerical object’” (136). The eighteenth-century opinion reflected that abolitionist efforts were futile and insignificant against the unconquerable obstacle of slavery. Therefore, More was writing in blatant opposition to slavery during a time when abolition was not seen as an achievable prospect, which explains the dramatic, emotional appeals she makes to garner attention. Abolitionists more frequently approached their goals from a position of *pathos* in addition to rationality (148–49).

This tactic was shared and further popularized by the Rational Dissenters, an extra-parliamentary association with political views that “tended to condemn slavery owing to their Protestant commitment to spiritual equality and individual autonomy, combined with Enlightenment notions of liberty and natural rights” (Page 728). Rational Dissenters were opposed to slavery on the grounds that in having slaves, the rights of individualistic powers, by which humans should exist according to Christian belief, are confounded by the act of holding power over another; that is the Rational Dissenters valued the Christian principle that God created all men equal and thought that “as true Christianity spread, so would its qualities of . . . sympathy” (763). This idea sheds light on More’s opening lines, an epigraph from James Thomson’s poem “Liberty,” which reads, “Wrench from Oppression’s hand the iron rod, / And bid the cruel feel the pain they give” (69). With these lines, More implores her pro-slavery audience to obtain sympathy by imagining themselves experiencing the tortures that they have inflicted on others. Thompson’s lines personify “Oppression,” directly addressing the slave owners and traders for who they truly are; he wishes those enslaved could hurt the slave owners and traders who have hurt them.

More’s intended result of including this epigraph from “Liberty” is for supporters of slavery to gain the humane sympathy required to end slavery, which is why, contextually, abolitionists began to “place the terms of debate within the framework of emotion rather than of rational arguments”; emotion proved more impactful to overpower emotions than to appeal to reason (Drescher 149). More uses the emotional tactic through graphic depictions, inciting visceral feelings with her own powerful language and references to other accounts and depictions of slavery. For example, the speaker notes that “. . . millions feel what Oroonoko felt,” associating with Aphra Behn’s lurid depictions of the violence resulting from slavery,



which was meant to invoke sympathy for slaves as well as anger toward slave owners (More line 72). Thompson's powerful excerpt sets the tone for More's opening lines: "If Heaven has into being deigned to call, / Thy light, oh Liberty! to shine on all" (lines 1-2). These opening lines immediately center the poem's Christian association, connecting emotion and power as well as religion and freedom. More begins "Slavery" in agreement with the religious Rational Dissenters; her chosen epigraph and subsequential, religious opening lines prove her intentions of evoking the Christian sympathies necessary for her emotional persuasions.

More's emotional and logical arguments begin to overlap when her religious imagery aligns with her rational reasoning. One moment when the two approaches merge lies within the line, "They are still men, and men should still be free" (More line 140). Slaves are men just as slave owners are men, and *both* parties have a right to freedom and autonomy reflected in their undeniable likeness. More appears to appeal to rationality by stating the logic that all men, no matter their race, have the same physical composition. However, in the later line—"Though few can reason, all mankind can feel" (line 150)—More asks readers to question whether reasoning alone can end slavery. She implies that reason has less to do with abolition than emotion does. She suggests that emotion is a human quality shared by both the free and the enslaved. Emotion has the potential to pull the latter toward emancipation. The emotional argument was a common perspective on enslavement at the time, as reflected in Josiah Wedgewood's "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" medallion, which depicts a slave down on one knee, looking up with pleading eyes (Bindman 79). The influential image and phrase contributed greatly to the goals of abolitionists, as well as the Rational Dissenters, as the coin focuses on the religious ideas of equal brotherhood shared within the Christian church (Page 750). The image was to evoke sympathy for the slave, who appears weak and humble, while also confronting the pro-slavery audience with a rational argument. Influence of this religious argument is prevalent in More's poem and is evident in her question, "What strange offence, what aggravated sin? / They stand convicted of darker skin!" (lines 33-34). These lines use a more logical Christian persuasion (hence the use of "sin"), like Wedgewood does with his medallion, allowing readers to identify the pro-slavery audience to whom More wrote. This logical persuasive technique also exists in the work of Olaudah Equiano, who asks slavers, "Why do you use those

instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another?" (112). In asking these questions, abolitionists are confronting slavery directly and intend to incite guilt in those who support this oppressive and cruel act. These rational appeals support arguments by making slavery appear unethical as well as illogical.

To further her logical appeals, More utilizes pro-slavery rhetoric in her descriptions of slaves. She writes, "Though dark and savage, ignorant and blind, / They claim the common privilege of kind" (lines 137-38). She appeals to the corrupt logic of the people whom she is attacking: slave owners, traders, and the supporters of them. In referring to slaves in such a derogatory way and using racist descriptions of slaves, More speaks to her readers with language that they would use themselves. However, she also uses similar rhetoric later in the poem, describing a slaver as a "white savage" (line 211) and indicating who she thinks truly deserves such berating. Additionally, in saying "kind" instead of "humankind," she allows the word to be read as an adjective or a noun, making evident the relationship between sentimental kindness and human equality, in which using the former could equate the latter. Therefore, she creates two readings of these lines, with one as a racist statement and one as a rational appeal.

More consistently uses imagery of light, which reveals an idealistic world where slaves are free and humanity is closer to God as a result. In a literal sense, light allows a person to see, and More is bidding slavers to see the crimes they have committed against humanity. She asserts logical appeals in which light is associated with rationality, which supports the belief that humans are all the same, no matter the "casual colour of a skin" (line 64). The word "casual" in these lines undermines the visual differences that slavers use as a justification for enslavement. She then wonders at the difference between Britain and Africa asking, "While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light, / Why lies sad Afric quenched in total night?" (lines 17-18), depicting Britain as prosperous and light-filled at the expense of harming or darkening Africa and its native people. By presenting this as a question, she turns the poem onto the reader, pointing fingers at the pro-slavery British who shroud Africa's people in darkness and despair. She continues using the dichotomic image of light and dark throughout the poem, weaving in a religious agenda.

Like the Rational Dissenters, More viewed religion as a means for villainizing the pro-slavery British. She takes advantage of the recognized

association of God with light in Christianity and argues that an African should be allowed to enjoy "freedom's beams which gild his native soil" (line 124) if the British can enjoy freedom. After comparing light and freedom, she connects freedom to Christianity, commanding her readers "To raise the lustre of the Christian name, / And clear the foulest blot that dims its fame" (lines 276–77). In comparing Christianity to light, she emphasizes goodness, which has been blotted out by the evils of enslavement. These lines appear near the end of the poem and read as More's call to action; she warns the readers not to tarnish Christianity and argues for abolitionism. Her persuasion reveals More's understanding that sympathy was not enough because slavers care more about themselves and their reputations than about other people. She uses the name of Christianity (line 276) as a stationary pillar of judgment on which rational arguments can be built.

More also argues in favor of Britain's overall reputation to gather support for the abolitionist movement. She compares Britain to America, pointing out that "the Quakers have emancipated all their slaves throughout America" (75n17) in a note for the lines, "still thy meek spirit in thy flock survives, / Consistent still, *their* doctrines rule their lives" (lines 247–48). In these lines, she refers to Quakers in America, which she identifies in lines earlier mentioning "peaceful Penn" (line 246), and how the Quakers were working to free slaves. Their efforts were not inciting riots but rather were uplifting America's name. More wants the same for Britain, so she appeals to her vain audience by saying that that freeing the slaves will ". . . let the nations know / The liberty she loves she will bestow" (lines 253–54), in which "she" is referring a personified Great Britain. More is inciting a sense of nationalism, saying that, if Britain values liberty as it claims to, then it should grant freedom to all. If the British do not grant freedom, they look hypocritical and weak to other countries. As Drescher explains, "abolitionism became Britain's popular reaffirmation of its status as the world's standard-bearer of liberty, alongside a parallel, but necessarily less national, movement in the new American republic" (165). In this way, More is using this concept of required liberty and comparing Britain to America to warn the pro-slavery public of the adverse effects that slavery has on the Christian name as well as the British name.

Hannah More's "Slavery" challenges its audience to question their actions and calls attention to the cruel, hypocritical, and illogical nature

of slavery. She carefully incorporates arguments against slavery using both moral Christian and rational principles—a common technique of anti-slavery writers of her time (772). Her images of lightness contrast the cruelty of slave owners, who darken the earth with sinful acts. She also includes racist phrases in a pro-slavery voice, which contrasts her pleas for equality and freedom for all. She may have used this warped technique to appeal to the potential benevolence of oppressors in language that they would use. She may also have chosen a poem as her medium because poetry can include persuasive statements within an elusive arrangement of words. More is careful not to limit her poetry to one mode of persuasion but rather combats every argument that a pro-slaver audience could have to favor slavery, with her goal to make cruel slavers look heartless and irrational.

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## Love and Exclusion: Spenser's *Epithalamion*, Medusa, and Roland Barthes

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Charles Mark Pearson

In Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion*, allusions to figures of Graeco-Roman paganism and Biblical poetry reconfigure ancient mythologies into the burgeoning Protestant language of early modern England. References of this sort tend to integrate into the text's celebration of the bride and the joys of the wedding. However, a particular line complicates the poem's vision of the beloved—an association of the bride with “Medusaes mazeful hed” (line 190). Instead of viewing the comparison as a fluke on the part of Spenser (whose poetry often seems meticulously designed to appear unintentional, with its combination of tightly woven technical structures and inconsistent medievalsque spellings), the image reveals mechanisms important to consider in the attempt at a thorough reading of the text. Of the possible interpretations offered by the reference, this essay explores the phrase's depiction of a certain *otherness* of the bride, a distance between lover and beloved, in a poem portraying a ceremony of union.

In the lover-beloved separation, a particularly applicable passage appears in Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Of the book's lexical explorations, the section on “*inconnaissable* / unknowable” (134) provides a way to understand the lover's struggle with the subjective (as in *relating to the human subject*) distance from the beloved:

I am caught in this contradiction: on the one hand, I believe I know the other better than anyone and triumphantly assert my knowledge to the other (“I know you—I’m the only one who really knows you!”); and on the other hand, *I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable*, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other’s origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know. (134; emphasis added)

Like Barthes, Spenser’s work presents the lover realizing a separation from the beloved. With the allusion to the mythological character, Spenser moves beyond typical tropes of early modern love poetry—simply praising the beloved’s chastity or virtue (Spenser, *Epithalamion* line 180)—and acknowledges the beloved’s hiddenness (*Epithalamion* line 190). Inspiring questions regarding love and marriage (and the roles and interconnections of both), the reference to Medusa (line 190) serves to place a distance between bride and groom who are persevering within a rhetoric of union.

In the text surrounding the passage—the tenth and eleventh stanzas of the poem, leading to the ceremony at the altar (Spenser, *Epithalamion* lines 167–203)—the *Epithalamion* focuses on detailing the beloved’s beauty, moving from a focus on the physical (lines 167–80) to that of the spiritual (lines 185–201). Within the tenth stanza, the narrator describes the physical attributes of the bride (lines 167–84), with each line beginning with the word “her” and with four of the lines portraying parts of the beloved’s head: “eyes,” “forehead,” “cheeks,” and “lips” (lines 171–74). The narrator proceeds to imagine “her body” as “a pallace fayre,” glorifying “honors seat and chastities sweet bowre” and pointing to the head of the beloved (lines 178–80). The poem treats her head as the resting place of her mind. Her physical beauty stands as an ornament to the greater beauty of her metaphysical self, connecting the attractive qualities of the corporeal and the incorporeal.

In other instances of Spenser’s poetry, the association between physical and spiritual beauty is more explicit. *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* connects the two in a manner that expresses ideas underlying the *Epithalamion*:

So euery spirit, as it is most pure,  
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,

So it the fairer body doth procure

.....

For of the soule the bodie forme doth take:

For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make. (lines 127–33)

Although the *Epithalamion* neglects to demonstrate this association as explicitly as the *Hymne*, the former plays on the Platonic themes that the latter presents more clearly. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates declares beauty as special among the "celestial forms" due to its visibility (254). "But this is the privilege of beauty," Socrates claims, "that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight" (254–55). For Plato, beauty as a form (beauty-in-itself) shows through instances of physical beauty, particularly as a phenomenon experienced through the sight of beautiful people. Spenser takes this philosophical notion and shapes it for a more convenient poetic use. Whereas Plato says particular physical beauty reflects universal beauty (254), Spenser portrays physical beauty as reflecting particular spiritual beauty, viewing the soul as a piece of the universal (*An Hymne in Honour of Beauty* lines 127–33). Rather than demonstrating the universal primarily, the physical beauty of the beloved shows the beauty of her soul.

In the following stanza (Spenser *Epithalamion* lines 191–92), the narrator shifts from looking at the bride's physical beauty to her spiritual beauty. The language of the eleventh stanza retains the hyperbolic praises of the previous stanza while directing itself more explicitly to the beloved's mind. Within the section, the narrator celebrates both the virtues of the bride ("sweet love and constant chastity" [line 191] and "fayth and comely womened" [line 192]) and her aversion to vice ("base affections do obay / And yeeld their services unto her will" [lines 196–97]). Through this overly admiring rhetoric, the stanza resembles instances of Spenser's poetry that led Karl Marx to deem him "Elizabeth's arse-kissing poet" (qtd. in Norbrook 311). In the dedication to Queen Elizabeth I in Book Six of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser refers to the "vertues" (bk. 6, proem v.8) of his "soueraine Lady Queen": "In whose pure mind, as in a mirror sheene, / It shows, and with her brightnesses doth inflame / The eyes of all, where thereon fixed beene" (proem vi.4–7). The lines express the aforementioned emphasis on physical beauty as a reflection of spiritual beauty, with a similar rhetorical style. The comparison thus far identifies the love poetry Spenser dedicates to his wife (*Epithalamion* lines 191–201) with the flamboyant praises of his

monarch (*The Faerie Queene*, bk. 6, proem i–vii)—praises that he might sing because of professional obligation. This similarity places more significance on the Medusa reference (Spenser, *Epithalamion* line 190) as a means of creating a separation between romantic love and fulfilling the requirements of figures of power. Spenser's introduction of monstrosity interrupts the visualizing mode of reading, giving the love of his bride something missing in the professed love of his Queen.

The striking effect of the Medusa image resides in its danger, the monster arising among seemingly innocuous praises of the bride:

But if ye saw that which no eyes can see  
 The inward beauty of her liuely spright,  
 Garnisht with heauenly gifts of high decree,  
 Much more would ye wonder at that sight,  
 And stand astonisht lyke to those which red  
 Medusaes mazeful hed. (Spenser, *Epithalamion* lines 185–90)

This reference is not the only time the poem deals with monsters, as stanza nineteen creates a long list of ailments and monsters leading to the consummation (lines 334–52). Instead, these images are part of what Spenser scholar Elizabeth Mazzola calls the *Epithalamion*'s attempt to "create and conceal a vacuum" (195), which builds a private space for the lovers within the poem. Medusa's exclusionary function (*Epithalamion* line 190), the impossibility of viewing her without petrification, finds resonance in Barthes' description of the *image*. In a section entitled "*image* / *image*," he describes the lover's place in the image as "not in the scene," the impossibility of inclusion within the image one creates (line 132). "Here then, at last, is the definition of the image," he claims, "of any image: that from which I am excluded" (Barthes 132). According to Barthes, images exclude by nature, and through their creation, the lover builds a vision in which he remains absent and his *presence is impossible*. To illustrate the exclusionary nature of images, he uses the example of taking leave of his friends at a café, imagining (an image of) himself as he walks: "I convert my exclusion into an image" (133). The act of viewing a scene necessitates remaining apart from it—to imagine is to exclude oneself.

In her book *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson posits a view of love poetry with similar qualities to the absence described by Barthes. Carson explains



love poetry, particularly *desire* in love poetry, as built in a “three-part structure” that she calls “triangulation”: composed of the “lover, beloved, and that which comes between them” (19). Without the third component, the poet loses the distance across which to desire—the lack of the beloved that inspires the poet’s unfulfillment. Unlike Barthes’ description of his example of the exclusion of oneself as a “*sad image*” (sad not as a specific reaction but sad insofar as the exclusion is necessarily saddening; 133), Carson avoids categorizing absence as necessarily saddening. For her, desire in love poetry necessitates the absence of the beloved, an empty space allowing the flourishing of the lover’s *eros*. Guiding Barthes’ pain at the image is the ideal of union between lover and beloved: “Dream of total union: everyone says this dream is impossible, and yet it still persists” (228). The mythical union erases the lack, “the absence whose presence is demanded by *eros*”—closes the wound that creates desire (19). Due to this ideal’s elimination of desire, Carson asserts that the lover strives (even if claiming otherwise) to maintain the lack of the beloved, the lover-beloved separation that makes *eros* possible:

On the surface of it, the lover wants the beloved. This, of course, is not really the case. . . . Union would be annihilating. What the lover in this poem needs is to be able to face the beloved and yet not be destroyed, that is, she needs to attain the condition of the “man who listens closely.” (69)

The unifying ideal presents a difficulty for the poetic lover, upsetting the devices that make love poetry possible. In depicting the Christian marriage, Spenser appears to push love poetry into the territory of union that the lover idealizes and poetry thwarts. Marriage as described by Jesus Christ, the husband joining himself “vnto his wife, and they twaine shalbe one flesh” (*Geneva Bible*, Matt. 19.5),<sup>1</sup> plays on the same myth Barthes describes. The tension between the ideal of union and the devices of the love poem becomes a question posited by *Epithalamion*, demonstrating the possibility of poetry during and within the marriage.

Through Spenser’s Medusa, the lover’s absence remains despite the ideal

<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from the 1560 edition of *The Geneva Bible*, the translation with which Spenser would have been familiar.

of union. The image exaggerates its conclusion, transforming the lover's absence in the beloved's virtue into a pronouncement. When the narrator details the physical beauty and "heavenly gifts" of virtue that compose the beloved (*Epithalamion* line 187), he constructs a vision of the bride in a setting populated by herself and the audience—"ye virgins in amaze" (line 181)—that looks upon her: an audience that may include himself but only insofar as the rest of the audience is included. As an image, the reference to "Medusae's mazelful hed" presents an explicit exclusion of the narrator. The petrifying effect of the Gorgon reminds the lover of his own absence within his art.

For the reader, the breakdown of the Platonic imagery instigated by the image draws attention to the language Spenser uses to describe the mythological character. Instead of focusing on Medusa's beauty or lack thereof, the poet chooses the word *mazelful*. Even among his typical array of archaisms and unusual spellings, the word stands out as strange—odd to the modern eye and quite possibly to the historical one, with only two other extant written usages before the year 1600 ("mazelful"). Typically, the word *mazelful* means "bewildering" or "confusing;" however, its structure—a combination of the noun *maze* with the suffix *ful*—expands the possible implications of meaning ("mazelful"). Etymologically, the root stems from the Old English "*\*mæz* or *\*mase*," which evolved into "*amaze*," from which the modern English verb *amaze* derives ("maze"). The noun form of *maze* is, in several ways, applicable to Spenser's use: "a feeling of amazement or perplexity," "a labyrinth," and "a bewildering mass of things (material or immaterial), in which the individual components are difficult to separate or make out" ("maze"). Although each of these definitions holds slightly different connotations, all point toward a difficulty of comprehension—either the labyrinth itself or confusion in the face of the labyrinthine. A reading of *Medusae's mazelful hed* through these senses of *maze* emphasizes the manner in which the mythological woman's power functions through a paralysis caused by an encounter with the unfathomable rather than with the question of the physical beauty of hideousness.

Particularly, the third definition (with its parenthetical "material or immaterial") presents a sense of the word worth exploring in the context of the poem ("maze"). In juxtaposing the bride and Medusa, the *Epithalamion* avoids a direct comparison. The two exist adjacently, connected

by viewers who “stand astonisht” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* line 189) at the *immaterial/spiritual* beauty of the bride in the same way as those who encounter the *material/physical* face of Medusa turn to stone. Instead of producing a beloved/Medusa binary, pitting them against each other as good and bad or safe and dangerous, the poem represents them as occupying two different spaces with similar complexity—a related otherness. Like Barthes’ imitation of the lover who exclaims, “I know you—I’m the only one who really knows you!” (Barthes 134), Spenser attempts to portray the positive qualities of the mind of his beloved while realizing “that the other is impenetrable,” that his descriptions are futile (134). The aspect of the bride so paralyzing to look upon—“inward beauty” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* line 201)—remains out of view in the first place. The narrator acknowledges the hiddenness by referring to her spiritual gifts as “unrevealed pleasures” (line 201), admitting ignorance toward the mind of his bride or, as Barthes puts it, “the loved being ‘in itself’” (134) the beloved as subject. The *mazeful hed* of Medusa leaves viewers frozen in facing the indecipherable. The mind of the beloved—for both Barthes and Spenser—also presents an indecipherability, an unmendable separation between lover and beloved.

Although the lens of Barthes’ lover helps to analyze Spenser’s groom, their respective treatments of the beloved’s otherness disagree at a certain point. Barthes’ lover says of attempting to “solve the riddle of the beloved,” “I wear myself out, I shall never know” (134). He depicts a struggle, an exertion on the lover’s part to understand the beloved. The struggle is not to find selflessness in the lover; he confesses that “I can’t know you’ means ‘I shall never know what you really think of me’” (134), pointing to the egoism of the attempt to understand the beloved. However, Spenser’s groom appears unconcerned with the attempt at *unveiling* his bride’s mind; instead, the groom weaves fantasies about her as a subject—as well as admissions that these *are* fantasies—into the poem’s text.

Here, a return to Carson seems appropriate. Unlike Barthes’ depiction of the lover hopelessly looking—sustained by the desire for fulfillment, the myth of completion—to understand the beloved, Carson posits the love poet’s “recognition” of “Eros as a sweetness made out of absence and pain” (26), a coming to terms with the necessity of lack. According to Carson’s terms, Spenser uses Medusa within a structure of *triangulation*, a way of “keeping the space of desire open and electric” (36). By presenting Medusa’s

unfathomability, the narrator recognizes and maintains a distance from the beloved through the insistence on inaccessibility. The fantasy of the *Epithalamion*, instead of portraying the *fantasy of male possession*, accounts for the beloved's unreachability, spinning visions of her mind while retaining an awareness of their fictionality. In the case of Spenser's groom, the lover remains *lover-as-poet*. He builds an aesthetic fantasy by understanding the subjective distance between himself and his bride. Because he is unwilling to deny the separation, he uses it as a bouncing pad to imagine the interior world of the beloved.

Through the *Epithalamion*, Spenser creates a version of the love poem in a place love poetry tends to stop short: marriage. Often employing a rhetoric of union, Spenser's tendency to foil his own simplicity appears through the allusion to Medusa. Built into the *Epithalamion*'s fantastical renderings of the beloved is self-awareness, a view of the beloved's otherness (or danger) depicted in a moment of textual play. Where this uncloseable space between the narrator and his beloved could lead to a despair of unknowing—such as that of Barthes' lover, or worse, a fantasy of authoritative sexual possession—Spenser turns it into a realm of possibility. The poem creates an ornamental version of this distance, including the triangulation of the subjective separation and the admittance of his vision as his own invention, a fiction separated from the beloved herself. Bringing the narrator to love's end, the *Epithalamion* shows the lover the subjective distance persisting within marriage, a union without union—love in perpetual difference.

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False Impressions: Withholding  
Information and Revelations of Truth  
in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Alora Peters

Jane Austen's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* deals extensively with the conflict between appearance and reality or between falsity and honesty. Heroine Elizabeth Bennet and her family and friends must learn to reconcile the true qualities—or lack thereof—of a man's character with often-misleading first impressions. Their reconciliation is most directly evident in characters Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Mr. George Wickham, both who undergo dramatic changes in Elizabeth's perception. After receiving new, previously withheld information, Elizabeth constructs a completely opposite opinion of both Darcy and Wickham. Wickham, the villain of the story, is dishonest and tells a false narrative, which leads to distress and hardship among the novel's characters and the near destruction of the Bennet sisters' reputations. Darcy, the hero of the story, is strikingly honest even in a difficult situation, leading to his and Elizabeth's happy marriage and the novel's resolution. Elizabeth possesses crucial information about the truth, which she neglects to reveal. The withheld information indirectly leads to the seduction of Elizabeth's own sister. Through the characters of Elizabeth Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and George Wickham, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* shows that prudent revelations of the truth—though frequently difficult—lead to an ultimately better outcome than withholding the truth, which can often lead to suffering.

One of the most pivotal scenes of *Pride and Prejudice* and most influential

revelations of true character is when, following her rejection of his proposal, Elizabeth reads the letter from Darcy that explains his interactions and history with Wickham. Prior to reading Darcy's letter and learning the true version of events, Elizabeth possesses a "strong prejudice" against Darcy and is thoroughly "persuaded that he could have no explanation to give" to justify his actions in her eyes (Austen 198). However, after reading Darcy's letter, her opinion shifts to the opposite of her previous, stubborn resolutions of "hostility" (Wainwright 5). "[O]nly at this point in the novel, with Wickham's glamour utterly dispelled . . . [can] Elizabeth observe Darcy's true character" and, consequently, grow to respect him (Bander 35). Elizabeth can judge with more complete information.

Darcy is loath to reveal his history with Wickham due to the delicate involvement of his younger sister; however, if not for his confession, Elizabeth would continue to entertain her previous ill opinion of Darcy and favorable opinion of Wickham. Prior to the letter, Wickham is a pleasant, "universally liked" man and Darcy is a disagreeable man whom she is "determined to hate" (Austen 89). Darcy admits that Elizabeth has more cause and evidence to believe Wickham in the right and Darcy in the wrong, writing, "[Wickham's] success is not perhaps to be wondered at, ignorant as you were of every thing . . . detection could not be in your power, and suspicion certainly not in your inclination" (197). Elizabeth cannot truly judge Wickham's character because she does not know of Wickham's dark history. However, Elizabeth can approach "earlier scenes in the novel with a new conception of character in her mind" when Darcy provides her a new lens through which she can evaluate both men's characters (Soni 378). Darcy's withholding information contributes to Elizabeth's false beliefs, and only through revelations in Darcy's letter can Elizabeth know the truth.

Through Elizabeth's reception of Darcy's letter, Austen argues for the expression of the truth, even in uncomfortable situations; however, Austen's clear condemnation of Lady Catherine De Bourgh's insensitive candor complicates this argument. Elizabeth is introduced to the unpleasant personality of Lady Catherine through the superfluous flattery of Mr. Collins, and her opinion of Lady Catherine does not improve upon acquaintance. In the presence of the mistress of Rosings Park, Elizabeth finds "little to be done but to hear Lady Catherine talk, which she [does]

without any intermission . . . delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to having her judgment controverted" (Austen 160). Lady Catherine believes that she should voice her opinions—however unwelcome. However, through Elizabeth, Austen indicates that Lady Catherine's blunt honesty does not lead to revelations of the truth. Instead, Elizabeth finds "herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence" (160). By presenting Lady Catherine as a disrespectful character and giving Elizabeth the role of the underdog in multiple verbal confrontations with Lady Catherine, Austen demonstrates that the revelation of every opinion and fact is not necessarily commendable or profitable.

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen narrates less-drastric situations when information is deliberately withheld from characters. Elizabeth conceals that Darcy interfered with Mr. Bingley's plans to propose to Jane. Elizabeth is conscious that she is withholding important information from her sister, but she justifies this action by saying that "nothing less than a perfect understanding between the parties could justify her in throwing off this last incumbrance of mystery" (219). Elizabeth believes that the proposal would be better relayed to Jane through the words of Bingley himself, thinking "liberality of communication cannot be [hers]" (219). She does not feel relaying Bingley's affection for Jane would be just, believing it would be better for Jane to receive the information from Bingley—should he ever propose—to spare Jane the pain of knowing what might have prevailed. Notably, Elizabeth's decision is a result of her "prudence" (219); she weighs the possibilities of disclosure and concludes that privacy and silence will best protect her sisters.

A similar reason exists behind Darcy's decision to withhold information about Wickham's true character; in his letter to Elizabeth, Darcy explains that "regard for my sister's credit and feelings prevented any public exposure" (Austen 196), justifying why Wickham's ill character had not been previously revealed. Darcy explains that he is revealing the details of Wickham's character out of necessity, describing the affair as "a circumstance which I would wish to forget . . . and which no obligation less than the present should induce me to unfold to any human being" (196). Like Elizabeth, Darcy decides to withhold information through careful, prudent discernment. Only when Darcy feels absolutely obligated to divulge the truth of Wickham and Georgiana Darcy does he do so, and then he



entrusts Elizabeth with the continued secrecy of the affair. His entrustment contrasts drastically with the incessantly divulged opinions of Lady Catherine; she gives, not to improve access to the truth after careful deliberation and weighing of the consequences, but to relate “the mistakes of . . . others, or relate some anecdote of herself” (163). Consequently, prudence appears to be a determining factor in justifying the withholding of information and the revelation of information in *Pride and Prejudice*.

When Elizabeth withholds the true nature of Wickham’s character before Lydia Bennet leaves for Brighton—an act of concealment that arguably has disastrous consequences. Prior to Lydia’s departure, Elizabeth attempts to persuade her father to keep Lydia from traveling to Brighton, where she is sure to further the ill reputation of the Bennet family with her “emptiness of mind” and uncontrollable propensity to flirt with the militiamen (Austen 223). Elizabeth’s efforts are in vain; parallel to Elizabeth’s prior refusal to entertain derogatory ideas about Wickham’s character or positive ideas about Darcy’s character, her father refuses to seriously entertain the possibility of Lydia’s behavior negatively impacting the rest of the family. His “dismissal” of “Elizabeth’s concerns . . . indirectly [allow] for Lydia’s seduction by Wickham” (Urban 137). By “barring Mr. Bennet’s ignorant refusal” with her knowledge, Elizabeth could have “actually prevented the unhappy development that both fixes the course of Lydia’s life and portends the perpetual debasement of the Bennet family’s reputation even as it threatens the future happiness of each of Lydia’s sisters” (Urban 137). Her father does not seriously entertain a new, negative character reading. Instead, Lydia simply remains a “very silly” girl, and the idea of Wickham as a villain is neither brought up nor anticipated (Austen 223). However, Elizabeth’s father has little cause to consider Wickham a villain. Mr. Bennet—like Elizabeth prior to reading Darcy’s letter—is ignorant of the particulars of Wickham’s unsavory character. Thus, Darcy contributes indirectly to Elizabeth’s favorable opinion of Wickham, as does Elizabeth’s failing to disclose the truth of Wickham’s character.

Elizabeth must consider the effects of her decision to keep the truth of Wickham’s character secret. When she hears of Lydia and Wickham’s elopement, Elizabeth’s first thought is that the marriage could have been avoided had she revealed Wickham’s deceitfulness sooner. She confides to Darcy,

I might have prevented it!—I who knew what he was. Had I but explained some part of it only—some part of what I learnt, to my own family! Had his character been known, this could not have happened. But it is all, all too late now. . . . When my eyes were opened to his real character—Oh! had I known what I ought, what I dared, to do! But I knew not—I was afraid of doing too much. Wretched, wretched mistake! (Austen 264)

Elizabeth feels guilty for neglecting to disclose Wickham's true character to her family. She understands that, had she told them the truth, Lydia's future may have unfolded differently. She is reflecting on past events with the sobering knowledge that Lydia and Wickham have eloped—a tragic occurrence she did not expect. However, unlike Darcy when he confides the history of Wickham to her, Elizabeth does withhold crucial information about the truth of Wickham's character, afraid of divulging too much information about Wickham's deceitfulness. Darcy was also anxious about revealing the details of an event that he wished to forget and that had negatively impacted his sister, but he shared details to present Elizabeth with the truth.

Through her experience, Elizabeth learns a valuable Austen lesson: Prudent honesty and communication of the truth, though difficult, ultimately lead to happiness. Darcy himself confesses this truth at the conclusion of the novel when he and Elizabeth become engaged: "You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous" (Austen 349). Both Darcy and Elizabeth recognize that their honesty with each other—during Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy's proposal and in his consequent letter to her—is what paves the way for their eventual felicitous marriage. Additionally, uncomfortable honesty leads to happiness in other marriages in the novel. When Darcy eventually reveals to Bingley that he concealed Jane's presence in town, Bingley is understandably "angry" (351), but Bingley quickly reconciles with Darcy as "his anger . . . lasted no longer than he remained in any doubt of [Jane's] sentiments" (351). Elizabeth and Darcy both withheld Jane's affection and her stay in London from Bingley. Although the results of these secrets are not as disastrous as the elopement, the revelation of Jane and Bingley's affection for one another clearly helps to secure their happy marriage.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates that prudent revelations of truth lead to ultimate happiness, while withholding crucial information leads to pain. Throughout the novel, climactic moments clearly demonstrate this lesson; these moments include Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, the concealment of Jane's presence in London, and Elizabeth's secrecy regarding Wickham's true character. Other characters in the novel also clearly illustrate this lesson. Austen presents perpetually dishonest characters like Wickham as villains and thoughtlessly outspoken characters like Lady Catherine as nuisances. Conversely, characters like Elizabeth and Darcy, who seek to convey the truth in the best possible means and in light of the unique circumstances, are heroes in this classic Austen novel.

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## Giving Brown's *Clotel* Another Chance: A Worthy Melodramatic Text

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Hawa Saleh

American slavery was a tragic institution, but, unlike tragedies in literature, it did not end in two hours and span five acts; it was a recurring nightmare for enslaved people, and those who were fortunate to escape did not forget their duty to their fettered brothers and sisters. In *Clotel: A President's Daughter*, William Wells Brown creates a fictional story to demonstrate the holes in the great American narrative that touts the promises of inherent freedom and unalienable rights. Although Brown has received scholarly criticism on what was perceived as his lack of ingenuity to bolster black literature and his pandering to the white audience, he subverts their commentary through his affinity for melodrama. By demonstrating that the great American independence story is nothing more than a performance meant to distract from the real heart of the matter, Brown gains authority. He uses the minstrel and tragic mulatta tropes to create seemingly one-dimensional black characters to underscore the idea that slavery dehumanizes in a manner that is absurd, and, in doing so, he induces a visceral reaction from his white audience to take up the abolition cause.

Brown often bears the burden of negative literary criticism because his work is regarded as unnecessarily messy. His failure to create a cohesive work is enough for some scholars to put his book on the shelf of obsolescence. Vernon Loggins, in his extensive *The Negro Author: His Development in America from 1900*, analyzes major black writers and, in his analysis of

*Clotel*, he finds that Brown was too hasty in reaching the “end of the tale,” thereby preventing his readership from understanding the complexities of characters (166). He continues to argue that Brown “did not realize the drama of his plot,” which resulted in a book that had great action and little depth (166). Loggins assumes, however, that quickness results in readers not receiving a “clear impression” of characters, an impression that mitigates the power of an astute readership who understand that the nuances of seemingly one-dimensional characters are hidden beneath the surface, requiring explication on the part of readers and not the writer himself (166). To condemn Brown for not writing explicitly absolves readers for their lack of critical engagement with the text.

More scholars echo Loggins’ complaints and continue to disregard the power of irony in this early African American novel. In the introduction to the Collier Books’ publication of *Clotel*, Gerald Rosselot refers to Arthur Davis’s introduction in the Collier Books’ publication of *Clotel*: “Brown’s greatest weakness is that he does not know how to make his characters come alive” (296). Although this critique is voiced by a plentiful number of scholars, it is indicative of a superficial reading of the text. To treat Brown as a person who merely preferred the sensational diminishes his added role of being an ironist. Jean Weisgerber stresses that such works “requires readers whose sense of irony is at least equal to the ironist’s: that is, people who are able to grasp at the same time the pretended and the intended meaning” (166). The pretended meaning in *Clotel* is that Brown wrote simple characters because he was incapable of writing insightfully about the black experience in America, but a reader who looks past these pretenses sees that the intended meaning is to elicit an intrigue from his readership. This palpable curiosity fostered by melodramatic scenes would have Brown’s audience acknowledge his authority in embarking on a journey to reveal how the white American portrayal of slavery results in a ridiculous cognitive dissonance, in which readers are unable to mentally juggle the paradox of a free slave-bearing country.

Brown is often charged with writing a novel that is only dedicated to white people, thereby pandering to the oppressing class. Scholar Gayle Addison, in “Paradigms of the Early Past,” argues that Brown failed in cultivating a work in which he speaks to the demoralized people of his time.

Rather than “redefining definitions,” Brown “offer[s] counterimages, more appealing to whites and the black middle class than to those on the slave plantations who bore the brunt of the Southerners’ attacks” (Addison 7). However, this notion of appeasement fails within the first pages of Brown’s narrative, in which he clearly presents whom he represents and whom he ultimately tries to save from inhumane treatment. Instead of focusing on “counterimages,” which Addison regards to be negative in “appealing” to non-enslaved persons, scholars can seek to find the areas in which Brown uses these established dichotomies to his benefit. For example, within the preface, Brown gives the condemning image of a country that boldly waves its “Stars and Stripes” but simultaneously features “twenty-five millions of whites . . . [who band] themselves in solemn conclave to keep four millions of blacks in their chains” (3). These statistics elucidate a troubling American paradox, and counterimages are helpful here—not to appeal to a white audience but to emphatically show where the inequities lie.

The notion that Brown desires to appease white people more than unravel the absurdities of the institution of slavery is refuted immediately within his decision to not feature a testimonial note from a credible white person of status, as do many early-American slave narratives. This convention is described by John Sekora as “Black Message/White Envelope,” as he noticed that early slave narratives have prefaces in which “white sponsors compell[ed] a black author to approve, to authorize white institutional power” to seal the now-permissible black story “within a white envelope” (502). What makes Brown remarkable is that he forgoes the white envelope entirely: He confesses that he is not manumitted in his narrative, which holds the power to alienate people from reading the entirety of his novel due to his failure in pursuing what was considered to be legally right. By refusing to incorporate this figurative stamp of approval, Brown asserts his own authority. He, and he alone, determines what should be added into his novel and what should be rewritten.

With the major criticisms addressed, critics must note that Brown’s novel needs to be read as a melodramatic text, as it changes the framework in which his literary decisions are regarded. Although the melodramatic flair hyperbolizes characters and scenes, the craft invites a more critical lens. Peter Brooks constitutes the elements of melodrama by writing,

This scene of dramatic confrontation and peripety takes us to the core of melodrama’s premises and design. The spectacular excitement, the

hyperbolic situation and the grandiose phraseology that it elicits are in full evidence, and virtue, triumphant, sets off a movement of conversion that brings barbarian tribesmen to their knees. This is universally recognizable as the stuff of melodrama. (617)

The “dramatic confrontation” is quickly found within the enslaved and enslaver dynamic because the black person’s dehumanization comes at the cost of great concession—a concession that makes the white person look absurd. For example, Gertrude insists that Mary (her husband’s daughter from *Clotel*, an enslaved woman) stay out in the sun in the hopes that darkening her skin will make the latter undesirable; this hope illustrates the degeneration of the supposed angel in the house. The cult of domesticity is unraveled to be nothing more than a fabrication of reality in which the lie placates the “ugly reality of Southern ladyhood” (Frye 533). This animosity toward innocence creates a “hyperbolic situation,” in which a child is unfairly punished for the sins of its father, a verse found within Exodus when God cautions His chosen covenant against falling in disbelief and sin, as it will lead to God “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation” (617; citing *King James Bible* Exodus 20.5). The transgression against this Biblical moral where Gertrude becomes this vengeful goddess sets off Brooks’ “movement of conversion,” when Brown demonstrates *Clotel*’s emboldened maternal desire to find her daughter, Mary, in Chapter 19 (617). Fleeing the rigid shackles of society, in which *Clotel* and her daughter are regarded as beautiful yet degenerate beings, proves that Brown is not only writing a novel but also writing in the frame of a tragic play. Melodrama’s solicitation of “bring[ing] barbarian tribesmen to their knees” (617) is Brown’s way of having white Americans acknowledge that their upholding of the peculiar institution makes them barbarous (617).

By adopting the melodramatic framework, minstrelsy takes on a different connotation, because Brown’s implementation of the racist entertainment form nuances the conversation around his black characters. *Minstrelsy* represents black people as uncultivated and degraded human beings; in this genre, white actors wear ties around their joints to give the impression that black people are marionettes (puppets) and thus have no agency. The laughs elicited from the white audience would indulge in the stage mockery that black people are buffoons who would not know how to handle freedom. Brown taps into these sentiments as he creates Pompey;

being the first enslaved person that the readership meets, Pompey solicits a laugh because his task is to “prepare” enslaved people for auction (53). He not only takes out gray hairs and shines black people’s faces with grease, but he also gives them fake ages. He tells a 29-year-old man to be 23 years old (and thus a better slave purchase because of his youth). When an older man tells Pompey that he is not young enough to be 30, the former states, “I knows nothing about dat” (Brown 53). Pompey appears to be unaffected by his condition, implying that slavery does not leave an indelible impression on its victims. This implication would engulf Brown’s novel as an apology for the wretched institution, but as melodrama is intertwined with irony, Brown’s readership must be ready to ask questions about and of the character Pompey.

The major irony of Pompey’s seemingly minstrel character is that he knows everything. He is written to be an undiscerning character; however, he is not a makeup artist as much as he is the stage manager in this tragic play—the first cunning person that Brown writes in this sophisticated melodrama. While correcting people’s ages, he gives them roles in the story, and he provides them their lines to avoid detection at the auction. Pompey possesses the script, and when an enslaved person tries to tell the truth, his exclamation of “I knows nothing about dat” is a farce. Pompey’s omniscient role is hidden from his fooled white audience as he “appear[s] perfectly indifferent to the heartrending scenes which daily occurred in his presence” (Brown 53). This appearance of apathy is a ruse, and it benefits Pompey because he is clever enough to fool his enslaver; he even proclaims he is “no countefit; he is de genewine artekil” (53) and, by reading this novel as a melodramatic play, the reader can interpret this assurance as an example of dramatic irony in which the modern and discerning audience would know that Pompey is not what he seems. Despite the criticism from Elizabeth West that this performative reading into Pompey’s character makes him an active agent in perpetuating injustices as he has a “lack of reflection on the profound implications of his part in the slaving world,” Brown’s melodrama subverts the minstrel trope to illustrate that the peculiar institution even makes black people absurd; for example, auctioning enslaved people is condemnable, but to make a fellow enslaved person deliver scripted lines and to make someone look younger to exploit others is reprehensible (West 177).

As Pompey is the stage manager, he effectively hands the role of the



“dandy” to Sam, an act that casts another dimension to a second absurd figure (Sam) who is introduced to the audience. Sam takes pride in his appearance, but the image of an enslaved person sitting “with his wool well combed and buttered, face nicely greased, and his ruffles extending five or six inches from his breast” makes him the epitome of a minstrel dandy (Brown 106). His predilection for fashion comes across as a further reification of his inherent ridiculousness, because he cannot even mimic the attire of white people without making gross mistakes such as using an egregious amount of fresh butter on his hair (106). With his failure of wearing fashionable clothes revealing a physical limitation on Sam’s aspirations to climb the social ladder, his appalling show of pride adds an ugly shadow to a character who is meant to evoke feelings to abolish the institution. He is prejudiced toward his fellow enslaved people: “the nearer the Negro or mulatto approaches to the white, the more [Sam] seems to feel his superiority over those of a darker hue” (105). Even though he is a doctor, he is written to possess little to no remorse for pulling out the wrong tooth of an enslaved person’s mouth; he “consoled himself with the idea that . . . there was more room to get at the right one” (108). For all purposes, Sam is crafted to be a superficial shell of a human being who does not help Brown’s mission to stir hearts of American and British audiences to end slavery. However, with this appearance of Sam, Brown accomplishes his mission. With Sam looking more absurd than put together and emotionally deficient to the pain he creates (105, 108), he becomes a mockery of the black experience that inspires the reevaluation of Sam’s characterization.

Brown’s presentation of flat characters makes other characters in the story multidimensional. Sam appears to don this stoic front of wanting to detach himself from his community, but when he goes into the woods, he celebrates Mr. Peck’s death with other enslaved persons (125). For Sam, the plantation is a stage in which he is continuously acting—playing a part that does not align with his personal identity. When he is in the woods or offstage or practically not within the eyes of the white enslavers, he takes off this facade and sings with his community (125). He begins the song with “Come, all my brethren . . .” (125) to reestablish the camaraderie within a group of people that he renounced pages before (105, 108). Although Sam was created to elicit laughs from his attempts at being the buffoonish dandy, he is Brown’s means to demonstrate how white actors performing in this entertainment are marionettes to a puppet show of their own making.

Sam is not a minstrel dandy as much as he is playing a part to fool his audience from truly knowing him.

The subversion of the minstrel trope indelibly impacts the way the tragic mulatta should be received because the titular character's death (185) is not a mere reification of the trope, as much as it rebukes the environment that prepared itself to receive an innocent black life. Brown subverts this trope perpetuated by the stories of American abolitionist, Lydia Maria Childs who despite having benevolent intentions, invoked the tragic mulatta trope in her stories to prove that slavery creates a category of mixed people whose inability to definitively belong result in them becoming highly hysterical and suicidal. Yet *Clotel* is not driven to madness due to her conflicting genealogies but dies to avoid American slavery. According to Addison, *Clotel*, who is caught in the middle of racial tensions, has "more in affinity with the white than with the Black" (7), which encourages the lesson to "proclaim the values, morals, images, and symbols of whites, wherever possible, as their own" (7), but Addison misconstrues what *Clotel's* death is meant to invoke (7). The dramatization of *Clotel's* death is not meant to harp on racist notions of black blood contaminating her pure white blood from an Anglo-Saxon father; her death is precipitated by the mere difference that she pretended to be white (Frye 538). The death that she experiences as a white man, a disguise she puts on to avoid detection, should not be read as a didactic story of which the moral gained is that black people should know their place in society. This transgression against the color line is where *Clotel's* death encourages Katie Frye to argue that Brown is offering "another assault on society's theorization of what is normal" (538). Instead of supporting the colonialist belief that whiteness "signifi[es] redemption and safety," Brown's novel proves that whiteness kills *Clotel* (538).

*Clotel's* death is not meant to make her a cautionary tale to warn white people of miscegenation, as much as Brown wants to show the mercilessness of America. *Clotel* does not commit suicide to garner the title of the tragic mulatta because Brown makes it clear that, despite her death being preordained by Providence, "she looked wildly and anxiously around to see if there was no hope of escape" (Brown 185). *Clotel* wanted to live, and it is this difference that nuances Brown's dalliance with the racist trope. He describes *Clotel's* last living moments as a painter lamenting the finishing of his portrait: "she clasped her *hands* convulsively, and raised *them*, as she

at the same time raised eyes towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion *there*, which has been denied her on earth" (185). The intentional italicization cannot be foregone because it emphasizes Clotel's faith in God. Her hands are begging for mercy and her eyes desire that her white enslavers recognize her pain. The bereaved painter turns into a livid witness who eulogizes the death of a young person with so much life to live by condemning the forces responsible for her cataclysmic end. Brown writes, "they boast that America is the 'cradle of liberty': if it is, I fear they have rocked that child to death" (185-86). To have her death unfold in front of the White House and the US Capitol is awe-inducing, because it parallels the dramaticism of Clotel's death with grandiose American justifications of the peculiar institution (185) and its claim in being steadfast to ideals of liberty.

With Brown's melodrama, American exceptionalism is proven to be a hollow truth that dooms enslaved people. And although critics highlight the inadequacies of Brown's novel and take fault with his literary decisions, his book should be read from a different perspective—one that allows the critic to leave behind preconceived notions on early American novels. Slavery's transformation into a tragedy does not diminish the gravitas of Brown's words; he does not look for applause to stroke his ego as much as he strives to create a work that transforms an audience from unaffected citizens who live in a paradox to champions of liberty who are ready to battle their cognitive dissonance.

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## Clarke's *Piranesi* as the Wordsworthian Scientist

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Brendan Sanders

Usanna Clarke's 2020 novel *Piranesi* is a modern fantasy tale steeped in the Romantic tradition. The novel's eponymous main character is deeply in love with the world—an infinite House—around him. His relationship with the House is reminiscent of the Romantic poets' attitudes toward Nature; however, Clarke's protagonist acknowledges the value of science in a way the Romantics never did. Romanticism, which began largely as a reaction against utilitarian modernity (McQueen), rejects empiricism in favor of imagination and overwhelming emotion, as displayed in the works of William Wordsworth. In his sister poems, "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," Wordsworth puts an enchanted view of Nature at odds with modern empirical science. Through its protagonist, *Piranesi* reconciles the Romantic and the rational, presenting an idealized scientist whose empirical methods do not undermine his deep enchantment with the world around him.

In the three years since release of *Piranesi*, little scholarship has discussed the work and the scholarship that does exist (e.g., Błaszkievicz, Dugger, and Gamboa) touches little on the novel's place within the Romantic legacy. Amy Nyary Gamboa evaluates *Piranesi*'s House through a psychological lens, concluding that the House is a metaphor for the truest form of one's own personality (1). Bartłomiej Błaszkievicz also approaches *Piranesi* from a psychological angle, though he focuses on classical fairy abduction

and secondary world motifs and concludes that Clarke has redefined secondary world literature through the lens of psychological realism (129). Julie M. Dugger departs from a psychological understanding of Clarke, instead comparing *Piranesi's* House to C. S. Lewis's Narnia. Dugger further traces Narnia and the House back to Plato's cave, concluding that Clarke's rejection of the hierarchy between artistic, physical, and spiritual worlds separates her from Lewis and Plato (Clarke 78–79). Although none of this scholarship directly recognizes *Piranesi* as part of the Romantic legacy, the conversations around Clarke's novel point toward Romanticism.

Dugger's comparison of Clarke and Lewis helps to establish the connection between *Piranesi* and the Romantic tradition, as Lewis's writings feature heavy Romantic influence (Prothero and Williams). James Prothero and Donald T. Williams argue that Lewis was a modern Romantic, identifying six common themes that tend to appear across Romantic works: the value of imagination, an emphasis on Nature, the importance of children, the common man, the balance of good and evil, and a fascination with utopias. Lewis's works incorporate each of these topics, although not every Romantic author touches all six (Prothero and Williams xi–xiv). Under these criteria, Clarke's work, specifically *Piranesi*, participates in the Romantic legacy: *Piranesi* certainly “sees into the life of things”—Wordsworth's definition of imagination (“Lines” line 49)—of the mundane elements of the House. Clarke's declaration that “The Beauty of House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite” (5) echoes the beauty that the Romantics find in Nature as the idealized world (5); the House, at least to *Piranesi*, is its own kind of utopia. Although no children are featured in the novel, *Piranesi's* naïveté affords him a childlike innocence. To some extent, Clarke overlooks the balance of good and evil and the emphasis on the common man, but *Piranesi's* childlike wonder with the House identifies him as a Romantic figure. Like Lewis, Clarke borrows from the Romantic tradition in her writing, but she is not a purely Romantic author.

Clarke deviates from conventional Romanticism in her attitude toward science. The Romantic understanding of science is clearly articulated in Wordsworth's “Expostulation and Reply” and its sequel, “The Tables Turned.” In the former, the poem's speaker—Wordsworth's self-insert, aptly named William—is sitting on a stone daydreaming when a friend, Matthew, confronts him and scolds him for daydreaming when he could be reading (“Expostulation and Reply” lines 1–4). William's response is indicative of

Wordsworth's own understanding of Nature: "Nor less I deem that there are Powers / Which of themselves our minds impress; / That we can feed this mind of ours / In a wise passiveness" (lines 21–24). Wordsworth rejects modernity's emphasis on learning from books, choosing instead to sit and learn by interacting with Nature. In "The Tables Turned," the dialogue is reversed when William tells Matthew to quit reading and enjoy the sunset (lines 1–8). Near the end of the poem, Wordsworth levies his criticism of modern science: "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—/ We murder to dissect" ("The Tables Turned" lines 25–28). Wordsworth laments science's need to destroy things in the name of understanding them; the "wise passiveness" for which he advocates (line 24) focuses instead on living within and learning from the natural world.

Piranesi embodies Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" ("Expostulation and Reply" line 24), living in harmony with the House, which he understands as a benevolent yet wild caretaker. His relationship with the statues (15–17) shows evidence of this—he sees not only an artist's depiction of things outside the House but what they represent. When Piranesi's fall through the halls is stopped by a statue of a trampled man (38), Piranesi's first thought is thanksgiving toward the statue: "I stayed there all day and all night, hungry, almost dead from cold but deeply grateful to the Trampled Man for saving me" (38). Later, when Piranesi—or rather, the person Piranesi has become—reenters the "real" world, he sees statues in the people he passes, idealized versions of each individual (241–45). Further evidence of Piranesi's relationship with the House comes in his interaction with its birds, who, through flying to different statues, communicate with Piranesi, even helping him survive an otherwise dangerous shift in the House's tides (40–41). Piranesi's transformation from Matthew Rose Sorenson most fully expresses his "wise passiveness." To understand the House's corridors, Piranesi's former identity is removed; though he cannot remember the world in which he previously lived (before the House reshapes Sorenson's mind), he can now better understand his new surroundings (68–69). By opening himself up to the House, Piranesi, the beloved child of the House, is born. Like Wordsworth in Nature, Piranesi lives in a relationship with the world around him, treating it as his benevolent guide.

Piranesi differs from Wordsworth in his attitude toward science, though the antagonistic Other reflects the distorted science that Wordsworth

criticized. The Other views everything around him as a means to his end of obtaining “Great and Secret Knowledge,” which he believes to be within the House (Clarke 8). Even Piranesi himself is a means to this end; he helps the Other navigate the halls, but the Other makes it clear that he would not hesitate to kill Piranesi should he outlive his usefulness (96–100). The Other considers the House a labyrinth to be feared, made clear when the House’s tides are near (24–25). Because he fixates on gleaning this Knowledge from within the House, the Other refuses to take the time to understand the House, and his utilitarian methods ultimately bring his downfall. One of the statues in the House—a man holding a shattered sword near the remains of a likewise shattered sphere (241)—strikes Piranesi as reflective of the Other’s nature: “The man has used his sword to shatter the sphere because he wanted to understand it, but now he finds that he has destroyed both sphere and sword” (241). In his effort to extract Knowledge from the House, the Other has reduced the House to a means to an end that is ultimately out of his reach—and in doing so, his hubris leaves him drowned, a victim of the very labyrinth he tried to exploit. Through the Other, Clarke acknowledges Wordsworth’s valid criticism of science; however, she offers an alternative to this misuse of rationality.

Piranesi, like the Other, considers himself a man of science, expressing early on that he writes to “[inculcate] habits of precision and carefulness” (Clarke 12). He keeps carefully labeled journals, cataloging the various corridors and statues within the House. The difference between Piranesi and his foil lies in his motivation: while the Other seeks only what will bring him toward the Great and Secret Knowledge (67), Piranesi documents things out of enchantment with the world around him, going so far as to proclaim guiltily particular statues as his favorites. Piranesi engages in science, not because he gains any sort of power from it but because through science, he is better able to live in harmony with the House. The contrast between Piranesi and the Other is made most clear in Piranesi’s rejection of their quest for Knowledge:

I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if we ever discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery [ . . . ]. The House is valuable because it



is the House. It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end. (60–61)

Where the Other embodies Wordsworth's demonized, utilitarian science, Piranesi presents an enchanted alternative in which careful records document the beauty around the scientist. Clarke uses her protagonist to find a compromise between Wordsworth's William and Matthew, arguing that science, when pursued in a way that maintains harmony with Nature, is a beautiful tool that may allow the Romantic to appreciate the world even more powerfully.

Clarke's *Piranesi* seeks, then, to bridge the gap between Romanticism and science, reconciling the two through its protagonist. Clarke remains true to the Romantic legacy, learning from Nature through a "wise passiveness," while still valuing the way in which science, when done right, can serve to make one even more deeply enchanted with Nature. Though she acknowledges the harm that a disenchanted pursuit of knowledge may bring, Clarke argues through *Piranesi* that the scientific process can be a window into a greater enchantment with the world. By emphasizing the inherent value of the world over what one may glean from it, *Piranesi* secures its position in modern works of Romanticism, building off classical Romanticism by offering a reconciled role for science in Romantic philosophy.

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## Black Sexuality, Visibility, and Power in Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play*

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Elizabeth Shanks

Historically, the black body has been a vehicle on stage for ridicule, torment, and denigration of the black experience. Beginning with Antebellum minstrelsy, a form of theatre involving blackface to mock African Americans, one can easily see how the theatrical trope originated (Brooks 186). Such minstrel-show tropes have evolved from nineteenth-century performances into deeply rooted stereotypes (Cosimini 53). Within these stereotypes are power dynamics between the white male and black female that have woven their way into the United States' white supremacist society, in which society reduces the sexuality of the black female to an object for sale. Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play* uses primary characters Jim and Kaneisha to reclaim the black woman's agency through hypervisibility and her imposed hypersexuality. Harris toys with power dynamics and stereotypes to invert the dichotomous "dominant" and "submissive" roles on stage and forces white audiences to acknowledge the violent history of slavery and the mistreatment of African Americans.

Hypersexualization is familiar to modern society, especially among African American women. Hypersexuality enlarges the concept of sexuality to fit an overzealous illustration of promiscuity (Cosimini 52). The use of a promiscuous lens to view black female bodies originated during slave auctions, when African Americans were objectified and sold for labor and sexual exploitation to wealthy white families (Brooks 169–70). The lens did

not disappear once slavery was outlawed but rather took on a new life in the hypersexual minstrel shows during the Antebellum Period (151–52). Minstrelsy took the violated African American woman and created the trope of the promiscuous black woman, appearing “bestial as in representations of the Jezebel” (Fleetwood 110). The black woman was attributed a sharper edge, whereas her white counterpart is described with an air of “softness,” suggesting the black female was lower in status and therefore worth (Gilligan 178). The black female body was placed on stage in stark contrast to white norms to dehumanize African American women when slave auctions no longer could (Stupp 70). The history of slavery crafts a narrative in which “the Black body . . . [is] a vessel onto which is projected the anxieties and contradictions of those living in a historically white supremacist nation” (62). In simply existing as a vehicle of potential desire to the white, voyeuristic gaze, black sexual performances “threaten white reproductivity through its invocation of miscegenation rooted in historical rape of Black women, as well as contemporary fantasies and practices of interracial sex” (Fleetwood 131). Thus, a promiscuous trope rooted in falsity that was forcibly assigned to African American women evolved into a stereotype of African American hypersexuality and persists in modern-day performances.

Once the black female body was inescapably defined as unchaste by white societal standards, she was left with two options of resistance: fight the labels that she did not choose to define her or accept and reclaim those labels. The “voyeuristic gaze” attributed to the black body on stage presented it as if it were a spectacle outside of the context of performance (Gilligan 179). This gaze invoked a sense of dehumanization among black people, as their bodies were both a site and source of such voyeurism.

In contrast, Harris’ *Slave Play* twists the idea of the black body as prey by reclaiming hypersexuality. Two of Harris’ main characters, Jim (a white man) and Kaneisha (a black woman), open the first act in overseer and slave roles. Jim uncomfortably degrades Kaneisha and then engages in oral intercourse, to which Kaneisha “lets out a sigh of disappointment” (Harris 26). Initially, Jim’s degradation appears as a typical minstrel characterization, and Kaneisha is expected to fulfill the slave role imposed without consent on her and her body. However, Kaneisha’s disappointment with Jim’s sexual act suggests that, instead of being assaulted in the assumed power dynamic role as historical slave and master, she wields the true power in the relationship. Jim then appears as the submissive oppressor, and Kaneisha as

his dominant slave. Here, Kaneisha uses the hypersexuality branded on her as an advantage, deriving her own sexual gratification from the interactions with her “overseer.” Although the sexual act between the two appears to be consensual play between husband and wife, the audience senses a thick air of discomfort at the presumed rape of Kaneisha without the context of the two’s established relationship. To heighten audience discomfort, the play’s backdrop is a floor-to-ceiling mirror, so the audience must watch the sexual encounter between Jim and Kaneisha, witnessing the spectacle indirectly on stage. Harris uses this staging intentionally to heighten the visibility of Kaneisha’s hypersexuality; her blackness must be hypervisible for her to reclaim her sexuality as an independent form of power.

The hypervisibility of black women, linked with their hypersexuality, allows for discourse that usually is not illustrated in theatrical performances. Many plays with explicit content can be censored or made elusive, or their meaning can present ambiguously to avoid being labeled pornographic. However, one method to resist white dominator culture is to reclaim this type of hypersexualized performance. This performance parallels to “play,” like the overt sexuality of Nicki Minaj’s lyricism and performance, which is labeled as “play” and defined as “a complex act of expression where desire and trickery constitute one another; . . . a type of contestation and a powerful tool for destabilization, resistance, and pleasure” (Cosimini 49). This definition of “play” creates a double meaning of Harris’ title, *Slave Play*—as both a literal theatrical performance and oversexualized fetishization. In *Slave Play*, a double consciousness emerges on stage, as the African American characters once again perform for a white audience, yet with the intent of discomfort rather than affirmation. Like the play’s character Kaneisha, “Minaj is aware of the exchange value of her body as commodity, but rather than being exploited, she makes her sexual commodification work for her” (58). Cosimini illustrates how hypervisibility forces white audiences to see the black experience, both literally as it happens on stage and metaphorically to acknowledge the past. This “sexuality-as-visibility” strategy on stage, described as “excess flesh,” suggests that sexuality “is an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the desires to discipline the Black female body” (Fleetwood 112). Her black body then is a tool for the woman, rather than for the perpetrator, so she can make her voice heard through a medium of visibility. Fleetwood also notes that “visibility . . . does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination,

symbolic and material, which determines what can and cannot be seen” (122). Although black hypersexuality-turned-visibility creates a vessel *by* the black female body instead of *on* the black female body, it does not change the racist structures that created and labeled her hypersexual. Rather, hypersexuality-turned-visibility takes that definition and reclaims it to dismantle the racist hierarchy from within itself.

Harris’ *Slave Play* aims for the audience’s discomfort to mirror the white characters in the play, who are baffled by the idea that their black partners are no longer attracted to them due to subconscious. The concept of hyper-visibility is used to challenge the stereotypes of hypersexuality while using the same sexuality as a reversal of norms to reclaim the terms enforced on black women. The hypersexuality of black women on stage “does not destabilize the dominant gaze or its system of visibility. Instead, it refracts the gaze back upon itself” (Fleetwood 112). Thus, the hypersexuality of black women, coupled with their hypervisibility on stage, forces discomfort in the white characters and the white audience, reclaiming the denigrating stereotypes of black bodies against the system that stereotyped them.

In *Bodies in Dissent*, critic Daphne Brooks says, “Acting is linked to sexuality because it is an embodied art. . . . To act you must be present in the body, available to be seen” (170). If the body is not seen, the hypersexuality of the black body is redundant and risks being a reinforced stereotype rather than being reclaimed.

Kaneisha asserts her sexuality and inverts dominant and submissive roles between herself and her white husband, Jim; however, her role does not come without complications throughout the performance. In the first act, the roles of the two appear as the dominant male and submissive female. However, once the second act begins, Jim states his grievances about the fantasy play in which they participated, voicing his discomfort with calling his wife “negress”—saying, “She’s my queen,” followed by Kaneisha saying, “Oh God” (Harris 78–80). Kaneisha’s reaction contradicts the sexualization of black women: Jim is neither fetishizing nor degrading his wife, regardless of if she derives pleasure from the play. However, Kaneisha finds herself in a position of displeasure when the source and purpose should be pleasurable. This inversion becomes more apparent when Kaneisha says, “The minute I express what I need from him. How I need it. He shut down” (84). Kaneisha’s desires are then masked as sexual, adhering to her prescribed identity as a hypersexual black woman, yet her true desires are

more ambiguous. Although her role as submissive slave was somewhat fulfilled during her and Jim's fantasy play, Kaneisha's part lacks power and control, which is what she has been seeking in her relationship all along. Thus, the intercourse on stage reflects not Jim and Kaneisha's romance but the complicated power roles they each employ.

Harris' *Slave Play* is not easily digestible for most audiences. He presents sexuality as a power to create discomfort and display an inversion of power between the performed black body and its place in society. Thus, sex is not only a visibility tactic of the black experience but also a power tactic to disrupt negative stereotypes and empower black women on the stage. Considering the struggle between sexes and the presentation of sexual acts and pornography, Linda Williams reports that "the root of literal or symbolic aggression towards women is some form of dominant, even sadistic male power" (189). In line with Williams' theory, Kaneisha snatches the power of the white male dominator in her pursuit of visibility, and she achieves this by reclaiming control and power in sexual encounters with her husband. Williams also notes that "only by playing the role of the 'good girl' . . . does the woman . . . get the 'bad girl' pleasure" (209). Similarly, Kaneisha uses her hypersexuality to gain erotic pleasure with her husband while simultaneously asserting power over the relationship. She is feeding into the male-dominator narrative that writes her black body as a vessel for male pleasure and inverts it so that her pleasure is now the objective, not the vehicle. Williams explains this phenomenon as "succumb[ing] to the authority of the male double standard that condemns and punishes women for pleasure, she defeats the system" (209). Kaneisha uses her body as a voice for black experience, pursuing fantasies and play that was "once only reserved for upper-class 'gentlemen'" (217). She vocalizes this desire in the second act, saying, "I'm never surer that I'm truly in control and earlier today when we were in Fantasy Play I finally felt in control" (Harris 121). Her narrative emphasizes how the "play" that she pursued in *Slave Play* is an assertion of power, sexuality, and visibility of the black body, and experience, on stage.

Although hinged on race and sexuality, Harris' *Slave Play* uses the mask of academia and research to "justify" the "Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy" pursued by the couples in the play. Williams claims that, when it comes to power dynamics in sexual relationships, "if sex is the problem, then . . . different sex is the solution" (228). Two therapists (Patricia and

Tea) in Harris' play believe and focus their research on this theory. They argue that "the Black or brown subject born under the constant psychological warfare of the white supremacist . . . system has been stricken with disorders that have gone unrecognized" (Harris 102). Although their intentions are well meant, they fail to acknowledge the sensitivity of the matter, constantly devaluing the experiences and thoughts of the couples throughout the performance. Their insensitivity toward their subjects reinforces stereotypes of black inferiority, as they argue that the partners struggling with sexual arousal are somehow the ones at fault. Kaneisha counters Patricia's and Tea's argument, saying that the problem of "Racialized Inhibiting Disorder" proposed by the two is not "some UNDIAGNOSED UNDIAGNOSABLE thing in ME. It's an undiagnosed, undiagnosable thing in you" (142). Kaneisha cries out against white supremacy, placing the responsibility of her anhedonia on her white husband. This statement acts as the performative reason for her inability to be aroused and a metaphor for racial ignorance among white people in society. Hence, she presents a complex shift as she covertly and overtly challenges white supremacy, and the evolving power dynamic between her and her husband functions as a cautionary tale against racial ignorance.

Harris places the audience into historical slavery, both literally in the first act and metaphorically in Jim's ignorance of Kaneisha's experiences. In addressing the historical performance of slavery on stage, author of "Slavery and the Theatre of History" Jason Stupp notes, "the placement of the nearly white body at center stage had the effect of holding up a mirror to an audience that must have been imagining and confronting 'one of their own'—a white person—in the role of a slave" (74). The white body (Jim) marks the minstrel trope of blackface as a means for white audiences to empathize with African American characters on stage and remains valuable in Jim's narrative. When he refuses to call Kaneisha a "dirty negress," she is upset but cannot articulate why (Harris 78). Jim explains his confusion about Kaneisha's anhedonia, saying, "[A]ll I have seen is you looking at me as though I were some type of virus," and then she can finally place the source of her discomfort: Jim's erasure of her experiences as an African American woman (139). After all that Kaneisha and Jim endure during the fantasy play and therapy session, their power dynamic reverts to associations of white domination versus black submission. Kaneisha finds that Jim's metaphor unintentionally describes her emotions perfectly: "[W]hen



your people landed on this land a third of the Indigenous population of the entire continent died of disease" (141). Her interpretation of Jim's "virus" indicates that her anhedonia stems from Jim's erasure of her black experience and the erasure of the savage history of colonization. The source for Jim's discomfort at the fantasy play with his wife stems from a deep history of ignorance; Stupp addresses this ignorance—"Americans . . . often resist interpretations of history that disturb their understanding of themselves" (82). Scholar Michelle Stephens furthers this notion, writing, "not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man" (33). White people's ignorance of slavery and racism are obviously disconnected, while they simultaneously uphold the systems that support both. Because Jim is British (not American), he is unaware of how his erasure acts as invisibility toward his wife and the greater historical violence against African Americans. Kaneisha notes this dissonance in Jim as she tells him he is "Un-American. Not a demon. But you do still have the virus" (Harris 151). With this, Kaneisha can identify her source of anhedonia and use of hypersexuality to reclaim her heritage and experiences.

In the third and final act, Kaneisha and Jim dialogue on their own. Kaneisha tells Jim that the point of the fantasy play "was about you listening to me" (Harris 145), to which he complies and listens, as she wanted him to do in the first two acts. Kaneisha tells Jim about her childhood in Virginia and how her mother told her to "look proud for her elders" (150). She has always existed in a position created to make her feel subordinate, and her elders viewed white people as demons for their mass genocide and torture of African Americans. Kaneisha also tells Jim, "[T]he elders don't care that you are a demon, . . . they just want you to know it" (155–56). In response, Jim initiates consensual slave play with Kaneisha, who thrashes and cries and then, laughing, says, "[T]hank you baby. Thank you for listening" (159). This final interaction is difficult to digest and interpret; however, the evidence of the hypersexual and hypervisible African American woman, coupled with the history of white erasure, indicates that Kaneisha's reaction is more metaphorical than literal. Kaneisha has used her sexuality to reclaim her autonomy and power in her relationship with Jim, yet her desire for romantic endeavors does not motivate this reclamation. Instead, her desire for control motivates her reclamation, as she wants Jim to acknowledge his whiteness. Harris writes Kaneisha to utilize her blackness to force the audience's eyes to their own whiteness and writes

the play's sexualization of African Americans as an uncomfortable truth. To make white people acknowledge the historical mistreatment of black people, the black body must be hypervisible in an uncomfortable setting between Kaneisha and Jim at the end of the play. The couple transcends the stage; Kaneisha becomes a voice for the black experience and Jim a representation of white ignorance and erasure.

Harris utilizes the black body and experience to make a greater claim about power and sexuality as a means of reclaiming history while also remarking on the white erasure of slavery, sexuality, and visibility. Harris places Kaneisha, a strong-willed, sexualized woman in *Slave Play* and makes her the voice of an entire race that is exhausted from its forced societal roles. He creates Jim, the British "innocent" white man, as the voice of white supremacy that attempts to silence the violent history of slavery. By placing the black body in front of mirrors, white supremacy, and sexuality on stage, Harris provokes his audience to feel uncomfortable to emphasize how the acknowledgment of black suffering is long overdue.

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## Saving the Appearances: The Beatific Vision of Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*

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Davis Smith

Of the fruitful crop of contemporary American writers who aim to engage honestly and seriously with Judeo-Christian faith amidst the tensions of secular modernity, Annie Dillard is a unique treasure. Paradigmatic of her relatively small oeuvre of sterling creative nonfiction is her three-part meditation *Holy the Firm*: a text that defies all categorization, but which is most essentially a memoir based on three days of intensive reflection and observation on an island in the Puget Sound. Dillard's relentlessly disciplined approach to language and structure results in a densely packed composition of a mere sixty-six pages, resembling a through-composed symphony bound by prominent motifs. It straddles the line between logic and imagination, science and poetry, highly personal confession, and theology on a cosmic scale. This irreducible combination of qualities makes the text a consoling, terrifying, and yet ultimately restorative prophecy for the current time—one that is unafraid to hearken back to the “archaic” assumptions of the medieval worldview while attempting to reconcile them with all the challenges they have met from the Enlightenment through the postmodern world. This essay will explore how Dillard uses the web of polarities in her text to challenge readers to make the leap of faith back in time, down into their souls, and up to the divine. In doing so, Dillard recovers a sacred model to make sense of our experience as both wanderers and pilgrims in an ecstatically paradoxical world.

### 1. *Experience and Tradition*

Dillard's work, fully in the great American tradition from which it springs, is immensely ambitious, and its tapestry of allusions is impressively intricate for such a condensed work. Many of these resonances stem from Dillard's immersion in the language and archetypes of the Bible, as well as the standard liturgy of the "high churches"—"where, if anywhere, I belong" (Dillard 59). Raised as she was in a staunchly Presbyterian household and a self-described Christian at the time of writing, Dillard's pointed use of scriptural echoes bathes her text in significance extending far beyond the sheer beauty of the prose in which it is couched. However, in Dillard's words, she is "grounded weakly in theology and strongly in art" ("A Face Aflame," par. 44). In *Holy the Firm*, the Bible serves mainly as a literary and symbolic reservoir from which Dillard draws to enhance her speculations. Yet, far from the assertion that Dillard finds God only in "the physical world apart from history and the Bible" and that "she does not look for God in Christ" (Felch 12), Dillard takes seriously the Biblical notion that God does not leave Himself out of anything He makes, and that the witness of Christ fills the world entirely. She may not begin with Christian assumptions, but, as we shall see, she inexorably leads herself and her readers to them throughout, as well as displaying a deeply respectful attitude toward the moral, metaphysical, and semantic resources offered by Christianity.

The other great tradition to which Dillard appeals is what C. S. Lewis would term the "medieval world picture": a mystical, all-encompassing imaginative model assumed by the great thinkers and writers of the Middle Ages (12). Time and again, Dillard appears fascinated with the Western mystical tradition, directly referencing figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius (45), Julian of Norwich (36), and Meister Eckhart (62); in which medieval thinking is commonly considered fanciful superstition, Dillard's decision to hone in sharply on this tradition puts her at odds with her cultural environment. Her decision to load the text with such echoes is also a resolute choice to return to a time before the Renaissance and Reformation initiated the unique tensions and assumptions that have comprised the West since their occurrence. The theological-poetical world that Dillard has constructed from her three days on the island is not only pre-Einstein and

pre-Newton but also pre-printing-press and pre-Copernicus. Clearly Dillard has carved out a rarefied literary space that can stand apart from changing contexts and has charted her course centuries backward to synthesize her experience.

Dillard's work seems curiously isolated from her times in a variety of ways. It is individuated more by what she does *not* write about than what she does write. Social, political, and ethical matters are practically nonexistent in her books; and not only do fellow humans make rare appearances, her works begin with the external realities of the natural world and then deduce matters of reason and faith from these observations (Smith 355-56). She may cling to the Romantic dictum that the self provides the most fertile material for art because it is what one knows best; however, in the scheme that she devises from her experience, humanity clearly takes third place in the universe after the sovereign status of God and nature. Even the Pacific Northwest setting of *Holy the Firm* serves only as a placeholder for such a lofty locale as "the fringe edge where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity spatter each other with foam" (21). The text aims ultimately to answer the question: how do we make sense of where we find ourselves—within both the great abstract tradition that shaped us and the given concrete reality that daily faces us? Dillard summarizes her attitude toward tradition in a piercing passage that begins with a line from Psalm 24 and rings with echoes from the prophets who lamented the unfaithfulness of Israel:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us; . . . there have been generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even a day. Yet some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dress for description, and fancy that life has evolved. (56-57)

No passage better exemplifies *Holy the Firm*'s uneasy clash of existentialism with historical consciousness than this excerpt. The surest way to reveal the beatific vision is to use the tools of poetry to interpret experience: what every flawed generation has done and through which we receive the sublime not

only through nature but also through the tradition of fellow thinkers and pilgrims who have embarked upon this same voyage—a truth acknowledged even by medieval mystics (Gaskins 161). Through this approach, the artist just may penetrate the disenchantment of modernity to restore wonder to the eyes of the reader.

In Dillard's *Holy the Firm*, she is an angst-ridden wanderer set adrift in the wild to make sense of where she finds herself. In Part I, "Newborn and Salted," she treats the first of her three days on the island as if she has never before been awakened to nature and thus has been "born again" as an adult and reverted to an Edenic naivete. In Part II, "God's Tooth," her Transcendentalist reverie comes crashing to a halt, as suffering and evil literally fall into her world from above: A plane crashes on the island, resulting in the horrific disfigurement of an eight-year-old girl, and Dillard's primal innocence is shattered. Finally, in Part III, "Holy the Firm," she completes the trinitarian structure by attempting to reconcile the entranced raptures of Part I with the anguished railing of Part II, using what she has learned to craft a cohesive theological vision by which to live.

Through it all, Dillard's mission is in accord with Lewis's understanding of medieval philosophy. Her goal is "to construct theories which will 'save appearances' . . . a scientific theory must 'save' or 'preserve' the appearances, the phenomena, it deals with, in the sense of getting them all in, doing justice to them" (Lewis 14). Dillard must "do justice" to the dizzying spectrum of disparate experiences that populate her text. She must formulate a model that can make equal sense of the towering majesty of the Cascades (20), the inward sacramental power of Baptism and Communion (64–68), and the crushingly violent horror of the girl's injury (36–37). "Saving the appearances" means to reject the notion that experience amounts to nothing more than itself. For Dillard, this means scouring the past for any models that can explain the transcendental anchoring we know to be true, as well as the chaotic contradictions that populate that very same experience. It means merging the extremes of innocent bliss and indignant despair that humans feel at their most heightened moments into an all-healing paradigm that suffuses all with relevance. It means liberating language from triviality and using it to serve the searching reader who is just as confused by experience as Dillard is. In short, it is to restore disenchanted man to his classical status of heaven-oriented pilgrimage, while directly engaging all the searing challenges posed to that position by the present age.

## 2. *Incarnation and Sacramentality*

Dillard's convictions about the divine begin with the assumption that "nature participates in the essence of God himself and if he removed his loving attention from it for a fraction of a second life would cease" ("A Face Aflame," para. 63). Her terse, vivid sketch of the landscape subtly incorporates the four elements of the medieval world picture. She begins with the small human world of the tiny church and the pastures and then moves through increasingly more overwhelming layers of sight across the forest and the bay until "the bright sound, the bluing of water with distance at the world's rim, and on it the far blue islands, and over these lights the light clouds" (22–23). This is a stunning image of the great chain of being that concludes in the "bright sound" of the harmonies of the spheres and a glimpse of the eternal ether of the Prime Mover, masked by clouds as it may be (23). And in fact, light is a superb analogy for Dillard's theology of immanence; it fills every area of vision in open space, causing people to see the essence of everything the light touches. It is undeniably "involved" in a person's experience, and yet it radiates from the magnificence of the heavens. It is *everywhere* at once, yet it is not *everything*. (Dillard is certainly no pantheist.) For Lewis, "in modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in this [the medieval model], he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light" (Lewis 74–75).

Just as the medieval people favored fire—light in its active, transformative force—as the most noble element because it reaches heavenward and, in their belief, encircles the atmosphere (Lewis 95); fire is arguably the most critical motif in Dillard's *Holy the Firm*. The recounting of the moth's immolation in Part I is a striking and humbling metaphor that becomes central to the book's project. In modern indifference and numbness to the transcendent, privileged moments of epiphany unexpectedly take hold of humans as they meander about, and they are thrust into the terrifying force of divine intervention that cannot leave them unchanged by the encounter—the violent transformation that burns a dross to strip life down to its necessities, just as the wings of the moth stayed aflame for hours. The other main subject of fire imagery—the young burn victim with the telling alias of "Julie Norwich" (36)—is at first painted as a senseless victim of cruel chance. "No one else was burned or hurt in any way," but just as her father



grabbed her out, “a gob of flung ignited vapor hit her face, or something flaming from the plane or fir tree hit her face” (Dillard 43). By the conclusion of the book, Julie has become an affirmation of the renewal humans undergo when they choose to see life’s vicissitudes—even its inexplicable cruelties—as pregnant with a potential for renewal only made possible by incarnation. To get there, Dillard must exhaust the entire gamut of religious options after the incident makes orthodoxy seem a sentimental illusion. Immediately after she unleashes a series of railing perorations that paint God as a cosmic bully (42–46), she engineers a startling gear switch to something like an orthodox Christology:

Faith would be that God is self-limited utterly by his creation—a contraction of the scope of his will, that he bound himself to time and its hazards and haps as a man would lash himself to a tree for love. That God’s works are as good as we make them. That God is helpless, our baby to bear, self-abandoned on the doorstep of time, wondered at by cattle and oxen, . . . faith would be, in short, that God has any willful connection with time whatsoever, and with us. (47)

Dillard dares her readers to accept this truth by contemplating paradox. The Christian position alone satisfies the yearnings of faith but requires a massive jump into the realm of pure trust that the modern world—Dillard herself—is uncomfortable making. Dillard’s universe positively *demands* faith beyond the empirical. Perhaps Dillard believes that the sheer difficulty and absurdity of Christianity is the prime justification for believing it. It is the only doctrine in which God can be truly transcendent as well as immanent; and the only one that can “save the appearances” (Lewis 14).

Part III is characterized by a series of sublime revelations, ironically yet significantly conveyed by Dillard as the result of engagement with the quotidian life of the island’s local church. The language preceding these revelations is an extension of the outcries of Part II: “We do need reminding, not of what God can do, but of what he cannot do, or will not, which is to catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel’s worth of sense into our days” (Dillard 61). But then, on her walk to the church with newly purchased Communion wine in tow, she “bear[s] holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God, the sempiternal silence personal and brooding, bright on the back of my ribs” (64). In response, she envisions a

great transfigured ecstasy flooding over the land as she begins to process the truth of sacramentality—sacred and secular, spiritual and material, fusing into one through incarnation as God “condescends” to serve His children through material means (65–66). This section is the most obvious parallel in the book to a fantastic “vision” such as a medieval mystic might have experienced. “Walking faster and faster, weightless, I feel the wine. It sheds light in slats through my rib cage and fills the buttressed vaults of my ribs with light pooled and buoyant. I am moth; I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see” (Dillard 65).

This ties together a host of crucial images. The emphasis on ribs recalls an Edenic recreation in the image of the Christian God rather than the paganism of Part I, while “buttressed vaults” recalls the fact that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (*The Holy Bible: New International Version*, 1 Cor. 6.19). And the return to the moth (Dillard 65) makes clear the significance of that memorable flashback from Part I: recognition of sacramentality, of God in the flesh amongst us, continually sustaining us with His invisible nourishment, allows us to touch the sacred fire and reconnect with our nature. “Everything, everything, is whole, and a parcel of everything else” (66) is a characteristically Medieval insight—all things, however inexplicable, have their role in the hierarchical “world picture” by which they glorify their Creator. With the sight of a baptism in the sea, the consummation of her beatific vision has been reached: “I do; I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains . . .” (67). This has the note of a wedding vow as she is betrothed to the sacramental vision, and life becomes whole again, if far from wholly comprehensible.

It seems apt to conclude with one of the classic statements of the past century on the meaning of philosophy for the believer. It has been the contention of this essay that Dillard does not necessarily present herself as either a Christian or a philosopher, but that her creative universe is also one where orthodoxy is inevitable and its intimations discoverable through contemplation. Roman Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper, in “The Philosophical Act,” writes,

The undiminished form of Christian philosophy will . . . only be realized by one who has not just “learnt” his Christianity, to whom it is not just “doctrine” . . . but by one who lets Christianity become real in him, and thus makes these truths his own, not by knowledge

alone, but through “suffering” and experiencing reality, the Christian reality—and then philosophizes on the meaning of life and the natural reasons and causes of the world. (142–43)

By Pieper’s criterion, Dillard has fully internalized and reflected her wavering faith. By redeeming experience and the multiplicity of the “given,” she shows that when humans embrace the beatific components of experience—encounters with awe—they can achieve a Purgatorial state of cleansing during our brief sojourn on earth that will awaken them to their identity and place in the cosmos. Then, “when we wake to the deep shores of light uncreated, then when the dazzling dark breaks over the far slopes of time, then it’s time to toss things, like our reason, and our will; then it’s time to break our necks for home” (62). Until humans reach that eternal abode, they must view the world through regenerated eyes, and to do so means to make a great series of painstakingly affirmative returns: to the traditions that formed life, to the miracles that surround mankind, and to the sacramentality that daily heightens people’s experience of holiness.

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## Reppin' H-Town: Houston Hip-Hop as Postmodern Representations of Place

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Kriss Thomas

Hip-hop culture is a fascinating combination of clothing, music samples, graffiti, rap, jump rope games, literature, language, theatre, and film. It is a juxtaposition of activism and apathy, philanthropy and capitalism, authentic and sellout, conscious and *gangsta*. Rap, the musical genre associated with hip-hop, is postmodern in its multiplicity and contradictions. As Bun B explains,

Hip-hop culture is not just a fad, but for many, a way of life and a means to contribute meaningfully to society, in general, and to communities in particular. . . . We've seen the culture take the worst of us and help us mature into great thinkers and men and women of concern, compassion, and action. (Miller et al.)

According to bell hooks, rap “has enabled underclass black youth to develop a critical voice, as a group of young black men told me, a ‘common literacy.’ [It] projects a critical voice, explaining, demanding, urging,” even while it seemingly promotes drugs, gangs, and violence (515). Since its inception in New York City in the 1970s, hip-hop has spread throughout the world; no longer a local phenomenon, hip-hop has a global presence that has made it one of the top five genres in 2020 (“Music Listening” 8). This new postmodern movement has evolved

within communities to become national or even international representations of those communities; whether Eminem from Detroit, 2Pac from Los Angeles, or Kanye West from Chicago, hip-hop artists pepper their songs (an extension of their personas and identities) with rhetorical references to their communities.

The referential aspect of music helps connect people through shared experience, and although many musical cultures use this idea of representation to draw in listeners, this aspect has especially taken hold of hip-hop culture, in which the sharing and locality is explicit through lyrics and song titles: Yo Gotti raps, "H Town they lean, Chi Town they stepping / Memphis throw up that sign to let u know what they reppin like" in "Memphis Walk"; 50 Cent raps, "[W]hen I die don't cry for me / just keep reppin' Southside for me" in "True Loyalty"; and Slim Thug raps, "I'm an outside veteran / Reppin' H-Town" in "Welcome 2 Houston." As rappers represent their communities, they use their music as a direct link to other members, thus placing themselves firmly within those communities.

The communities that hip-hop represents are both global and local. At each geographic level, scholars need to consider how the locality influences the music as well as the community's members through place identity theory, an interdisciplinary theory combining place—"a geographical space which has acquired meaning through a person's interaction with the space" (Hauge 46)—and identity—"a dynamic, social product of the interaction of the capacities for memory, consciousness and organized construal" (48) to explain the interrelationship between the two. Because "the structure of identity is manifested through thought, action and affect," rap presents as a manifestation of identity; therefore, rap that focuses in and about a place is also a manifestation of place identity (50). The hip-hop movement began in New York City and moved to Los Angeles; therefore, much analysis focuses on how hip-hop reflects the East and West Coasts of the United States. However, few scholars have examined the roots of the Dirty South Movement, to which artists such as Three 6 Mafia and Soulja Boy belong. Dirty South hip-hop is "not just modulations of East Coast and West Coast hip-hop; the culture progressed from local and regional domains" to create new mini-movements within the larger postmodern hip-hop movement (Faniel 22). Because of this, scholars need to study the Dirty

South Movement to understand its unique representation of its Southern American community.

Study of the Dirty South Movement must begin with where the movement and the music originated. Ben Westhoff, author of *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil' Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop*, writes, "Southern rap's gangsta roots can be traced to one group: Geto Boys," a group that came from Houston in 1986 (39). Though the Geto Boys were local and thus did not receive radio play, they could thrive by "getting a buzz on the streets successfully . . . nobody even conceived or believed that somebody from out here could come up like that. . . . [But the Geto Boys] had some good songs, man, and [the local hip-hop community] started to see people accepting a Houston group," says K-Rino, a member of the rap group South Park Coalition (Walker, *Houston Rap* 33). Because local groups began and sustained the movement, study of the Dirty South Movement must focus on the small localities, such as Houston, rather than on global scene; without the locality study, scholars risk

generaliz[ing] hip-hop cultural development by assuming that hip-hop in Houston developed in the same way it did in other sites, ignor[ing] the contribution that hip-hoppers in Houston made to the broader culture and miss[ing] how Houstonians specifically participated in the hip-hop culture that came from New York and how they adapted hip-hop to fit their specific needs. (Faniel 25)

Houston has been a major scene in Dirty South hip-hop since the mid-1980s and should be studied itself, rather than a bastardization of New York hip-hop. As the Geto Boys say, "Everybody know New York is where it began / So let the ego shit end" ("Do It Like a G.O."). Beyond New York hip-hop is a multitude of smaller, more localized hip-hop movements with their own ideas, languages, and representations of postmodernity.

Houston hip-hoppers knew they were different from hip-hoppers in other parts of the United States and the world, yet "[b]y staying focused on their city in terms of content and audience, Houston rappers and labels became authors and publishers of a city life" (Hess 429). These rappers and labels created and continue to preserve their Houston hip-hop community. Rapper Bun B, half of the duo UGK (Underground Kingz), is a prime example. In his song "What I Represent," he raps,

I wasn't born with a silver-spoon sticking out my grill  
I was raised in the middle of the struggle on the real  
Had some hard times in my life, trying to make ends meet  
Not to mention, trying not to fall victim to the streets  
Against the odds, a nigga made it out the game  
But that don't mean that I'm gunna forget about from where I came  
UGK ain't just a name; it's what a nigga is  
I was there before I got in the biz, and nigga that's on the rizz.

As Bun B's lyrics explain, Houston rappers do not just glorify guns, drugs, and violence; instead, they speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Bun B remembers his past and reaches back, trying to draw the people connected with it "out of the game" with him. In *Houston Rap Tapes*, Bun B says,

UGK has always spoken for those who can't speak for themselves. The silent majority. . . . A lot of people don't understand, but it's always going to be there, because these people are sittin' here, they're hurtin', they're tired and they're misrepresented and they want somebody to stand up for it. (Walker 262)

Bun B represents Houston by giving its underprivileged population a critical voice.

Bun B has been active in Houston's hip-hop community since its inception in the mid-1980s. In addition to rapping for and about Houston, he guest-lectures at Rice University, co-teaching "Religion and Hip-Hop Culture," a course "designed to explore hip-hop culture's religious dimensions through the musical language of rap" (Brotzen 4). Teaching, he says, "allowed [him] to show the public, starting with Rice students and Rice University people and then spreading out hopefully to a larger audience, that everything that has been portrayed about hip-hop in the public eye is not all that hip-hop is" (Brotzen 5). In this way, he is giving his community a voice, both in his music and in academia.

In addition to representing the underprivileged in his music, Bun B uses his music to discuss, critique, and ultimately better his community. In *Houston Rap*, a book of photographs and interviews about Houston's hip-hop scene, Bun B says, "[Y]ou have to take the good with the bad.

Unfortunately, some people don't know how to differentiate the good from the bad and all they kinda see is the bad" (Walker 75). He tries to show both the negatives and the positives in his music. He raps about money—"Like 'Face I got the money, the power and the finesse / To roll around one deep with hundred-thousand round my neck / I'm looking real shiny; you can see me from a mile away" ("Draped Up")—but he also tries to create a more positive climate for his community. For example, in "If It Was Up II Me," he raps,

It's time to educate the people man, free school and college  
 So everybody cross the border can get the same knowledge  
 education leads to jobs and jobs kill poverty  
 And no more poverty means we makin' money obviously  
 Everybody makin' money everybody smilin'  
 .....  
 How am I gonna clean your house, and mine still dirty  
 How am I gonna feed your kids, and mine still thirsty  
 And speakin' of the kids we need to spend some more time with 'em  
 Can't turn 'em loose in the streets, cause they dying in 'em  
 .....  
 You say your boy trippin', I'm just keepin' in it G  
 Cause you could see how good the world would be if it was up to me.

This song is directed clearly at his more privileged listeners—those who believe the songs are about money and diamond grills. He is painting a portrait of the real Houston, the Houston beneath the façade that rap has created, and attempting to elicit social change. In the example above, Bun B criticizes "how the world is" ("If It Was Up II Me"), whereas in the previous example, he admits he "made it out of the game" ("What I Represent"). Hip-hoppers, such as Bun B, use their voices and platforms to both critique and solidify the status quo.

Of course, purpose in music is not unique to music from Houston; other rappers have created music to give the underprivileged a voice and have taught university classes. (For example, Lupe Fiasco has taught at MIT, Christopher "Play" Martin at North Carolina Central University [Kennard], and John Forte at City College of New York [Watkins]). However, what is unique to Houston is its hip-hop scene: "Perhaps



owing to its geographic isolation from other cultural enclaves, the scene has developed its own slang and sound, which don't always translate in other regions" (Westhoff 61). Houston is home to the "chopped and screwed" method of "augment[ing] typical rap tracks by slowing them way down and repeating lines a few times over, slurring rappers' speech and infusing their music with an extraterrestrial quality" (61). This method was pioneered by DJ Screw in 1990 and has been a staple in Houston hip-hop since (Faniel).

Beyond "chopped and screwed" production and DJing, Houston hip-hoppers have their own language, which sets them apart from the rest of the hip-hop community. Houstonians use words like *trill*, *slab*, and *The Nickel*, each word representing something unique to Houston (called H-Town). Bun B says, "[B]eing trill was always about how you carried yourself; it was about how you related to people; it was about how you moved amongst people; and most importantly how you—I want to make sure I say it correctly—it's more about how you interact with people on a continuous basis" ("Microphone Check"). This unique language may seem like mere slang, an unimportant aspect of language; however, it is indicative of the strong bond Houston hip-hoppers share.

In a 2016 email, an undergraduate student mentioned his love for Houston hip-hop. When asked to elaborate, he explained,

I came from India as a kid and hip-hop helped me adjust to the society around me. It was the way I was able to connect with others. It allowed me to initiate conversation because it was all over the radio. This music described what was trending in Houston during the time and it was just something that allowed people of all colors and ethnicities to come together. (Anonymous)

Listeners' responses show the importance of locally centered hip-hop. Because "Places represent personal memories, and because places are located in the socio-historical matrix of intergroup relations, they also represent social memories (shared histories)" (Hauge 50), and because H-Town hip-hop represents Houston as a place, listeners who are new to Houston, such as this student, can tap into rap music as representations of social memories to form their new place identity (50). Although hip-hop has become universal and listeners can universally relate, Houston hip-hoppers

understand localized messages on a deeper level; as a result, scholars should study the music but even more investigate the message that listeners receive. Ultimately, rap music made in and about Houston is a postmodern representation of a place that both establishes and maintains a critical voice for a community that previously was underrepresented in the industry and in the academy.

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# BACKMATTER



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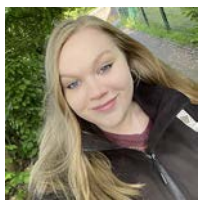
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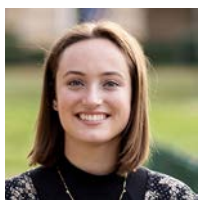
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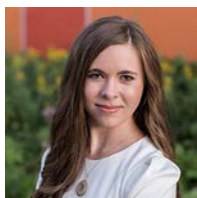
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TYLER EDWARDS (he/him) is from the Bay Area and is a college junior at Chapman University. He dreamed of being an author when he was in elementary school, and he is now looking to actualize that dream. Tyler is eager to explore as many forms of storytelling as possible. He has pieces published in *Calliope Art & Literary Magazine* and *Ouroboros*. When he is not writing, he likes indoor rock climbing (V4s), playing volleyball with his sister, making smoothies, and listening to audio dramas. Follow Tyler on Instagram @tyler.kiyoshi.



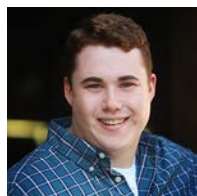
SOFIA ESCOBAR is a senior at Hartwick College, double majoring in Creative Writing and Philosophy with a Minor in Women and Gender Studies. Her work has appeared in Hartwick College's undergraduate literary magazine, *Word of Mouth*; *The Auburn Circle*; *Outrageous Fortune*; *Rising Phoenix Review*; and *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. In 2023, she received Sigma Tau Delta's Eleanor B. North Poetry Award as well as the Anna Sonder Prize for Poetry through the Academy of American Poets for 2022 and 2023. After her studies at Hartwick College, she hopes to pursue an MFA in Poetry.



ISABELLA FERNANDEZ is a Cuban American undergraduate student at Old Dominion University, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English with teaching licensure. Her goal is to teach English in high school after completing an MA in English in the next few years. Her favorite genres include horror and mystery, and, when she is not reading, she can be found planning panels and events for local anime and comic conventions.



MEGAN FINAN is a senior English and Elementary Education Major and Creative Writing Minor at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ). She has served as Secretary and then President in TCNJ's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She is also a member of the executive board for TCNJ's literary and art magazine, *The Lion's Eye*. When she graduates and becomes a teacher, she hopes to pass her love of words to the next generation.

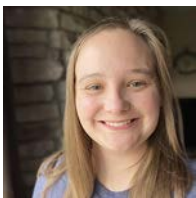


NOAH FISCHBACH is a senior at Liberty University, studying studying Creative Writing, Professional Writing, and Literature. He has been published in *The Waiting Room*, *Ekstasis*, and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. He serves as a Poetry Editor for *ReCap*, in which some of his poems have been published. Aside from poetry, he is passionate about social justice and good friends, and he hopes to one day write for a living.





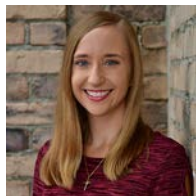
SOPHIA FRIEDMANN was raised in New York City and now attends Clark University. A rising senior, she is earning her BA in English and Education. Sophia has been accepted to Clark University to pursue an MA in Teaching for Secondary English. Sophia works in the Clark Admissions Office, while being President of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Club. Outside of school, she works at an all-girls sleep-away camp as a Head Counselor and Events Coordinator. Sophia just returned from a semester abroad in South Africa, where she taught children and created more of her own writing.



MARISA FRISK is an undergraduate student at Northern Michigan University, studying Secondary Education with a Concentration in English and a Minor in Secondary Education History. Although it took a while, Marisa realized that she could merge her passion for English with her passion for teaching. Marisa enjoys writing about her life experiences as well as reading a variety of literature.



ISABEL GARRISON is a senior at Austin College (TX). She is majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and Minor in Sociology. She is from Wichita Falls, TX, and has worked on projects for the Wichita Falls Public Library. She joined Sigma Tau Delta in 2022. After graduation, she will pursue a Master of Science in Library Science to help others foster their love of literature. She enjoys writing everything from the fantastical to the macabre.



ERIKA B. GIRARD is currently pursuing her MA in English and Creative Writing with a Concentration in Poetry through Southern New Hampshire University. Originally from Rhode Island, she derives creative inspiration from her family, friends, faith, and fascination with the human experience. She is a proofreader for the *Wild Roof Journal*, an online bimonthly literary journal. Her own creative work appears or is forthcoming in *Black Fox*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *Untenured*, *Viewless Wings*, and more.





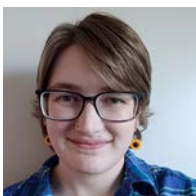
ALAYSIA GODFREY is a senior at Transylvania University where she is majoring in English. Her passion for reading began early in middle school at the Scholastic Book Fair. Later, she developed an interest in creative writing after taking fiction and nonfiction writing courses during her sophomore year in college. Her aspiration is to pursue a career in the publishing industry. Alaysia works as a Student Employee for the Campus and Community Engagement Office, where she has made connections with fellow students and faculty. When she is not busy with classes, she enjoys spending time with her family and baking sweets.



ALEXANDRA GONZALEZ recently graduated from Lebanon Valley College with a bachelor's degree in English and Creative Writing. Her creative work focuses primarily on spirituality, queerness, and mental health. "A Road in Pennsylvania" is her first published creative piece. The poem is an English-to-English translation of Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" featuring playful verse between the poem's speaker and Alison Bechdel. She would like to thank her family, friends, partner, and professors for reading her work and encouraging her to submit it.



ELAINA GONZALEZ is a rising senior from The University of Texas at Tyler, pursuing a Major in English and three Minors: Political Science, Spanish, and Writing with Technology. She is an Archer Fellow for fall 2023, when she worked in Washington, DC, as a Public Affairs Intern. Born and raised in Tyler, TX, her career goals include public service and traveling with the US State Department. She has recently worked as the Opinion Editor for the *Patriot Talon*, a Digital Media Intern for the Daniel Boone National Forest, and a Senator in UT Tyler's Student Government.

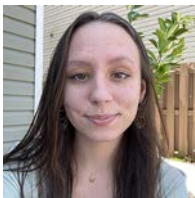


NICK GREENBURG is a recent graduate of Charleston Southern University who could not decide between English or Library Science and so majored in both, with Minors in History and Philosophy. They have previously

been published in their school's literary journal, *Tobeco*, of which they were also an Editor. While pursuing an MLIS in fall 2024, they will continue to fill the gaps in their schedule with writing, lest they ever be accused of having made up their mind.



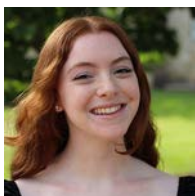
LAURIE GRIFFITH is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Florida, studying English and Mass Communication. She grew up traversing the rolling hills and labyrinthine valleys of small-town Western North Carolina, mostly in racing flats. She currently serves as an Editor for both *PRISM: A UF Honors Magazine* and the Nanoscale Institute for Medical and Engineering Technology. She hopes to write creatively for the rest of her life. She believes nothing is more powerful than a manuscript with one's whole truth scrawled across its pages.



KAYLA HARTSOCK is an up-and-coming author, poet, and high school educator who is currently finishing her bachelor's degree in Secondary Education at the University of South Carolina, Aiken. She has published works in both *Broken Ink* and *Contrapuntos X*. In her free time, Kayla can be found lurking in the shadows, running amok, or otherwise lollygagging around Aiken, SC.

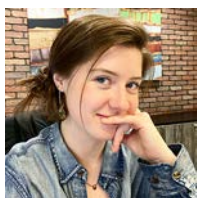


IAN HEARN is an English Major at College of the Ozarks. He grew up in Nepal as a third-culture kid. When he is not studying, Ian enjoys backpacking, climbing, photography, birding, and anything outdoors. One of his favorite modern authors is Wendell Berry.

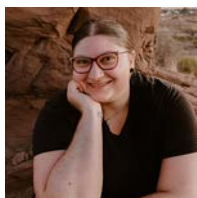


ALEXANDRA HILL was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA, and she recently graduated in 2023 from St. Lawrence University, NY, with Majors in English, French, and Mathematics and Minors in Statistics and European Studies. She resides in Strasbourg, France, where she

teaches English to middle-school students as a language teaching assistant. Hill has been passionately involved in publication and journalism for more than ten years and has worked as Editor-in-Chief of a national award-winning yearbook, a literary magazine, and a newspaper. Her aspirations include becoming a professor and continuing to write and publish creative nonfiction stories and poetry.



KENDRA HURST is a literary creative who recently completed her MA in English Literature at Southern New Hampshire University, a program she learned about while serving with AmeriCorps following the onset of the COVID pandemic. Her work focuses on the intersection of the queer experience, literature, and society, and on conveying sincere, impactful narratives. Kendra believes in true expression, honest sharing of experiences, individuality of life, and significance of self-knowledge. She currently resides in Oregon where, to live as joyfully and authentically as possible, she spends as much time as feasible napping in sunbeams with her cat.



ALYSA JOERGER (they/she) currently attends Southern New Hampshire University as a Creative Writing and English Major. Their poetry and photographs have been published in *Sacramento Voices*, *Poetry Now*, and *Nota Bene*. She has also won a photography competition that put her work on display in the California State Capitol. Although they have lived across the United States, Salem, MA, will always have their heart. With a cup of cocoa in her hands while the autumn rain is falling, she feels most at peace.



CAITLIN JOHNSON is a senior at Utah Tech University in the Education Program, and she hopes to become an English teacher. When she is not in class, she loves to read, write, go to concerts, and spend time with her dog.



ABIGAIL E. JONES is an English Major and a member of the Honors College at Houston Christian University, where she has been able to pursue her passion for reading, writing, and discussing great works of literature. She owes her love of learning to her mother, who homeschooled her through all twelve grades. Abigail also enjoys watching films and memorizing poetry, particularly that of William Shakespeare. Her first publication was in *The Imaginative Conservative*.



JAYLIN JONES is a junior English Major and Black Studies Minor attending the University of Southern Mississippi. As a creative writer and student leader, they are dedicated to giving a voice to the marginalized. Their work has been published in the university's literary magazine, *Product*, as well as the news blog *Black Girl Times*. They lead four student organizations, and they hope to pursue a career in academia after graduation.



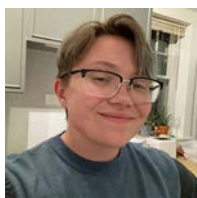
ALEC KISSOONDYAL is a Florida-based writer and a recent graduate from Santa Fe College who completed his BA in English. He is a Writing Tutor and the Fiction Editor for *Bacopa Literary Review*. His fiction has appeared in several literary publications including *The Los Angeles Review*, *Cornice Magazine*, *The Bookends Review*, and *TEA Magazine*.



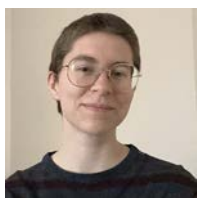
HOPE KOONIN is a recent graduate of the University of California, Davis with a BA in English. She intends to pursue higher education with the goal of becoming an English professor. Her current research interests include popular American fiction and pre-1950s fantasy literature.



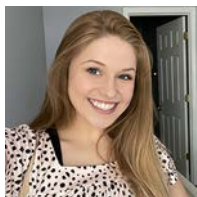
KHAMILLE LABBÉ is a first-generation, bilingual college graduate originally from Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic. She holds a BA in English—Professional Writing from Saint Leo University, where she graduated in May 2023. She currently lives in Tampa, FL.



MILES LATHAM is a stage manager, student, and essayist with a particular interest in the historical aesthetics of queer and women's liberation. As of this publication, he is completing his senior thesis on the aesthetics and ethos of historically influenced Live-Action Role Playing (LARPing) groups in the United States. He would like to thank the Macalester College English Department, and especially Dr. Coral Lumbley, for introducing him to the wonderful and vibrant Medieval world.



SYDNEY LOGSDON is a junior double majoring in English and Environmental Studies. She is the undergraduate Lead of Michigan State's Digital Humanities and Literary Cognition Lab and a Research Ambassador for the university. Sydney also serves as President of the Alpha Upsilon Xi Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and vice president of Creative Writing Club. In her free time, she enjoys listening to music, sitting on floors, and trying new flavors of ice cream from the MSU Dairy Store. After graduation, Sydney hopes to enter a graduate program that allows her to continue studying English and conducting humanities-based research.



LAURA MARTIN—a Winchester, KY, native—attended Transylvania University to continue her soccer career and pursue a BA in English and a Minor in Secondary Education. Diagnosed with autoimmune encephalitis, she took a year-long break, during which she became an advocate. After recovery, she returned to school, leading

the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and joining Sigma Tau Delta. Her short story “Henry Teel” was published in *The Transylvanian*. She had the honor of introducing United States Poet Laureate Ada Limón at a campus event. The 2023 graduate now teaches English at Bryan Station High School in Lexington, KY.



KARA “KAT” MAUSER is a sophomore English Major at James Madison University with Minors in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies, Creative Writing, and Pre-Professional Secondary Education and a Concentration in Journalism. She enjoys working part-time at JMU’s English Department as Communication Assistant and also writing for the school newspaper. She hopes to one day pursue a job in teaching or journalism. Over the summer, Kat was a Research Intern for JMU’s Student Office of Awards, Initiative, and Research (STAIR). She also recently won the Mark Facknitz Outstanding New English Major Award Scholarship.

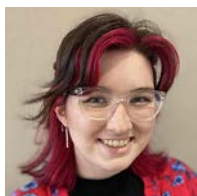


SARAH MCLAUGHLIN graduated from Providence College (PC) this year with a BA in Creative Writing and Political Science. Currently, she works for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) as a Communication Intern, and she aspires to be a published novelist. At PC, Sarah served as Editor-in-Chief of *The Cowl* and as Writing Center Tutor. She is from Bridgewater, MA, and enjoys playing piano and crocheting in her free time.



MIRANDA MILLER is a senior at the University of Iowa, studying English and Creative Writing. She is also minoring in Ancient Civilizations, but that was an accident. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Wilder Things*, a student literary magazine at Iowa that publishes speculative and genre fiction. When she is not writing a novel in November or analyzing Shakespeare for fun, Miranda spends her time playing board games with too many rules.





ABIGAIL NELSON has published short stories and essays in *SEFER* literary magazine. The 2023 recipient of the Gilmore Award for Excellence in Creative Writing, she currently attends Charleston Southern University and will graduate in December 2023. She plans to pursue an MFA for Creative Writing after graduation.



ERIN O'KEEFE is a fourth-year undergraduate Dance and English Major at the University of Georgia (UGA). Erin dances both classical ballet and contemporary modern. She is passionate about creative writing, and her short stories and poems have been published in *Stillpoint Literary Magazine* and *The Chapel Bell*, a UGA publication for which she has served as Content Editor. Currently, Erin feels captivated by her research on Mary Wollstonecraft and the eighteenth-century origins of the "sublime." This fall, she is applying to English graduate programs to conduct interdisciplinary research on visual aesthetics and dance in eighteenth-century British literature.



CHARLES PEARSON is a student of West Texas A&M University, pursuing a BA in English with Minors in Spanish and Philosophy. He serves as the vice president of the university's Philosophy Club and a member of the student organization POEMAS (Professional Organization of English Major and Spanish). Outside of his academic pursuits, he likes to spend his time reading and playing musical instruments.



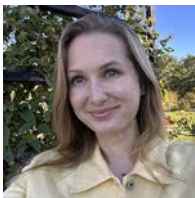
NICHOLE PENNINGTON received her BA in creative writing from Old Dominion University in 2023. Though she is a native of Central Ohio, Nichole has lived in many places. In 2019, she decided, with her husband and two daughters, to settle in Hampton, VA. Often drawing from her experiences as an adoptee and a mother, she enjoys exploring themes of loss, identity, and parenthood. She currently teaches English at Hampton High School.



ALORA PETERS is currently pursuing her JD at Ave Maria School of Law. She recently graduated from Saint Leo University with her BA in English, with a Concentration in Professional Writing. Some of the highlights of her undergraduate experience include serving as the Editor-in-Chief of Saint Leo's student-run newspaper, *The Lions' Pride Media Group*, and completing a senior thesis that analyzed the intersection between Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Aristotelian concepts of virtue.



ELIANA PLUMB is a junior, majoring in English and minoring in Writing and Rhetoric. She is from Hermann, MO—a small town on the Missouri River. Growing up homeschooled with her five older siblings, Eliana learned to love literature in all forms. After pursuing her education at East Central College, she transferred to College of the Ozarks, where she was given the opportunity to participate in Sigma Tau Delta. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and playing the violin. She plans to pursue her debut novel, *Vibrancy*, in the next 2 years.



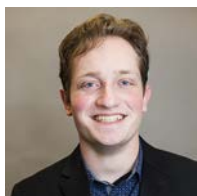
KATHLEEN RYNDAK is an English Major with a Minor in Digital Media. She is a member of Elmhurst University's Honors Program and the multidisciplinary honor society, Phi Kappa Phi. She recently received First Place for Elmhurst University's 2022 Carlson Award for Poetry. Her award-winning poem, along with another of Kathleen's pieces, will soon be published in Elmhurst University's art and literature magazine, *MiddleWestern Voice*.



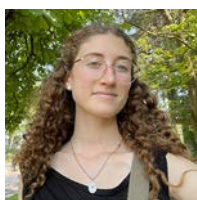
HAWA SALEH (2024) is a Writing Center Tutor who studies English, Creative Writing, and History at Canisius University in Buffalo, NY. At the 2023 Northeast Modern Language Association Convention, she presented a poster on how *melodrama* (a term often derogatorily applied to works) uplifts immigrant voices



in early twentieth-century texts. The excess of emotion in melodrama leads to powerful identification between the misunderstood protagonist and seemingly distant readership. Hawa also writes fiction and poetry, which has been published in the University of Minnesota's *The Tower* and in her own university's *The Quadrangle* magazine.



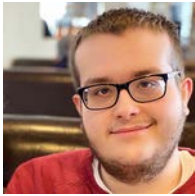
BRENDAN SANDERS is a recent graduate of Northwest University in Kirkland, WA, where he received a BFA in Contemporary Music Industry. Despite not majoring or minoring in English or literature, much of his free time is spent pursuing various creative and analytical writing projects. He is passionate about the return to Romantic ideology in recent art, music, and literature. Brendan hopes to continue writing in both poetic and professional contexts and eventually work as a sound designer in the film and video-game industries.



GRETAL SHANK is pursuing a major in English with a minor in Psychology from the Virginia Military Institute and will commission in the United States Army upon graduation in 2025. She grew up in Southeast Pennsylvania and most of her writing is about her large extended family; she plans to publish an anthology of memoirs about her older relatives, particularly her paternal grandparents who passed away in 2021. She considers it her duty to preserve the memories of her loved ones so the small details and intimate moments will never be forgotten.



ELIZABETH SHANKS is a senior English Major at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, VA. She has been a part of JMU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta since May 2022 and has served as Chapter President since May 2023. Since enrolling at JMU, she has taken a variety of English literature and writing courses, including a study abroad program in London, England. She plans to continue her education at JMU to earn an MA in Teaching.



DAVIS C. SMITH is a student of literature, philosophy, and music who will graduate in May 2024 from Bethany Lutheran College, where he works as a Writing Center Tutor; contributes regularly to Bethany's online literary magazine; and is President of Alpha Rho Tau, the college's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. His academic interests include literary criticism, the English Renaissance, Romanticism, religious literature of the twentieth and 21st centuries, and the nature and purpose of liberal arts education. He plans to pursue graduate degrees in Classical Education and English.



ZOE TALBOT (any pronouns) is in the Five-Year English Master's Program at The College of New Jersey. They have been involved with the Alpha Epsilon Alpha Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta since fall 2020 and will be serving as Publicist for the chapter for the 2023–2024 school year. This is also their second year on the Student Leadership Committee for the Eastern Region of Sigma Tau Delta.

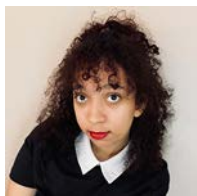


EUNICE TAN is a senior at Union University majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Journalism. She is the published author of unabapologetically Malaysian stories, and her writing has been cataloged in the Library of Congress, published in literary magazines, and acclaimed internationally. She has had the privilege of working at Penguin Random House's Kokila as an Editorial Intern; in that role, she helped to edit children's and young adult books projecting diverse voices. After graduation, her goal is an MFA in Creative Writing.



KRIISS THOMAS is a PhD candidate in Literature from The University of Texas at Dallas and an Instructor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She holds BAs in Sociology and English from Middle Tennessee State University and an MA in Literature from Belmont University. Exploring the interplay between sociology and English is her central passion, as she seeks to integrate the popular with the academic. With her current work, she aims to demonstrate how

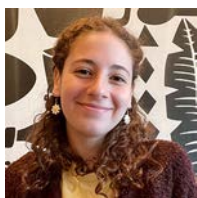
popular culture, particularly rap and hip-hop culture, can increase student attentiveness in the writing classroom.



ANNIE WILLIAMS is a writer based in Fraser, MI, who is currently studying Creative Writing at Oakland University. She has two poetry collections—*Optimistic Heart*, *Pessimistic Mind* and *The Blue Mirage*. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Swallow the Moon*, *Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine*, *Nuestras Voces*, and *Wingless Dreamer Publisher*. When she is not writing she is either rocking out at a concert or staying at home watching a horror movie.



ELISSA WILLIAMS was born in Charleston, SC. As a child, she moved and lived in Charlotte, NC, before moving back to Charleston. She graduated with her BS in Biology from Coker University. She was inducted into Sigma Tau Delta during her junior year. Taking a year off before she leaves for graduate school, she uses her free time to write stories that reflect her life experiences through a fictional lens. When not writing, she likes to watch crime shows and animal documentaries, of which she incorporates the newfound knowledge and her expertise in biology within her writing.



MADELINE WOLF recently graduated from Denison University where she majored in English/Creative Writing and minored in Spanish and Studio Art. A Baltimore, MD, native she is happy to be back on the East Coast; she recently moved to New York to start her first year at the Fiction Writing MFA Program at Sarah Lawrence College.



## 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 secondary school students and faculty. The English Language Arts Honor Society for students in grades 6–9 was launched in 2023. Sigma Tau Delta 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; three subsequent executive secretaries/directors—E. Nelson James, William C. Johnson, and Matt Hlinak—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, and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

Submissions for the 2025 journals are due between March 11 and April 15, 2024.